The Medicine of Memory  
by Owen Ó Súilleabháin

Ireland, the land of my birth, is famous for its culture of grieving. Our word in English to keen or to lament comes from the Irish word caoineadh, meaning to cry. One of the significant rituals of this grieving culture is called a wake. James Joyce’s epoch-defining novel Finnegans Wake references this ritual. To this day, over half of the funerals in Ireland involve some form of a wake. At a wake, the body of a loved one is laid out in their home. For two or three days, the family stays with the body, and the community comes and pays their respects and shares their sympathies.

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Every life is like a day. We begin the night before and, in the darkness, we are formed as a word that strikes a spark. This spark lands like a seed coming to the ground in the soul of the womb.

Then miraculous growth pulses like wildfire—an unstoppable explosion of unimaginable genius—the exponential roar of universal proportion.

Every life well-lived holds in its heart’s core the knowing that all life is formed from the dust and back to dust disintegrates. We wake up from the sleep of the cosmos and, in the evening, we prepare to return to that great, mysterious darkness once more. The trinity of dying, death, and grief is part of one great movement, each a particular primary color on the spectrum of passing back into the night from where we came.

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I want to share a reflection that I wrote as my father passed through this spectrum of mortality. While he was moving through that threshold rainbow, so was I. My identity as a son was also shape-shifting. The sands of time were slipping under my feet. During those times of seismic shift in our lives, the world seems accelerated and concentrated. Times of growth and transition are like a mother giving birth—all-consuming and annihilating.

So I could grasp something during that time of confusion, sadness, and desolation; memories came flooding over me. These memories felt like hormones that had some function for the autonomic systems of my soul. Memories arose like chemicals, memories like medicine, a pharmacy of memories stored deep within me, waiting for an emergency alarm.

The memories that came up were ones of childhood, of love, of holding hands, or eating together, of learning, trust, promises, wisdom, things left beautifully unspoken.

I quickly realized that these memories were not random reminiscing or seductive
sentimentality. They were part of an ancient, evolved healing mechanism.

One of the great balms at an Irish wake is the recounting of stories of the one who has died. Tales of the loved one, tales once so mundane, now glimmer through the ocean of grief like precious pearls. The memories flow like nourishing waters across the cracked and parched soil of our cried-out and broken hearts. Our body knows that grief needs memories. Our social selves know that we must share those stories with another loving soul.

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There is a great temptation to want to say everything when you face the great trinity of dying, death, and grieving. But I would invite you to leave some things unsaid purposefully. Particular private dynamics can be too precious to be spoken. They are between you and the soul of the one that is now free from this visible world. This secret is sacred. They know it, and you know it. No words can tell why the tears of grief are the only answers to the mystery of loss. The conversation will never be held in the old way again. A deeper conversation is now called for, a conversation with no words: A heart to heart. With a bow. And a smile.

And so, my father, hail, and farewell forevermore.

And immediately
Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.[1]

One of my earliest memories is of you and me at home alone. You made me mashed potatoes, and I remember how different it tasted. You probably put way too much butter in.

Then you wrapped me in a warm coat and zipped me up, and off we went, over to the park opposite Meadowbrook, beside the John Barleycorn Hotel. And I recall us walking up a hill.

And then at the top, we stopped. And I’m standing beside you now, and I see you looking out into the world. I’m warm, with my belly full, and we are holding hands, eyes fixed on the horizon, together, in silence.

I saw then how to look upon the world; how an artist looks and listens for the music of what happens. I learned how to pray and what the sacred feels like; I felt simply loved: Total, silent, open, endless love. This was your kind of love. A love that stood beside me, minding me and teaching me my whole life. The kind of love that never leaves, and—if I do it right—the kind of love that I will leave behind me, too.

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You dropped me off at school one morning in the car. It was my first or maybe my second year at that place, and I dreaded it. There was this smell of sadness there that seemed to overpower me.

Usually, I walked up with Nór, but today you drove me. Maybe it was raining hard. You had
to be at the university, but when we arrived outside the playground gate, I knew I had to stall you for as long as I could before making that sorry trek across the yard.

You gave in and decided to teach me how to read the clock. You pulled out a piece of paper and a pen and started to draw faces with your hands, and I was in heaven. The quarter to, the half past—I wanted it to go on forever.

You always taught me about time. Especially the waiting. Waiting in the long grass for when the time is right—and striking when the iron’s hot. You were a master at both—those nanoseconds before hammering that white-hot piano key or holding back for years for that jealous adversary to incriminate themselves.

Then you really had to go—a pioneer, off to stake your claim on the wild frontiers of higher learning. And as I slid down from the seat onto the tarmac, you said what you said to me every morning on my way to school. It was your blessing: “be good now, and don’t forget to mind all the little babas.”

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And that famous time you were tucking me into bed in our home in Murroe. Maybe we were only renting it then, so it might have been before I was eight years old. Sitting on the side of my little bed, your full adult weight a gravitational force beside me, your warmth and fatherly aroma an overwhelming comfort.

I would ask you questions; the deeper and more philosophical, the better. I worked out early on that those were the ones that sucked you in. I was wrapped in wonder at the earnestness that you would muster. Every question returned with a professorial elucidation. And then it was time for you to go, and you kissed my forehead, and then it hit me: “What is time Dada?”

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Throughout my twenties, we lived together, held in the prayerful palm of that light-filled farmhouse. There were mornings, usually weekend mornings, mid-mornings, when you would burst into my room balancing a precariously loaded tray of goodies for breakfast: Boiled eggs. Toast. An overflowing pot of tea. As much Mulcahy pottery as could be mustered. Sometimes even a little flower in a small jar. “Carpe diem!!!” was the war cry, either to prepare me for the feast or kept just for the theatrical grand entrance:

You offload your goods on the coffee table and then slide the tray down on the duvet as I prop myself up. And then we eat. Sometimes talking, and sometimes not. And I cannot imagine a more magical rite, the holiest of communions, the sense of pure essential specialness, how time somehow slackens to a saunter—drifting into a new day, encouraged into the great unknown, with a tray and loving exhortation at my side.

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For my father’s wake, his body was laid out in the front room of his beloved home. There he laid for three days; a constant vigil kept around him. Candles lighting, incense burning, music playing. Cups of tea and tears and smiles and hugs. Speaking to him through sobs of such tenderness and love, touching his face, hands upon the miracle of his hands.
Memories flooding over me—of childhood, especially—wave after surging wave with the same sensation of a bully’s push and a playful pull and then the backwash of sand sucked out from under my feet—then nothingness, for a time, before the next wave rose again.

His spirit was so present there. Not the same as when he was alive. It was a different presence, strange, but he was there. I felt him there like a burning fire that burned but never changed—needed no fuel. Needed nothing. Gave no heat. Gave only presence. Life presence. Like those timeless moments when light washes the room through the thought of high windows. Time hangs thick as fruit before the fall. And there is just this sense of everything—everywhere—forever.

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