

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/2

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My Father Knows the River Lee

(a river in County Cork celebrated in song)

My father's corpse looks able-bodied,
ruddy face and cool repose,
his closed eyes far from blind.
I sense he sees the oxen angels
yoked to haul his sledge of coffin
out to the snowy sunlight.

"Life is done, and life's begun," an adage-prone
old fellow on the kneeler beside me
whispers in my ear. A thousand memories
chase around the casket.

I'd have him rising from his bed
as if he knows the spirit knows
when it's time to get the hell up and stow
the rest of everything anywhere
and go like a flying monkey
over the sea, to the River Lee, where he
"sporting and played neath the green leafy shade"
as a child, in that song he would sing.

It's a sociable hell in the parlor,
relations and friends in grand number
tilting the edge toward grief or mirth
the whole few hours, till the wake
settles down, and most are gone, and you learn
in that speck of a moment
quiet inklings of forlorn.

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To grieve and laugh, that's the ticket for entry
to Flaherty & Brown this night,
the parlor of choice if you have to be dead
or to mourn and celebrate the dead.

Death's a sanguine old scoundrel, asks only a song
from the song-loving dead. My dad knows
the lyrics, the marriage of jolly and sad,
his confident longing a match for the Void,
at home on the banks of the Lee.

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