

The Place Between

Pádraig Ó Tuama

I open at the close.

J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

He demands a closeness

We all have earned a lightness

Carry my joy on the left

Carry my pain on the right

Björk, "Who Is It"

I am the wind which breathes upon the sea,

I am the wave of the ocean,

I am the murmur of the billows.

Amergin Glúingel, *The Song of Amergin*

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I always dream about my friends after they have died.

I got used to this. When I was sixteen I hitchhiked from Cork to Dublin with a girl called Mags. She was a year older than me, wore oxblood boots, and a dress over her ripped jeans. We got a lift from Cork to Dublin after forty-five minutes of trying. The truck driver let us buy him two cups of tea in a café and he asked us whether we would mind if he unloaded his truck in Portarlinton on the way. We got to Dublin and walked to our friend's house. Mags died a year later, knocked over by a drunk driver. I didn't know her very well. But for months she wandered into my dreams, always wearing yellow, always with her hair down, always clear and truthful and brave, just like she had always been.

When my grandmother died, she appeared in the dreams of my auntie. My aunt had not been able to sleep. When she finally did, her dead mother

showed up, dancing, with a baby in her arms, crooning a song. “What are you doing?” my auntie asked. “Waltzing with a baby,” my grandmother replied, as if that were the most natural thing to do for the living and the dead.

Which, I suppose, it is.

When my friend Cathal took his own life, I was twenty-four. We had been friends since I ran into the middle of a fight to pull him out. It wasn't an act of heroism. I didn't have many friends myself, so dragging him along the ground over to where I had been standing was more a confirmation of just how unpopular he had become, rather than a welcome into a circle of courage. Anyway, we were friends then. We walked for hours in the dark roads around our village, him smoking cigarettes, me talking about poetry. We lied to our parents, bought a tent, slept in woods, shivered, lied to each other, never asked each other how we were, and dreamt of leaving. When he died, I was in Australia. Too far to get a plane to a funeral I didn't want to go to.

I got a phone call late one night – wrong night of the week – from my mother saying he was dead. I said, “Thanks.” I remember crying at the stupidest times: in the shower, taking a piss, washing up.

A few nights later, he arrived, fully himself, in a dream. I'd forgotten the way of dead friends. This was a new grief and I wasn't sure what the rules were.

Anyway.

More of that later.

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I hate much of what's written about Celtic spirituality. Dreamscapes of ancestors who lived at one with the earth are drawn without any question about how they ate, where they shat, how they grieved or fought. It is all well and good to think about the thin places where the living and the dead interacted, but what about the winter?

I heard a retreat leader – a visitor who spoke not a word of Irish – speak about a valley in Wicklow once. Wicklow is known as the garden of Ireland. It has heathers that are purple and green and yellow and moss brown. “Look at the inherent spirituality of the valley,” he said. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I thought. Landscapes don't have spirituality; this one had heather, or, in Irish *fraoch*. It comes from a word meaning rage, or fury, or fierceness. *Fraoch* is gorgeous on the eye, tough for eating. I wondered about people – from thousands of years back – from that valley. It must have been admired for generations, beauty in the eyes of the ancestral beholders. But what animals would thrive in such thick bracken? What could a mammal eat from there without ripping its tongue? What farmers farmed there? What invaders claimed there? Where is the blood spilt? Who has wept there? Who ran away from there? What is the story that the landscape has held?

If we are to speak about spirituality, we must speak about breathing and dying. Spirit, from *spirare*, meaning to breathe. To be spiritual is to breathe, to be unspiritual is to die; it is the most concrete thing we can think of. After you die, you die.

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And then you show up in dreams, but we know that already.

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Landscaped spiritualities usually arose from a desire of people not to die. They discerned movements in seasons and invented gods to pray to – to keep the weather clement, to keep the seasons in season, to keep the living alive. The longest day of the year; the shortest day of the year; the days in between those days; the day when flowers flower, when the moon seems fullest, when the sun hits the spot it hit that year that everything was perfect, or so we heard; the swell on the sea that year of destruction; the smell of thyme in the air that year the babies died. We take those, we remember the living and the dead, we turn them into prayers, and the gods of war listen.

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Ray Davey was a Presbyterian minister from Belfast, born in Belfast in early 1915, back when the land was still just called Ireland, and the tinder-dry politics of Europe had just sparked into war the prior year. One hundred years later and some people still don't understand why World War I began. Maybe people just like a fight. Ray grew up in World War I and, in World War II, he went as a volunteer padre with the YMCA to a respite camp in North Africa. There, he was captured and held in many prisoner of war camps. He writes about the inhumanity and the humanity he saw in those camps. He saw men whose bodies gave up on them. They became bedmen, unable to move. He made a rota – oh, lifesaving Presbyterian rotas! – and kept men alive with time and company.

The last camp he was kept in was outside Dresden. His liberation came with the annihilation of that city. Some cheered. He wondered how to be glad.

“When your enemy falls, do not rejoice,” someone wrote once. Whoever wrote that must have known rejoicing, either because their enemy fell or they were the enemy of someone, and they fell, and they saw their opponent's joy. Ray wasn't sure what to do. He was free now. Or soon to be. But twenty-five thousand people were dead in Dresden.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, . . .

It takes a long time to count to 25,000. It takes approximately 240 times longer to count to 6,000,000. What terrible places we find ourselves in.

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Ray came back to an Ireland still in the first quarter century of its partition, and saw that enemies were still stirring there: some loved the border, some hated it. Some were spoiling for a fight and rejoiced at the possibility of fallen enemies. He became chaplain of Queen's University in Belfast and began groups where the living could encounter each other before they knocked the living daylight out of each other. These experiments in community were with students who didn't know each other, they were on the edges of religion. I met a man who was about to go to Queen's as a seventeen year-old. His mathematics teacher summoned him to her bedroom – she lived in a little flat on the top floor of the school. "There are three things to stay away from at university," she said to him in her bedroom, "dances, girls, and Ray Davey." He was in his eighties when he told me this, and he laughed as he remembered the delight he took in avoiding each clause of her advice.

Ray made little communities of people wherever he went: prisoner of war camps; chaplaincies; summer trips; Sunday evenings at his house. In 1965 he heard of a place for sale fifty miles north of Belfast, a few fields with a rickety house and a view over the sea across to Scotland. The civil rights movement was in full swing. Some believed that marching would work. Others itched for blood. There was talk of strikes and bombs and guns and military command. What was needed, he thought, was a place for encounter between the living, so that enemies don't need to come back in dreams. He raised the money in three weeks and bought the house with the view on the fields called Corrymeela. The Corrymeela Community was named by the land and began its mission to transform division through human encounter.

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Some naive idiot said it meant "Hill of Harmony."

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They were wrong. It means "Lumpy Crossing Place."

Corrymeela became known as a place of reconciliation. Not because it is easy, but because it is not. It is an argument, an accusation, a list of words coming from your mouth in the presence of the other that is worse than saying nothing, but saying nothing is killing you so you have to say something. It is the meeting of people who feel like they are barely living,

and that their circumstances are squeezing the breath out from them, so they need the release of language in the presence of their enemy.

It is not an end. It is just barely the beginning.

I lead Corrymeela now. I arrived exhausted fifteen years ago and found myself breathing – for the first time it felt like – because I could say that I was gay and human and full of faith and fear. And it was not that nobody cared. It was the opposite. They did. It was not that I was welcome regardless of those things. Those things were regarded.

Regard: from the French, meaning a steady gaze or esteemed.

To lead a place of reconciliation is to think of the stories that have been disregarded, that have been discarded, cast away, considered peripheral, or ignorable, and to know that people who have lived fragmented lives need to have their edges re-enlivened. Stories of hatred and stories of survival, stories of hope and stories of dreams where dignity is a reality. Reconciling involves making mistakes while trying to do good. Sometimes bad mistakes.

Even if we cannot make dreams true, we can regard each other. Because one thing is true: we are perfectly capable of making nightmares real. Just look around. Regard.

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While I have met plenty of the dead in my dreams, I have never asked them what it is like to be dead. I do not know why. I am more concerned with me when they turn up than I am with curiosity. Maybe the next time a dead friend visits, I shall remember to ask, but I doubt it. All of that goes to say that I know nothing of death. Some of us do, because we have come close, or because we have died a little, or because we are hanging on by a thread.

But there are things that feel like death: invasion, exile, survival, compromise, separation.

To move towards each other in some reconciling project is a rejection of other options. It is the rejection of a solitary path. Reconciling involves others, sometimes even those we have been estranged by. It means to connect again. Partly, the word is naive because people who have hurt people are already connected by terrible events. Perhaps reconciliation is the introduction of some new agency to a connection that has had a taste of death. It involves feeling, maybe not for the person on the other side, but perhaps for yourself. And that which feels, lives. It is a threshold between the way things could have been, and the way things are. You do not step through that threshold once. You step through it every time you breathe.

Remember: Spirituality.

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This week, I phoned someone to say sorry. I had written a poem that I thought was loving, but he had taken it differently. I had sent it to him, hoping to make his day.

It didn't.

Right now, I am feeling like there will be the relationship before and after that damned poem. Maybe not, but some wars begin over something as small as words on a bit of paper: ignorable by some, and inflammatory to others. Maybe all of this will be forgotten. Maybe it has caused a small bit of death in a space that was breathing. Maybe death was there all along waiting for a page on which to be written. And I wrote it: rhyming, in quatrains, with assonance and rhythm.

Forgiving, if it means anything, must be true. It cannot undo what was done. It can only help us through a threshold. It must tell its story of death. Again, and again.

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Again, and again and.

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This can feel like an almost unbearable compromise. Welcome to a practice of peace. It is messy. It is not easy. It is fragile and thin and breakable. It is a verb, not an achievement. It needs to be conjugated regularly. It is the experience of having been torn. And, having been torn, staying with that new shape and finding dignity in language, in protest, in lamentation, in justice, in re-ordering, in catharsis.

It's not a landscape; it's staying alive.

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When my friend came to visit me in my dream, I was unprepared. I knew people died – I had seen enough dead bodies at funerals – but friends do not die. Not like that. Well, they did, and they do. He turned up two nights after that phone call with my mother, and in my dream, I was trying to put something right. “What’s this? An apology?” he asked, laughing the way he always did, eyes disappearing and face crinkling with laugh lines.

Such dreams do not bring friends back. Apologies do not change anything except the story we tell. It is not great. It is not even good. But it might be good enough.

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There are some things we say when we are in pain that make the pain more bearable. Sometimes those are things we regret. Sometimes those are things

we will never regret. When Jesus of Nazareth was being executed slowly by the state authorities, he was held in place by nails and shortened breath and a body and language.

He spoke of forgiveness; he extended kindness to people he believed did not understand their actions; he spoke to one man beside him, but not the other; he spoke to his mother; he prayed; he shouted; he begged; he tried to keep up; he gave up.

Christianity is built on the actions and language and story of this character. His words at death indicate a way of living. He was like lots of us, trying anything that would work to keep alive. It is a fine practice, and he is remembered for it.

Many try to force us towards resurrection, but I have not seen any true resurrection without a true giving up. Jesus went, some stories say, to the places of the dead. Where is that then? Is it here? Certainly, some people think that the twentieth century – with all its wars – is evidence that, even if there is no hell, we are perfectly capable of making one all by ourselves. That night, did he visit anyone in their sabbath dreams? Was he cooking fish? Was he showing bloody hands and saying the same kinds of things he had always said? Was he angry? Or was he still surprising people with his survival?

Many of us spend time in the Saturday between crucifixion and resurrection. Some of us live there permanently, in our lives, in our country's life, in our sexed and disempowered lives. We have the torture of the past at our back and some kind of horizon hoped for at our front. It is a threshold, with hints of one and the other always tapping us. It is both exhausting and exhilarating to be on the cusp of breakthrough and the cliff edge of destruction. It is utterly physical. There is nothing abstract about it.

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Years ago, a boy from Britain was kidnapped and brought to Ireland. We know him as Patrick. In his confessing, he spoke of the tangible. Under the guard of his kidnappers, he said up to one hundred prayers a day. That poor boy. How awful to have nothing to count except days of captivity, sheep and prayers. Kidnapping is not an abstract state, it is entirely physical: your body is captured. It is here, in a state of living that is barely living, that Patrick defined what many of us dream about. Finding language that praises the surface while ploughing the depths.

I arise today
 through the strength of heaven:
 Light of sun,
 Radiance of moon,

Splendour of fire,
 Speed of lightning,
 Swiftiness of wind,
 Depth of sea,
 Stability of earth,
 Firmness of rock.¹

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I've heard some people describe liminality in the language of Celtic spirituality: a thin place, a narrow place, a place where the living and the dead commune, where heaven and earth all regard each other.

Hell too, I hope. Otherwise what's the point?

"Narrow" in Irish is *caol*, meaning narrow, slender, subtle, or tenuous. In Irish, to speak of the "narrowness of the hand" means the wrist, or the "narrowness of the leg" the ankle. It is a place of mobility or action, a place easily twisted and when twisted, it hurts. Lots of us live in this narrow place, easily open to twisting. Our past and our future each have a hold of us in the present and we wonder how we shall manage. How do any of us survive this fragile place? Liminality, if it means anything, must be as truthful as forgiving, as confessing, as breathing, as surviving.

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For some reason, my computer keeps autocorrecting the word surviving to surfing.

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Last year, my friend Lynn was surfing the waves near Corrymeela. The crossing between Ireland and Scotland is only fourteen miles at its closest. The waves are not always huge, but the current is vicious. A pod of dolphins had moved into the bay. She caught a wave at the same time a dolphin did and for a few seconds they surfed together, buoyed up by the current and the tide. I swam that frigid water too. One Easter Sunday morning, my friend Ross said he was going for a swim and invited me. I said I did not have shorts with me and he laughed and produced a spare pair. Damn, I thought, I should have told a better lie. It was biting, bracing, bitterly cold. It was physical, and I shook when I came out, body covered in silt and salt and little dead things that the surf had surfaced.

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1. More information about the Corrymeela Community can be sourced at www.corrymeela.org.
 2. St Patrick, "The Deer's Cry" (St Patrick's Breastplate), in *The Deer's Cry: A Treasury of Irish Religious Verse*, ed. Patrick Murray (Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1986).

The source of the word surf is uncertain. Some people think it refers to a coastal region of India. Others think it might be onomatopoeic, the sound of water on a shore: a place of exhilaration and exhaustion, a place where land meets sea and creates something else: a noise, an invitation, a threat, a promise, a place to swim or drown in, a place of horizons, waves, tides and crashing. A place of sound and salt; a space where stones are ground into sand; where whales come to die; where people delight in splashing; a place on the living earth controlled by the movements of a moon where nothing lives; an in-between place for the living and the dying.

SAMPLE