



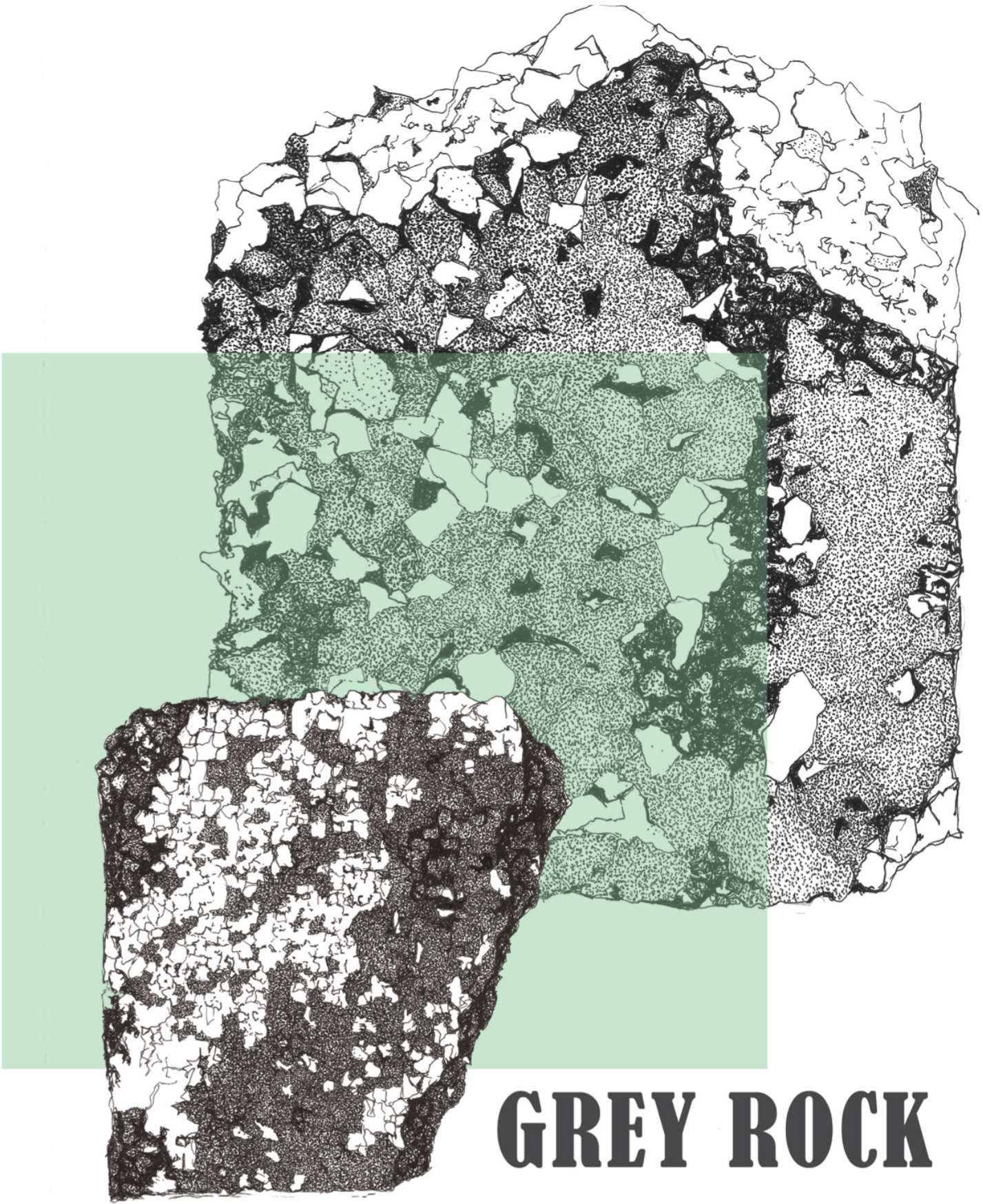
## IN THE SPACE THAT HAPPENS ANYWAY

You know those offcuts you end up with when you cut a circle in pastry or paper? – almost triangular, with one curved side – well, those are called ‘spandrils’. You’d often see spandrils on the undersides of bridges or in metalwork such as brackets or cast-iron decorations between beams in train stations. If you ever used Microsoft Word 1995, you probably inserted one, in the form of *printer’s flower*, into the corner of the document to make it look fancy. A Persian rug often has four, one at each corner of its *field*, halfway from the centrepiece medallion to the edge. Spiders form spandrils where they weave their webs into corners, and if you were to stand on the Moon and look down at Earth, the space behind it – Space itself – out to your peripherals would consist of multiple spandrils, and the same goes for the white behind your head on your passport photo. The area underneath the stairs on the ground floor of a house is a three-dimensional spandril; it’s my favourite kind of spandril.

For as long as architects have been designing arched doors and windows, they’ve been left with the dilemma about what to do with those incidental spaces beyond the outer edges of a curve, spaces which aren’t the main feature (that have no structural function) but nevertheless are there and must be addressed. Cast or carved botanical ornamentation – so many swirling flowers, leaves and stems – have been a common filler for spandrils from antiquity to the present day. Deities, lazily leaning or triumphantly flying over the tops of arches, have also been popular. Perhaps the most famous relief of this kind is the one that sits in the Ancient Greek city of Ephesus (or *Efes*, like the beer) in Izmir Province, present-day Turkey. It consists of a marble triangle depicting Nike, god of victory, being whisked away by the magic laurel wreath she’s holding in her left hand. Looking at this relief, which once sat atop an arch but now lies on the ground propped up with a rock at its thin end, it’s easy to see how the graphic designer Carolyn Davidson was inspired in 1971 to create one of the best-known brand logos in corporate history: that great icon of Capital, the ‘Swoosh’ of the sports manufacturer Nike. (‘Nike’, by the way – in contravention to the wishes of the company but according to my brother when he was eleven years old and I was six – should always be pronounced with one syllable, rhyming with ‘bike’.) Indeed, the track shoe – due to its very shape (especially where it makes contact with a football), or in how its leather upper is ostensibly useless (good for little more than advertising, say, the sale of more of itself) – is a sort of spandril.

As I’ve already mentioned, there’s a spandril under every staircase that has no staircase underneath it. In a house, it’s usually put to good use as a storage space, a cubbyhole or – as the French have it – a *cagibi*.<sup>1</sup> The spandril is probably where your coat’s disappeared to in a friend’s house if it isn’t over the newel post knob<sup>2</sup> (that’s the term for that thing on top of the last bannister) at the bottom of the stairs, or flung onto a bed in the spare room along with the coats of the others. In a stranger’s house, you might be introduced to a charming understairs spandril room with a toilet and the smallest hand basin the world squeezed into it; you might be told to ‘mind your head’ as you go in, smiling uncomfortably. That’s if there even is a basin; and if they sent you in there to piss, there’s no way they’re going to let you into the inner sanctum of their gaff. They’d rather die than let you into the kitchen to self-consciously wash your hands at the sink with Fairy Liquid, or up the stairs to the better-kept main bathroom with its full-sized basin. *You were lucky enough to get to use the spandril bag*, they might think, *get out of my house and take your filthy hands with you*.

Back when coal was what most of us in the Northern Hemisphere used to heat our homes, we’d shovel it into the space under the stairs to make a ‘coalhouse’ of the spandril. During the Belfast Blitz, not having much faith in air raid shelters, many families squeezed in under the stairs on top of the coal (and on top of each other). The staircase added an extra layer of protection as the Luftwaffe dropped bombs from the sky. My maternal grandmother tells the story of being crammed into the coalhouse with her parents and siblings on Easter Tuesday night, 1941. From his studio in Hamburg, the American-born Irish Nazi propagandist William Joyce, alias ‘Lord Haw-Haw’, announced over the radio that there would be ‘Easter eggs for Belfast’ as 200 bombers embarked from Nazi-Occupied Europe over that body of water called the *Ármelkanal*, which looks to me more like a spandril than a sleeve. Over 900 people were killed and 100,000 were made homeless in one night. Granny Ria, who left the coalhouse in the middle of a raid to run upstairs and fetch the matches for the lamp, is the hero in her story. It’s never clear whether she was selected or she volunteered. She was only eleven years old, but maybe that was older then.



# GREY ROCK

MASSIVES  
EXHIBITION BY RACHAEL CAMPBELL-PALMER  
WITH ESSAY BY SCOTT MCKENDRY

When I was that age, I used to climb behind the armchair that backed into a corner of our living room and read the *Guinness Book of World Records*. It was my own space, my spandril. Actually ... to be honest, I can’t remember what I read down the back of the chair, but I know the mention of that book might rouse nostalgia in you. If it doesn’t, how about this: the grimmest kind of spandril is that which exists under the first set of concrete stairs in a block of flats. What drab, cold, regions they are. Of course, that doesn’t mean they can’t be beautiful. When I used to hang around the Weetabix Flats on the Shankill Estate and the Sunningdale Flats in Ballysillan (both now demolished) I experienced them the way I was supposed to, in the manner in which they’d been ideologically conceived. That is, because I didn’t have to live in one, I understood (on an aesthetic level) the futuristic drive behind government social housing policy between the 1950s and the 1970s. Bastardising the ideas of Le Corbusier, the Swiss-French pioneer of Modernist architecture, planners were under the impression that housing people in blocks of flats would bring about nothing less than a residential utopia.<sup>3</sup> In the context of Belfast at least (as opposed to, say, Singapore, where space is at a premium), this string of policies was, we can now say with certainty, daft. By the time the powers that be twigged that flat life – gardenless, claustrophobic – could exacerbate social deprivation and contribute to generational disintegration (which is to say, they were and still are often shite places to live), many people made them (subpar, yes, but so what) home. At the heart of the spandril phenomenon is making the most of things and an appreciation for serendipity.

Famously, the eminent English poet John Milton described Belfast as that ‘barbarous nook of Ireland’ in his Hibernophobic diatribe *Observations on the Articles of Peace* (1649). He accused the ‘Scots presbytery at Belfast’ of ‘devilish malice, impudence, and falsehood’ but what he hated most about this up-and-coming bourgeoisie was how it had become too cosy with the ‘inhuman rebels and [...] papists in the south’.<sup>4</sup> Far from the Established centre of civility, Milton regarded the still quite small town – despite the huge economic investment of the Plantations – of little use to England. He did, however, retroactively, find a rhetorical use for Belfast. Perhaps owing to how they’re always an afterthought, spandrils are zones of insecurity.

Evolutionary biologists, linguists and psychologists have used the spandril as a quirky metaphor. Professor Ben Garrod defines it in an evolutionary context as a ‘physical structure or behavioural characteristic that is a by-product from some other functional adaptation’.<sup>5</sup> Let me give you a for-instance. The fennec fox uses its big ears to dissipate heat as it hunts locusts in the Sahara. If one of its cousins – say, a human – had a pair of inordinately large ears with no obvious function, their existence could be interpreted as a bit of a spandril (yet again, one must admit that one finds inordinately large ears extraordinarily arousing). Some have said the human chin in general, given its functionlessness, is a spandril.<sup>6</sup> Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin have postulated that language itself could be one, serving no evolutionary function.<sup>7</sup> Steven Pinker argues that music is a spandril, characterising it as ‘auditory cheesecake’; music, he writes, ‘could vanish from our species and the rest of our lifestyle would be virtually unchanged’ (imagine a party over at his house).<sup>8</sup> That the spandril exists as a metaphor in science betrays something about the way we as a species overcommit ourselves to utility and efficiency. Sometimes things exist and amuse us. They don’t always exist *to* amuse us. They need not be planned, and we’d do well to laugh at their appearance very seriously.

Despite not being the main feature (the football, the staircase, the arch, the face, Ireland, the Earth), spandrils are – evidently – quite useful and probably inevitable, existing as both an appendix and a source between object and subject. They’re how we make the most of superfluous corners, how we attempt to frame infinity in order to delude ourselves that we can comprehend the limitlessness of our universe, and they’re probably why – for no particular reason – I sometimes put my warm forehead against cold concrete walls when nobody else is around.

*Scott McKendry was the recipient of the Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Award 2019 and his pamphlet, Curfuffle (The Lifeboat), was Poetry Book Society Autumn Choice 2019. He is currently working on his first full collection of poems.*

<sup>3</sup> John. Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing* (London; New York, NY: Verso, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> John Milton, *Complete Prose Works of John Milton* Vol. 3. (Rufus Wilmot Griswold (intr.), Philadelphia, PA: John W. Moore, 1904), p. 425–434.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Garrod, ‘How “useless” quirks of evolution actually support Darwin’s theory’, *The Independent* online (19 December, 2018) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/evolution-evidence-useless-quirks-charles-darwin-theory-spandrel-biology-genetic-mutation-a8686721.html> (Accessed 20.5.21).

<sup>6</sup> Ed Yong, ‘We’re the Only Animals With Chins, and No One Knows Why; Despite much chin-stroking’, *The Atlantic* online (28 January, 2016) <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/01/were-the-only-animals-with-chins-and-no-one-knows-why/431625/> (Accessed 20.5.21).

<sup>7</sup> Kathleen R. Gibson and Maggie Tallerman (eds.), ‘Introduction: The Evolution of Language’, *The Oxford Handbook of Language Evolution* (Kiribati: OUP Oxford, 2012), p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York, NY: Norton, 1997), p. 534.

<sup>1</sup> The word *cagibi* (‘ka-zye-bee’) is a contraction of the term *cage à bijoux* or ‘jewellery box’.

<sup>2</sup> The newel post knob is the scourge of bannister-slider and the thing that keeps coming off in George Bailey’s hand in *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946).