

“Magic in the Mundane”  
Atlas, Globe  
Sidnie Paisley Thomas

This essay is about a feeling. The one I felt radiating from the limestone of West Ireland’s mountains — the one I sensed in the quiet care, people carried in every one of their actions. It’s the rhythm of the area, the heartbeat and the poetry that flows through it. It’s as natural to the Burren as the purple and yellow flowers that grow wild in the grass.

The month I spent in the west of Ireland this past July was the most remarkable of my life. In a house of strangers, going to a school I’d never been to before, and doing things I’d never done, I strangely found myself less anxious than I normally am. This was for a number of reasons, one of which was a Gilman Scholarship to study abroad. Though my parents have told me time and time again that they want me to try new things while I’m in college, I still worry about how the cost of my education affects my family. Because of my scholarship, I didn’t worry about how much spending money I had left or how much of a burden the program costs were on my parents back home.

Winning the Gilman Scholarship made me realize not only how rare an opportunity this was, but how lucky I was to be able to experience it. I had doubts about whether going to Ireland was the right choice, but once I won the scholarship, I knew I had to take full advantage of it, regardless of my fears about being in rural Ireland for a month with a group of strangers. My excitement and gratefulness overruled the part of my brain that made me anxious. I was so out of my comfort zone that I found myself oddly at ease.

One of the many new things I tried on the trip was hiking. I, born and raised in New York, and having moved to Boston for college, had only seen the tops of mountains from my car passing by. I lagged behind during trips up mountainsides, stopping to catch my breath as my peers seemed to traverse the terrain effortlessly. Thankfully, I was with some of the kindest and most encouraging people I’ve ever met, so I never felt inadequate. Instead, I found myself picking up on things I might have missed had I been up ahead. To survive the struggle up the mountain, I focused on the little details around me: how the hazelwood trees twisted between each other, how the cool sun poked through branches, and how grass sprouted between stones, hiding the rocks like landmines on the trail.

The more I walked, hiked, and stumbled through the west of Ireland, the more I understood why the people were borderline tyrannical about recycling and why they spoke of their grass — which was not so different from my grass in the Boston Common or Central Park — as if it were sacred, holy. There is a beauty there that is inexpressible. You truly have to see it to believe it. But simultaneously, it is like any other beauty, with its trees, stones, flowers, water, and cows. The things that made the Burren so unique were things I could find anywhere. And yet, I was struck by them, unlike anything I’d experienced.

The first large hike we did in the program was up Diamond Hill in Connemara National Park. I remember before we began, I looked up at the peak of the mountain and thought to

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myself, *There's no way*. The mountain stretched into the perfect blue sky, almost as high as the clouds. I looked at the group of friends I was hiking with, all of them excited to get a move on and make it to the top, and I didn't know how to tell them that I truly believed I wouldn't make it.

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The way up felt like climbing a staircase that would never end. But surprisingly, with each step I felt myself getting stronger and stronger, — not physically, but mentally. A friend's father sent us inspirational quotes to keep us going when it felt impossible: "The mind always quits before the body," he said. With that, I continued to climb the limestone fragments until I reached the top. Each step reinforced the fact that I could do hard things, even if it felt impossible. Before I knew it, I reached the peak. I was exhausted, in pain and terribly thirsty, but the magic of the view overrode those feelings. I'd never seen so much life, so much green grass and blue sky, and so much water, all in one place. It was overwhelming and awe-inspiring. It made every ache in my back and cramp in my calf worth it.

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It's difficult to talk about the Burren without mysticizing it, because when you're there, it's almost like you're in an altered dimension. On days when the sky is clear and the sun shines across the long stretches of fields with cows and sheep, and the gray mountains hovering in the background, touching the sky, you can't help but feel like such beauty only exists there. And in some ways it does. There are very few places left on earth with as much biodiversity as the Burren. But at the same time, the Burren isn't outer space. It's a small part of our large existence, a snapshot of the simple beauties that scatter the earth. Its contoured hills and fragmented cliffs paint a picture so unique that you'll take a thousand photos of it, but in essence, is it really so different from the terrain you walk at home?

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In the Burren, you have no choice but to be in tune with the environment. The weather is so unpredictable that the app can never give an accurate forecast. You must be able to sense the rain. If you don't, the clothes you hung out to dry will only get wetter. You need to be able to read the wind to determine whether today's a good day to go out on the water. You have to know that the sun, despite its perceived shyness, is fierce and unrelenting, once you get higher up the mountain. You have to take a step back and feel, or else you'll be off balance. My struggle to keep up during hikes, which felt so much like a curse, ended up being the gift that allowed me to witness the magic of the Burren.

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It's this connectedness, and the subtle ways you have to be in tune with life — the quiet way people live in harmony with the land, their knowledge of its history, and their understanding of its quirks — that I felt so deeply in Ireland. It made me wonder about my relationship with the land, and how I interact with it, if at all. I started to wonder how I could harmonize with it.

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I've brought this feeling back home with me: his unremarkable beauty, this mystic psyche, and this instinctive love for the land. Its fading wake leaves behind two things: gratitude and wonder. I can't express how grateful I am for the time I spent in the Burren, the people I met, and the things they taught me. And I wonder, Can I translate the feeling I felt there, and can I bring it with me and plant its seed between the cracked concrete in front of my house? What does it mean to be in tune with the asphalt beneath my shoes as I rush to class? Will I start being able

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to sense when the rain is going to come, and decide to wear my raincoat that day? Can I let it make me softer, kinder, and more apt to change?

I'm not sure. But it's funny to think about how a single scholarship and a ton of courage broadened my worldview in such a beautiful way.

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