'Places That Defined Me'

- *by a Fifth Year Student*

What kind of question is this to ask a boy, seventeen? I am young, and I hope that I have a lot more life to live, and many more places to define me. While it is true that our teenage years are in large part what defines us most, I feel as though at seventeen there are many milestones I have not yet reached, many rites of passage not yet completed. I still have thousands of people left to meet, thousands of places to go and things to do. It is impossible to describe myself as a fully defined person, but it is no more possible to really describe anyone as a fully defined person. Regardless, I shall endeavour to answer the question put before me. Come along with me as I delve into the murky, unreliable depths of memory.

It is hard to nail down places that define me, so I suppose it would best to start at the beginning of sorts; my family home. I grew up, (and still live in), a large enough semi-detached house in Sandycove, south county Dublin. It's a quiet neighbourhood, and only about five minutes from the sea and a nearby hill. The picturesque, sleepy nature of the surroundings of my house are a rather sharp contrast to inside, where three children and their two parents lived. We were neither quiet nor picturesque growing up, being three noisy and hyperactive children. I sometimes wonder how my parents had the patience to cope. I often pray it is an inherited trait. Regardless, my siblings and I were a bright bunch, though also occasionally destructive. There is a reason our

boxes of Christmas baubles are half empty and my brother's record of broken snow globes currently stands at about seven. In the face of this, to say my parents were anything but loving is beyond farcical. We were encouraged to follow our ambitions and to be kind to others. Our parents accepted everything about us without hesitation, and stood by us when we wanted to change some of those things. No matter where I go in my life, my home will always be the place that defines me most. Obviously.

Spending almost seven hours a day in one place, 167 days a year for five years tends to leave a mark on someone. To say that my school didn't define me would be an outright lie, though in many ways I would say that it possibly did so in a way that wasn't intended. Naturally I owe a lot to my school, and the friends I have made here, but I feel as though much of what has defined me is not how I fit into the school, but how I did not. To what extend my brother's experiences coloured mine is hard to say, but it is easy to be certain that the spectre of his schooling life loomed over my own, at least in the beginning. Discovering one's sexuality is difficult, and while I remain comfortably unsure of my own, my brother was not. My brother was also not unsure of what those around him thought of his sexuality. Alas times change, and while my brother's experiences are not my own, (and I to hope they will never be), the scar remains all the same. It would, however, be a disservice to the school to discredit its academics and I know I have learned much from the teachers who have done their utmost to encourage me along. And while it may be too difficult to show them, I

know that through the tribalistic unity of my friends I am deeply loyal to them. I feel as though we do not credit each other enough in our assistance in surviving the most chaotic years of our lives.

If there was ever a place that came as close to my home for defining me, it would have to be the campus of DCU. For three weeks at the beginning of my summer for four consecutive years I studied a variety of third-level courses at the Centre for Talented Youth Ireland. To someone who has never been there (and many who have) CTYI has a confusing, often frightening but ultimately harmless atmosphere, with an array of strange, cult-like traditions of song, chant, and dress. To describe that place as a sub-culture is inaccurate, as over those three weeks it develops into far more of a sub-society. In my youth, my teenage dramas played out on the backdrop of these rigorous courses and intense yet strangely relaxed stage of CTYI. First kisses, short relationships and lifetime friendships are what define CTYI for many, myself included. I learned more about myself than any of the courses I studied there and I know that no matter where we are I can trust the friends I made there. CTYI was a strange and confusing place for some of the strangest and most confusing years of my life, and it has left me a more developed person. Last summer, having finished that chapter of my life I feel grateful for the experiences I have gained and people I have met. I have matured through the love, acceptance and hate of that place, and I will never be able to listen to *American Pie* by Don Mclean again.

While this essay may seem to indicate the contrary, I maintain that this is a stupid question to ask a seventeen year old. Maybe if you check back in five or ten years, you'll get a more fulfilling, heart-wrenching answer. Until them I remain, a snarky and cynical teenager, about as damaged and about as defined a person as any teenager. My experiences are neither universal, nor uncommon and I will continue on as everyone does, a stone carried on by the rivers of time.