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The Worlds of the Ordinary

By Walter Cummins

A review of *On the Shoreline of Knowledge: Irish Wanderings* by Chris Arthur (University of Iowa Press, 2012)

Unique among writers of personal essays, Chris Arthur, in this new collection, as in his previous books, does not seek insights into himself or words that convey the essential drama of his life. Instead, the knowledge he pursues is a deeper understanding of his quotidian experiences—a chestnut found in a coat pocket, a list of mammals he compiled at age five, a pencil taken from the ground near a school, a photo of a boy with his first bicycle—in the much greater context of the natural, historical, philosophical, and spiritual; in short, how the smallest and seemingly insignificant detail relates to the totality. In this sense, what happened to Arthur, distinct happenings, do not function as access into the man himself, but rather as representative of all our lives, starting points for exploring the connections of the personal with the world around us. What Arthur does reveal is his intellect, the workings of his subtle and curious mind, rather than his psyche.

In the essay "Lists" he writes:

> The desire to order things, to find palatable interpretations of the world, is at the heart of much of our endeavor. We are a pattern-seeking species hungry for the articulation of experiences into sense and for those shapes of intelligibility by which the brute face of being may be tamed into person-centered scales. We need to extract some kind of navigable meaning for life's gargantuan liquid flow, which, without our efforts to dam and irrigate it, would sweep us away in a tidal wave of incomprehension. Language is our primary tool in this.

Arthur's title for this collection, shoreline of knowledge, suggests the geography of his home nation, the island of Ireland, surrounded by the sea, and Arthur often writes of water and coastlines. Yet he transcends that literal sea by suggesting the expanse that encompasses the particulars of our singular lives and locations, and the need to plunge in from the shores of our selves to seek a greater knowledge. He concludes the essay "Chestnuts," by comparing the long sea journey of a peregrine drift-seed from Jamaica to a beach in Donegal to his own writings, as if they too were drift-seeds cast into the current, hoping for "the possibility of landfall, both proximate and distant, in someone else's understanding. Is this not enough to steel the nerve and attempt our repeated, hazardous voyages between self and other, now and then?"

His subtitle, Irish wanderings, may imply a travelogue of journeys throughout that landscape. The word Irish may be found in the titles of almost all Arthur's books. But he is not just a literal traveler through a physical landscape. Northern Ireland is his birthplace, the home of his youth, though he spent many of adult years in Wales and now lives in Scotland. A memory from that time in Ireland functions as a starting point for his writing, with the actual wanderings taking Arthur in many directions as his mind navigates a labyrinth of information, references, and possibilities.

For Arthur ordinary places "exert an authority on the psyche." But why? What is their power over us? Each place has its own mystery, and he functions as a sleuth attempting to solve that mystery. Unlike the protagonists of detective fiction who comfort readers with the certainty of their resolutions, Arthur frames possibilities instead. The answer could be this or it could be that or even something else. We live in the midst of unknowns and weave stories to confront them: "So we clutch at the things around us, put them in our pockets when we can, take what comfort there is to be found in them, salvage what shreds of sense appear in the entangled savagery and sweetness of life's unfolding."

Arthur emphasizes contingencies, "the proximity of other outcomes . . . how 'otherwise' is our constant companion." Writing of the "miracle" of his uncle's survival amid a fusillade of gunfire during World War Two, he says, "So many things seem as if, so easily, they might never have happened. Seemingly trivial events carry gargantuan implications."

Arthur's method of pursuing those implications is circular, each essay a compilation of smaller essays that return to the initial "trivial" event or object and consider it from a different perspective. The collection's introduction explain his reliance on the concept Zen

concept of *ensō*, going round in circles, a concept "variously taken to represent enlightenment, clear seeing, the absolute, one-pointedness of concentration, the universe." He suggests that this approach yields more epiphanies than a straight path.

The essay "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Briefcase," a homage to Wallace Stevens's blackbird poem, is one demonstration of Arthur's approach. It begins with the image of a herd of calves among the hillocks of Ireland's County Down, narrowing in to the particular calf whose flesh became this briefcase. The next section is the opposite of idyllic, conjuring the horrors of the slaughterhouse with death, skinning, and tanning, a reminder of how animals are transformed into leather objects. Then it strikes him that the briefcase in question could have come from many parts of the world, not just Ireland. Arthur realizes, "The briefcase, which on its own seems so limited, straightforward, closed—uninteresting—in fact harbors unexpected doors, locked only by our strange custom of not trying them; doors that give access to other times, other places, that quickly lead from the ordinary into the extraordinary."

Yet the next section returns to the mundane, an almost technical description of the briefcase—its color, shape, texture, its signs of use. Then Arthur tells the reader that though a stranger might see the briefcase as a trivial object, to him it sings as sweetly as a blackbird. The sixth section reveals the briefcase was his father's, the source of a flood of memories, a trigger point opening "another dimension."

Part of that dimension is the role the briefcase played in his father's career in Northern Ireland's Ministry of Finance, holding the government papers he carried back and forth on his daily commute from their home village to Belfast. This fact leads to a consideration of the politics of the time and the likelihood that, without his apolitical father even contemplating it, those papers may have played a role in the suppression of Catholics by the Protestant majority, a condition that led to violence and many deaths.

Still, it was Arthur's father's briefcase, suggesting a "skin-to-skin" communion when touched by the son years after his parent's death. The complexity of its associations makes Arthur think of the Book of Kells he once saw with his father in Trinity College Dublin's Old Library, and beyond that an exhibit of one hundred objects presented by Neil MacGregor, a director of the British Museum, who said, "Telling history through *things* is what museums are for." Although the father's briefcase would not have been one of those

objects, like them it connects "with the personal and the planetary, with lineages of individuals and species."

Finally, Arthur considers what may be held in common between multiple ways of looking at a briefcase and looking at a blackbird, and he remembers the blackbird is Ireland's totemic bird. This leads to a childhood memory of seeking blackbird nests in "secret, hidden bowers"; his father, when he was very small, lifting him to see the eggs. "Sometimes I think of the briefcase now as a kind of nest crammed with a treasure trove of eggs."

Once again, in this essay, as in those of the entire collection and in all Arthur's writing, an object from his life and its associated personal memories lead to ruminations that demonstrate the web of relationships binding the specifics of an individual life to patterns of history, to natural processes, to ideas, and to the endless connections that animate the world around us, past and present. Although, in circling around its subjects, Arthur essays follow a similar approach, they transcend redundancy because each set of discoveries offers a new range of surprising illuminations.

These essays could be considered exemplars of William Blake's world in a grain of sand, "the depth of meaning contained in the seeming shallows of the ordinary." But in this case objects Arthur has encountered throughout his life do not yield their vastness from within. Each grain opens up worlds of complex relationships through networks of meaning that encompass time and space. In this approach Arthur can be considered an interdisciplinary writer, integrating the findings of extensive reading and historical associations with the musings of his own imagination.

Walter Cummins is the author of five short story collections and co-publisher of Serving House Books. His recent collection is The Lost Ones*, from Del Sol Press. His review* ***Seeking Creatural Diversity*** *appeared in* Zeteo *in July 2012.*