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Kevin Mullan

Footprints and Fingermarks

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We were not here very long, those four decades and more ago, when the coal tip in Wales gave way and slid down on the school, burying its children. In the college jottings one of our number began his short poem *Aberfan, abair paidir*, modulating the sounds of the village name into the sounds of the heart, and nursing the elsewhere tragedy with the immediacy of absorption.

Today – looking back over those years – and at times maybe we can't or shouldn't – we know we have woven words into other people's lives, and perhaps our own too – to comfort pain, to give hope, to raise a smile, to unlock the space where a soul may float in freedom, content.

With friends, with spouses and companions, with colleagues and soul mates, with one another – we have tried to live the words that promised that we would absorb one another and be together in courage, in searching, in preserving, in understanding, in gratitude for one another, and in joy.

And now there is that sense of an ending, coming at us – not only from those memory-laden names of the dead, dropping into our hearts where we played together at the outset of our adventures and their unfolding – but borne in on us from all that we have seen and heard along the road – the passing nature of things, the contingency of existence, the sun's slow but inexorable burnout to darkness.

Our own footprints are on the journey of time, our own finger marks on the addenda of history or its substance; our own wishes germane to certain outcomes; our own influence and impact on the flowering or diminishing of some people's lives – and then we are gone.

Our young people at the Feis back home were reading from Gabriel Rosenstock's volume of tiny but richly packed poems, *Sasquatch*. An imaginary animal, the last of its species, encounters life and death in the other creatures and things of earth and water

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and sky around him: learning to be noble, learning to be cautious,
and then – looking into the eyes of a deer –

*Stopann tú chun bhreathnú orm
ní fhiafraíon tú cad tá ionam
agus toisc nach dteitheann tú
leánn ár bhféachaint
tuiscint bhreise anois agam don neach atá ionam.
(You pause to look at me
and ask not what I am
and because you do not flee our gaze melts
I now know something more of what I am.)*

He learns from the bees that there is sweetness to be found by those who search and agrees with the setting sun that darkness is a companion and a component of life. And then he is lost in the water, drowned.

*ní raibh éinne dá mhuintir beo
éinne in aon chor a chaoineadh é
(None of his ilk survives
to weep for him.)*

This may owe something to Eastern religious graspings at the unseen within and beyond the visible. But we too have existed in time, living between the seen and the unseen, the deceptions of the tangible, and the hints of the eternal, engaging with and being engaged by We would probably put other words on our story, though we have so much in common with our fellow creatures, necessarily so.

Searching for words to weave into the growth and decay and questionings of other human beings, we draw on a belief that we have absorbed – or may still grapple with – that the invisible revealed itself, and dwelt among us in love and fragility, its victim and its victor.

We may meet them at *close of day*, when *the evening is spread out against the sky*, when the day has not answered every need, and Mister Godot has not come. These moments may be today's customary places of prayer, as Luke describes the spot where Paul met Lydia outside the city walls (Acts 16:11-15), outside the places of relentless doing and slaving; these moments when the soul demands to be heard, and questions come through tears of fear and doubt, or something reassures and must be true.

Jesus loved those conversations with the questioning soul, and listens in on ours. He invites us to walk with courage on water of

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unfathomable depth, for love is at the furthest depth of reality. The Spirit of truth has convinced us to believe (John 15:26-16:4).

We return within the city walls to live the truth in love in its squares and market places, in its teaching halls and places of governance, in its feeding places and nursing stations, in its courts and prisons; to delay with Bernanos's *curé* in its dark corners with its poor and desperate, its victims, and be ourselves victims of its anger, sometimes deservedly, sometimes by accident; to love those who are different, those who are dangerous; to forgive even as we are forgiven.

Martin Luther's 500 year old spectre challenges us to live by that grace and live graciously. Within the Catholic Church – *semper reformanda*, but where our intellect and emotions find food - we have become children of our own time's reformation, the Council. We have passionately and loyally tried to bring its joy and hope to humankind.

The cloud of the journey, the *néal maidine*, has come down upon us and our hearts have stirred for God. We have caught fire from the *tine oíche* to defy the darkness. We have eaten the bread and supped the cup of our God's eternal commitment to his people. In boldness and humble repentance we have tried to be faithful storytellers to our fellow pilgrims and to children's children.

May those who will carry our bones and walk upon them know what we have been blessed to know – and more, until, in the joyful mercy of the Love which is beyond all understanding, we know even as we are known – and we see one another in God.

The part that lies behind. This is part of what I see as my own life's pilgrimage, that search for an understanding of what 'lies behind'. What lies behind the idea of 'pilgrimage', what lies on or behind 'the holy mountain', whether it be Kailas, Tabor or Croagh Patrick, a mountain amongst the holy mountains of the world? While the Reek has become closely associated with a particular form of Catholic devotion, I think to find the real sense of it we have to look further. We have to look at other religions and other pilgrimages to come to an understanding of what lies at the heart of all of them.

– PATRICK CLAFFEY, *Atlantic Tabor: The Pilgrims of Croagh Patrick* (Dublin: The Liffey Press) p.163.