

The Dragon's Horde

Dublin is a dragon and on my first night, I rode atop its head. Pairs of feet still stained with United States soil flitted across slick cobblestone streets. The night hung as a black curtain above warm lights—string lights strewn across street alleys, lamp lights, storefront signs, pub lights. The air tasted sweet with an earthy metallic. Street music reverberated between brick and called me over to stay awhile. But there was too much to hear, too much to see, and the body of the dragon curved on. We skipped down the streets, a flock of wild, adrenaline eyes and parched lips. Air-weary travelers, the pub lights lured us in to music and drink. Once we tired of one, we rushed the streets in search of another, and another; *The International Bar*, *Temple Bar*, *The Hairy Lemon*. Our hearts were insatiable. After two drinks, the dragon called me back to its streets. This time, alone. I found my way back to the music and stood in place for a while to feel the moist air settle on my cheeks. The first night is what I pictured it would be like, but it was only night, and I had yet to see Dublin under the scrutiny of day.

In daylight, the hypnosis of city lights is quieted. The city becomes something new altogether. In the daylight, I realized that Dublin is a dragon.

Let me elaborate.

Its body, scales of uneven cobblestone, snake and glide beneath the untrained feet of a visitor. As feet walk on and familiarity is lost, the body bends below and guides one street into another, and another, and another, until bearing has returned. Webbed spines fray along its jaw, and when the wind blows past, tight and quick, it makes music. Dusted with bar-light stars and dew from misty rain, Dublin's flesh shimmers. It is a dragon with a 120-meter-long lance for a heart. This lance has many names: *The Spire*, *The Monument of Light*. The lance has a magic about it. Light never ceases to shine from its peak. It is the vision of one, unified Dublin. But as

most hearts are, this one is still conflicted. Dublin has scars over old wounds. It has notches in its bones from bullets. Their remnants stare back, blasted into the pillars of the General Post Office, a building that sits along the dragon's spine: O'Connell Street Lower.

If Dublin is a dragon, then what might be its horde? I say "horde" and not "hoard" because this dragon collects live things. They sit in heavy jackets and thin jeans on O'Connell Bridge and the ends of Ha'penny Bridge. Their sleeping bags gather by storefronts and crosswalks. One man sits and reads from dawn till dusk every day, another woman asks tirelessly for just enough euros to rent a hostel room for the night. They take turns with a tub of chalk and write poetry on the sidewalk.

They write;

Some people look down on me

Because I am Homeless

But who are they to judge

For I bleed blood and

I breathe the same air

So! How can anyone judge

For no one in life is...

—and it sits unfinished in the minds of passersby. They only looked because suddenly, the concrete was colorful beneath their feet.

Splitting between the scales are buildings as spikes, meticulously groomed at a maximum of 60 meters high. The buildings are full—fit to burst, leaving its horde to camp in the streets. In the cold and mist of December 2017, the dragon counted 2,385 children in its horde. It counted 3,712 adults and 1,028 families. The horde continues to swell.

I ventured this dragon alone often. My tastes had changed. Before, I had preferred a second mind around as back-up in case my own failed. But in Dublin, I found a comfort in being lost. It helped slow my world down. It taught me to walk with purpose in the present, instead of rushing to something in my future. When I slowed down, the city felt like a dream—real, yet just beyond my comprehension. Lost, I met with beings from the dragon’s living horde. Some were on feet consumed by a nervous pacing. Some sat coiled in their sleeping bags, staring a week into the future. At the crosswalk by Christ Church Cathedral, a woman rushed to me, her hair thin and oily, her eyes red from exhaustion.

“Spare some euros please, please, spare some euros please! Please!”

My response was robotic, trained; it was all I knew. *I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.*

“Just enough for a hostel for the night, please! My father is in the hospital and I have to visit him, please, only enough for the night!”

I’m sorry,

I have no cash on me.

I’m sorry.

She heard me. She nodded and continued past without a word.

Before Dublin was a dragon, it was a tiger. Crisp businessmen with eyes trained towards a new frontier brought their dreams to Ireland. They expanded their companies on Irish soil and watched as the country’s capital flourished. Ireland became the *Celtic Tiger*. Its citizens, for the first time in a long time, felt secure. They felt fearless as they shopped in stores, ate out in restaurants, made down payments on houses yet to be built. The Celtic Tiger assured its people that they and their spending were immortal, even as the nation’s economy began to stagger under the weight of progress. It was a denial that led the nation into a crippling recession. Houses now

sit vacant, cold, unobtainable to the people who then found themselves scraping for some semblance of stability. When the Celtic Tiger fell, Dublin resurrected as a dragon with a currency of its own—a horde in the thousands.

At the corner of Parnell Square is a garden. A long pool of water stretches down the garden and out at the sides in the shape of a cross. Flowers bloom when in season, and the grass on the risen earth is a striking green year-round. At the head of the cross, up a small climb of stairs, is a monument. At its base are three human bodies sculpted to appear to be clothed in loose cloth. They are thin, dejected. The first, a man, lays close to the earth as if near impact from a fall. The second, a man who looks like the same man from before, but only at the start of the fall; as if rewound in time. The third is a woman. She stands the tallest yet leans faintly to the left. Forming from the backs of all three is a flock of large birds taking flight. This garden is the *Garden of Remembrance*, and it commemorates the lives of those who died amidst the struggle for Irish freedom. The monument, atop its perch at the head of the garden, shows the Irish people rising from the ashes of their past.

This garden is surrounded by a fence and locked at nightfall. Next to the fence, a tent sits pitched into the grass, and clothes hang haphazardly from a tree to dry.

I was not a stranger to the city at night, but I preferred it during the day. I made 20-minute trips by bus from Dublin City University to the city center in front of Trinity College. From noon until late evening, I wandered the body of the dragon with no real purpose or direction. In the back of my mind, all I was searching for were sights, music, and a cup of coffee somewhere hidden from the rush of jaywalking feet and double decker buses. A handful of those evenings in the city, I came across the same man. His hair was grey and ruffled, his beard sticky but not unkempt. The clothes he wore were stained and torn. His skin looked faded, wax-like.

His eyes stared past everything—past the buildings, the dumpster, past my body walking by. When I came across him, he would mumble under his breath—caught in a heated argument with himself and a phantom that sat not far from his own lips. One evening, something about him had changed. That evening, he was pacing feverishly back and forth between the curb of the street and a locked storefront gate.

“No... No... No!... No...No! No!” He shouted, shaking his hands like they were crawling with something. I kept moving. I knew the man as well as a frequent stranger could know him. I was used to passing him quickly. A step before passing him, he lifted his arms and bellowed, “I’m not scared of you! I’m not fucking scared of you! Come fight me, I’m not scared! Fight me!” He crashed his body into the storefront gate and punched it with a sharp hook. The gate echoed a light rattle but did not give way. It was a sudden aggression that startled me. Where my feet should have sped, they halted, frozen. I looked, but only for a moment. He seemed to understand that the gate was metal, and he was only flesh. The man went back to mumbling and leaned against the gate in defeat. I walked on.

Dublin tries to hide its horde behind the Leprechaun Museum, behind a bus tour, behind a Carroll’s gift shop on every street. They sit, invisible, a few yards away from where people stand daily with smiles on their faces, holding out pamphlets about angels. Every so often, someone will notice a piece of the scattered horde along the street. They will bring them a warm cup of coffee, crouch down, and have a nice chat as if the day was warm and home was waiting for them both. It is in those small moments that you can see them smile. Their eyes are glossed from loss of sleep, but the conversation brings a redness back to their cheeks.

Dublin is a dragon whose scales look different from afar. They reflect like a mirror, and we see only what we feel we ought to see. In case you were wondering: yes, I did drink

Guinness; yes, I did go to the pubs; yes, I went to the Guinness Storehouse; but I tire of responding to an image of the dragon from across the sea. Dublin is a vibrant city. There are stomping feet in its pubs, music in its streets, and art blooming in bookstores and studios. Dublin's body is old, but its breath is young and changing. And yet, the horde is still there: living things waiting for the warm season and counting their euros to pay off a hostel room for the night. The horde does not always look like defeated bodies strewn across the streets. When they find themselves with 2.70 euros, sometimes, they take the bus. Their children return from school to a hotel room shared amongst two, three, four others. Dublin is a dragon with hypnotic, fiery nighttime eyes, and with a horde ever swelling.