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My Tuam.

My Tuam is built on a foundation of childhood memories, of school and summer holidays. It's sitting in the back of a mustard volkswagen beetle, hearing the purring engine driving up the lawn and the soft sound of long meadow grass gently brushing its underbelly. It's playing with cousins on the railway line, pressing our faces against the rusted tracks, stretching our ears to hear the sound of an approaching train. It's memories of sucking sickly sweet push-pops while waiting on the platform in Ballyglunin for a steam train to arrive. It's ham sandwiches on brown bread in a basket with butter and chef sauce. It's spring onions pulled from the back garden dipped in salad cream - lettuce, tomato, two slices of rolled ham on a china plate. Taytos, fig rolls, red lemonade. It's the welcome warmth of a turf-fired range in winter, in summer. It's the familiar click of a kettle going on the boil. It's gathering around fires, sharing news, telling stories - visiting.

My Tuam is a hinterland, a home from home in the heart of my Mother's homeland - Crumlin, Ballyglunin. My Tuam is a place of belonging, a feeling, deeply evoked by the presence of generational footprints etched on the land. It's dry stonewalls and hawthorns in bloom in May. It's over a railway, under a railway bridge, past the new school and the pumps at Ryan's.

My Tuam is a collection of daily experiences. It's saying "Yes!" to a proposal on the top of Knockma. It's "Bom Dia" in the morning, "Boa Noite" at night. It's going into town on a Friday and catching the market down Brownes Lane. It's as much about the chat as it is the fresh locally grown organic vegetables, home baked breads, willow witch and free range pasture grazed pork. Going home with my wares, maybe into O'Tooles to pick up a few bits or LIDL for the big shop. New Harmony to fuel my latest health fad and Padraic's when I'm looking for that something and I'm not sure what it is but I know I'll find it there when I see it.

It's breakfast in Leaf & Bean, followed by a stroll to the library, maybe a book or maybe catch an exhibition in the foyer. It's Viennese fingers from The Cake Box, if I'm lucky, shared over a cuppa with a friend, a neighbour. It's Orange, the handmade chocolate shop. It's the sound of kids playing in the park and families on bicycles. It's young people hanging in closed doorways laughing, dreaming, all-talk about their futures.

COVID happened. The market ceased trading, the Cake Box closed down, the library doors shut to the public and Leaf & Bean went click and collect. Young people still gather in doorways laughing, dreaming, all-talk about their futures. Covid happened but something else happened too.

Since Creative Places came to town my Tuam is all this and more. My Tuam is curious. It's reading the announcement of 20 seed funding recipients in the social media channels of a national resource organisation and realising this is happening in Tuam. My Tuam! Delighting knowing that throughout the hinterland in studios and workshops, through communities and collaboration there's a network of practitioners experimenting, making and producing. The announcement is followed by newsfeeds of new websites launched, podcasts released, musicians recording, craft fairs continuing and suddenly the seeds are growing, the creative endeavors of a community supported, made visible, taking root. I am witnessing a place being held. That's the privilege Creative Places has honoured Tuam with, holding a space, deeply believing in a place and its people.

In this sense Creative Places is for me a presence, an enigma of sorts. Creative Places moves through you, it's in you, it's of you, it's of place. In many ways it's hard to imagine without a physical space or building to identify with, which in itself challenges institutional norms about how creativity and the Arts are supported. Yet somehow the fluidity of the framework and relational methods maintain this holding space, even in a pandemic.

From a personal level it's feeling supported to find my voice again. It's being listened to and being heard. It's feeling the fear and doing it anyway. It's an invitation to host a breakout room as part of Create's infamous networking day. It's sharing my reflections with you today. It's belonging to a community of practice, with identified shared interests, working in unison. It's a virtual meeting with collaborating artists in France. It's the fresh promise of a newly formed artist collective. It's a journey of discovery, a "Walking Whid" audio tour to hidden spaces, experiencing place through others. It's Little John Nee performing on the platform at Ballyglunin Station for Culture Night. It's following a community trail of scarecrows and witches, ghosts and ghouls and a night walk by torch to see a ruined house illuminated for Halloween. It's Eugene's light sculptures on top of Knockroe. It's just the right amount of balance acknowledging what's already there while providing nourishment to breathe, experiment with new ways, to learn or unlearn. Creative Places is momentum. While the mill wheels may have stopped turning, the river still flows. Place is our commons, culture, our differences and creativity binds us. My Tuam, this Tuam, is a place of possibility. My Tuam is past, present and most definitely my future.

Joanna McGlynn