

FOREWORD

Roddy Doyle

I found out that Imelda May was a poet during what became known as the first lockdown. (We didn't know at the time that there'd be a second, and a third.) I'd been walking the same two permitted kilometres for months. I live very near the sea but, as a neighbour said to me one morning, 'I'm fuckin' sick of the sea.' I was sick of the sea, the sky, the seagulls, the anxious faces of the people coming at me; I was sick of my own anxious face. I was living in Dublin but beginning to forget its map, its rhythm and its voices.

But a day came when the permitted 2K became 5, and I could turn and walk in the opposite direction, into the city centre. The streets were quiet and a bit desolate but that was why I noticed the poster.

'You don't get to be racist and Irish'

It was the only new thing I'd seen all day.

It was a poem, simply that, just words on the poster, down the huge page on the wall. It was angry but playful too – exuberant. As I read I felt I was being reacquainted with the city's rhythm; the words on the wall were making up for the emptiness of the streets. I'd read about half the poem before I saw that it had been written by Imelda May. And, really, it didn't surprise me. I could hear Imelda now as I read – the swagger in the accent, the pride, the humour, the honesty and generosity, the brilliance.

Imelda May is brilliant.

It's simple as that – and as complicated. She can sing 'Johnny Got a Boom Boom' effortlessly, but only because she sat down and wrote it. This book confirms the hard work behind the brilliance. This time, we get only the words and what she can do with them. Imelda May has always been a poet.

A brilliant one.

Becoming

I am woman
I am me
mother, daughter, sister, free thinker
activist, writer, boss, singer, sinner
lover, carer, endless beginner
introvert, extrovert, every-kind-of-vert
assertive, confident, confidant
non-conformist, nonchalantly
flaunting, flirting, I'm funny as hell
storyteller, secret keeper
dreamer, reader, non-credence believer
bleeder, bleedin deadly
survivor, thriver, chancer, skiver
I'm a ducker, I'm a diver
I'm hungry for knowledge
but I'm full of it
full of pain, full of joy
one size doesn't fit
like a glove that I'm not
but I am what I am and I'm good with that
I'm ordinary, I'm extraordinary
I'm a queen, I'm a bee
I'm sweetness of honey
I'm salt of the sea
I am the seed
I am the earth
I Gaia, she
I matriarch
I am I
I am we
I am woman
I am me.

Mammy's Dying

I dream of her death
wake gasping for breath
then dry sweat
off my soaking wet skin
the trickles tickle
me to drift again
then I'm 10
and I'm straining to spot her shopping
as the nuns march us up Meath Street
for confessions of nothing.

Then I'm 4
and I'm holding her hand as we walk
and talk and the world is good
and it's sunny
(why is it always sunny?)
and only we know
our secret code
squeeze once I love you
squeeze back I love you too.

Her hands, her hands
that held mine tight
blew kisses goodnight
and swept hair from out of my eyes
how I wish I could crawl
back into her womb
so we could start
all over again.

