

Baby hare

His pupils had collected a basket of words given to them by neighbours, which his black pen tipped neatly onto a page in 1935. Pocharrion, puth dearg, push-a-haw, push-a-han, putch-ar-on. Repeated because the source word must have been unfamiliar to him, the original Irish chewed up and spat out in varying forms. Now, over eighty years later, the root word was unfamiliar to me too. With fair but fading book-Irish, I twisted and turned the sounds trying to seek out the mother form. Unsuccessful, I turned to one better versed in the tongue. He proffered *patachán*, meaning leveret or young rabbit. But that didn't quite make sense. Old dictionaries were in agreement, but also offered 'plump little creature' and 'weak young boy'. At first these seemed more likely, but as the weeks passed, leveret took hold. Leveret: a way of creating distance between a never-child and the community. A word that diluted a father's shame for allowing his newborn to die unbaptised; a word that absorbed some of the mother's grief. Less awful to pass a fairy fort encircling the bodies of lithe leverets, than a waste field choked with dead babies. *Patachán*, a word used in parts of 1930s Louth for babies who died before baptismal waters had cleansed their souls. These little lost leverets, soaked in original sin, were buried in unconsecrated ground, stranded forever in the grey nothingness and nowhere of limbo.

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