

By Linea Johnson

# Welcoming the Rain in Ireland

A student with bipolar disorder trades the rain of Seattle for the rain of Dublin while studying English and creative writing in Ireland.

**IT'S TEN O'CLOCK AT NIGHT** and I am sitting on the seawall in Galway, Ireland. With my knees to my chest and my arms wrapped tight around my legs, I crouch on a low stone bench watching the last of the day's fishermen pack up their coolers and head home. My gaze follows their slow procession as they vanish into the damp night. Then I feel the rain begin to fall.

Slowly and begrudgingly I put on my hood. I remind myself that this is nothing new. I am from Seattle after all. And it is for this reason that I have a hooded sweatshirt rather than an umbrella. I somehow think that I can beat it. That I can stay warm and dry under a thin layer of cotton.

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It is at this moment that my mind begins to slow down; the world around me begins to fragment.

I watch an endless stream of swans move toward the shore, their heads slowly tucking beneath their wings.

I listen to my friends talk drunkenly and adamantly about the importance of our frequent swims in the freezing Atlantic Ocean.

I listen to the water hit the wall and the faint laughter of teenagers across the canal.

I know this feeling. It is a frequent occurrence in my life as someone struggling with bipolar disorder. This feeling is anxiety, intensity, love, pain, and extreme emotional engulfment. It is everything at once—and overwhelming.

It is at this moment, as I look over at my laughing friends, that I realize that I need a moment alone. Unlike many other students—I must make the time to process my day. Having spent almost two inseparable weeks traveling with newfound kindred spirits, I have not let myself take in all I have been experiencing.

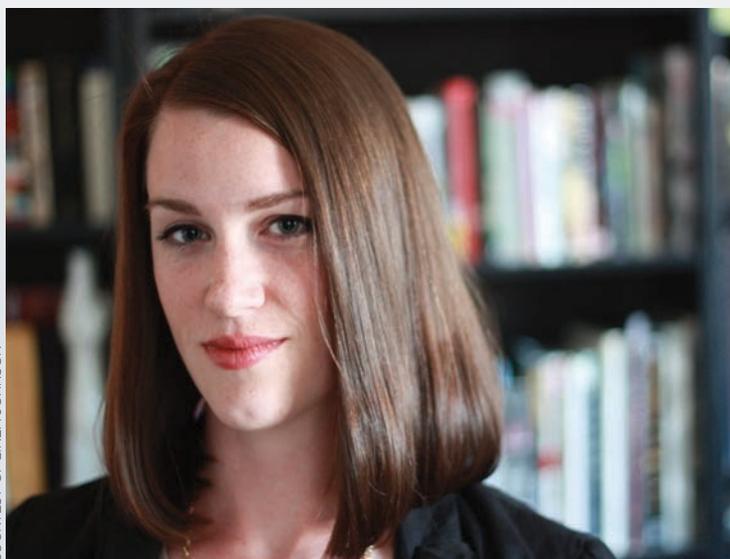
I have not let myself fully feel the power of the ocean crashing against those cliffs.

I have not allowed myself to cry at the beauty and pain of Yeats's poetry as I come to better understand his country.

I have not permitted myself the joy of simply sitting quietly on my own.

I have always been an intensely emotional and passionate girl. But it wasn't until I was 19 years old that these emotions overcame me, eventually landing me in several hospitals and earning me a new label: bipolar disorder.





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Over the three years that followed, my emotions spun and dove making my life a whirlwind of confusion and intensity. It was not simply bipolar, but multipolar.

Slowly however, I began to know my body and my emotions. I began to find treatment that worked and I became more aware of approaching episodes. Eventually I even became stable, and stayed there. I stayed there for so long that I even began to assume I was “healed” while simultaneously becoming overly cautious.

It was in this state of stability that I decided to attend my school’s study abroad trip to Ireland. Being an English and creative writing major I was more than thrilled to be reading James Joyce in Dublin or writing poetry on the Aran Islands.

In preparing for the trip I made sure to be organized and ready for anything.

I met with my counselor to talk about coping strategies if I felt unsteady.

I met with my psychiatrist to make sure I knew what to do if things went wrong, to make sure I knew the most fragile times in my journey.

I was told about the importance of sleep to someone with bipolar when experiencing jetlag.

I learned how to manage my medication when eight hours of my day has been deleted, when I was required to race through airports feeling extreme side effects.

I had told my teachers that I may need certain accommodations.

I told myself it would be okay.

I was ready and prepared for everything and I was elated at my opportunity to go.

Sitting on the seawall I realized that my mind had reached that fragile point of exhaustion and emotional overstimulation. It was at this moment that I realized the gift I had been given.

In having a “mental health condition” (I won’t call it an illness), I am more aware of my emotions and the affect of my feelings on my body and soul, and therefore allow myself to spend more time thinking about my environment and daily activities.

Though an umbrella would be the best protection, I needed to take my chances of getting drenched and enjoy that freedom. It is in my daily life with bipolar that I realize that I cannot spend every day worrying about stability, that I can’t spend every day monitoring my moods in order to seek the best protection.

By taking my study abroad trip to Ireland I ran out in the rain, not completely unhooded, but aware and prepared. I allowed myself to take chances all the while knowing my limits and my need to find space to soak in the meaning of the experiences.

In the end, between my hood and my awareness, I have beaten the rain. I have navigated the things that continue to restrict me and recognized the richness of my days, realizing that the whole of who I am is certainly not my condition, and that I am even more in love with the world than ever before.

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