**From Michelle Walshe's essay**

As the sun rises, Skellig Michael is thrown into shadow, its black, hulking silhouette reminiscent of an iceberg dislodged from its frozen roots that has travelled far from home to settle off this jagged coastline on the southwest of Ireland.

The sun wakes me. Light streams through the bare window of my cabin. Endless ocean stretches outwards towards the horizon where dark blue meets light blue at the hem of the sky. I grab my swimsuit, soap and a towel and make my way to the pier.

I notice the natural light. It dances up and down the stony path in front of me and over and back across the ocean. The sun glints on the surface of the water making it sparkle like a thousand flashing paparazzi bulbs. Light expands, uncontained by the constraints of a city and unpolluted by its air. It is clear, pristine, unfiltered.

As clean, white clouds chug across the sky like puffs of steam from a train, sunlight sweeps over the rock, changing its colour momentarily from green to brown to black, then back to green. It throws shade, then retracts it, disappearing almost as quickly as it appears. It is like watching a painter at work, the action of a natural brushstroke sweeping across a canvas. It creates a feeling of wide, open space, even though the rock is small and narrow.

At the pier, the waves are gentle, lapping against the ropes and the iron stairwell to the landing. The sea looks inviting, but I know the water is cold. The Atlantic Ocean never warms up, but a swim in the sea is a better start to the day than waiting for the kettle to boil and washing from head to toe in a tiny basin in my cramped cabin.

Seabirds clot the sky. The plaintive cries of Kittiwakes, that onomatopoeic bird, crying kittiwake, kittiwake, reverberate into the air above me. Seagulls caw-caw as they wheel across the sky, the sound harsh against the wind. Guillemots laugh on their narrow rock ledges, jutting from the cliff. They are the avian equivalent of high-rise apartment dwellers sitting on their balconies at the same time. They are my audience as I plunge into the ocean.

I sit on a sun warmed boulder to dry off until I see the first boats approaching in the distance, their v shaped wakes slitting the surface of the ocean, a mirror image of a flock of birds flying in a v formation above.

I climb over six-hundred steps to the monastery. I try to count the exact number, but my concentration breaks every time I see the cartoon beak of a puffin emerge from underneath one of the stone slabs.

Puffins, unperturbed by my presence, strut on their bright orange feet from their burrows, across the grassy slope, to gaze out over the ocean, contemplating flight for a moment before taking off, where they hang in the air before diving into the waves, a disconcerting sight, like a miniature penguin able to fly.

The cry of the puffin is different to other seabirds. It is a droning sound, like a running motorbike engine. When I hear this noise for the first time, I look around, half expecting to see a cluster of bikers on their Harley Davidsons. Then I remember where I am. I continue upwards.

I pause at Christ’s Saddle, the grassy mid-point of the island. The steep stairway rises in front of me, winding its way up towards the monastery. It resembles the spine of a skeleton, stone after stone, vertebra after vertebra. A literal backbone.