

## **The Natural History Museum**

Liza Costello

### *Brittle Stars*

The internet is a wonderful thing. Surfing it with my newfound interest in the brittle star, a relation of the starfish, leads me to Lily of San Diego's 30 second film of a tiny member of this species. In the background, you can hear the delighted exclamations of Lily as he wraps himself around her finger, waves at this new and waterless world with many tentacles, before he is lowered back home. He looks like a cross between a spider and a snowflake.

*Brittle Star.* As in hard, but liable to break or shatter easily. Mostly they bide their time crawling along the dark sea floor, unlike the rest of sea life that is drawn to the sunny metres closest to the surface. They remind me of us. The way we toughen ourselves up against the world and all the things it can, and does, throw at us. How we secretly suspect that one little thing more will cause us to splinter and disappear. How on a really bad day, the dark blanket of sleep is the one place we want to be.

Yet the brittle star is not as fragile as first appearances would suggest. Under attack, a limb does break off easily. Just as easily, another one grows back in its place. The brittle star, you see, possesses the rare ability to regenerate itself, limb by limb. It is in their very brittleness that their secret of survival can be found.

### *The Smallest Hummingbird*

My mother was a teacher in a boy's primary school for 37 years. Once she told me that every one of her pupils was a model of good behaviour, when they stepped inside the Natural History Museum. Like me, it held them in thrall. In my own school tour days, my favourite item was the smallest species of hummingbird in the world. Though tiny, stuffed and very dead, I rated it above the terrifying arrangement of gorillas and monkeys, the polar bear with his coarse fur coat, the cobra in its jar, the ancient elk horns, not to mention the whale skeleton that hangs from the ceiling, conjuring the unbelievable.

That tiny hummingbird is still my favourite. You can see it on the upper floor, surrounded by an array of other birds. A shimmer of fluorescent blue glimmers from its wings.

Camping on a large farm in Central America a few years ago, I was brushing my teeth over an outdoor sink when a real live hummingbird flew up to me and hovered just above my shoulder, as though to say hello. It happened the next morning too. Later I realised it was its own reflection in the mirror above the sink that caught its attention, and not me. It was just as transfixed as I was with the inexplicable blur of wings, the miracle of life pulsing through body.

### *The Bird's Nest*

When two planes flew into the towers of the World Trade Centre, I remember a politician on television describe it an inhuman act. That, perhaps, was something to cling to. But no. It wouldn't do. It is the fact, after all, that it was committed by human beings that makes this event so very terrible. The human factor is our problem.

A man saws through the trunk of a tree and discovers a secret. It is a bird's nest. Small, perfect and impossible. Inside it lie two broken shells, the colour of morning blue. The tree is searched for an opening through which a bird could have flown. None is found. The only explanation is that the tree grew around the abandoned home, until it was completely obscured. Grew around it, without bending a twig out of shape. Without touching the empty shells. You can still see it in the Natural History Museum, the nest snugly nestled into the trunk, both safely enclosed in a glass box.

It was a human act that brought this aberration of nature to the Museum. It was a human act to accept it as worthy of exhibit. It was a human act to stand and wonder at it, as countless people have since done. The things we are capable of. A day cannot pass on this planet without pain being inflicted on someone, by someone else. And yet we know that this odd miracle of a carefully protected nest is to be celebrated, even loved.

### *The Last Wolf*

The last wolf in Ireland died between 1759 and 1816. I wonder what that felt like. Did it realise? Do wolves feel loneliness? No one recorded the actual day or year it died. No one cared to. Wolves were nothing but a hindrance, killing livestock, a threat to children. Our survival trumped beauty without an eyebrow being raised. Now many of us regret its extinction. It represents, in a way, all that is bad about progress. It makes you wonder if all change is to be regretted, inseparable as it seems to be, from loss.

It was Goethe who said that one must ask children how cherries and strawberries taste. When I spoke to my four-year-old nephew Sean after his first day in school, he told me that everyone in the class sits on a wall outside the school, and not in a classroom. That his teacher's hair was red, but now it is white. Sean knows that sometimes facts have nothing to do with the truth. That it takes a truly creative energy to illuminate a change as great as entering the world of school. We have lost the wolf. Many other losses have followed, some caused by us, some by external forces. More are happening right now and no one seems to know exactly where they will lead. Good perhaps to remember then, that it is in the process of change itself that the potential for the wonderful can be found.

### *Nixon's Moon*

In 1973, President Nixon gave the Irish people the unusual gift of a piece of the moon. A year later, he was fired from the most powerful position in the world, in possibly the most famous case of corruption in modern history. Just as the disaster of the Vietnam war was crawling to an end. We still have our piece of the moon. You can see it beneath a sheet of glass in the Natural History Museum, alongside samples of limestone and quartz. It is small and dark and glittering with secrets.

What a jumble of ideas is conjured by the moon. Madness. Sentimental declarations of love – ‘I would give you the moon on a plate if I could’. The mysterious universe – a world of darkness, whizzing rocks, desolate planets and who knows what else. On the other hand, the moon is just rock and this is a very small piece of it. Cold, dead recorder of history. So we have the moon on a plate, or a piece of it at least. It is at once dull and amazing, ordinary and wonderful.

I ask my four-year-old nephew what he thinks the moon is. His answer is clear. The moon is the light in the sky at night-time. He's right of course. We love the moon because it reminds us that darkness only exists in relation to light.

*These scripts were broadcast on RTE Radio 1's A Living Word in August 2010 and in January 2011.*