Only Say the Word

Niall Williams

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Extract

I do not know what words to write. There have been so many words written already. So many endings and beginnings. I have lost my faith.

Yesterday I sat at this table for hours and wrote nothing but your name. I wrote it in the four corners of the page, as if by doing so I might conjure you at its centre. I wrote it while waiting to begin, but how can I begin without faith? I have gone through days when I was certain I would never sit down again and try to write anything. I have despised myself for the weeks and months of unlived life spent creating those books of mine that stand on the shelf above the fireplace. What was first a refuge became the place where I was most comfortable, where I could forgive God His own oversights and blunders and make the plots come out all right. But what now? I seem to know no other way of living except to sit each day before the white screen and listen for the words. I do not want to invent a meaning this time. I don't want to pretend there is a God or that the innocent die for reasons secret and profound.

And so I sit here, and feel your absence and wonder how to begin to live without you.

Begin.

Kate.

The blankness of the page is like a hurt. I write your name on the paper to put you back into my life. As though words were real things. As though when I write your name you are here.

Kate.

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Autumn progresses. The rain is ceaseless now, and yet seems hardly to fall, a soft grey, wrapped like a shroud about all west of the Shannon. Leaves of sycamore blacken and curl their edges. When the wind picks up the rain, they come slanting across the cottage window in stricken flight. All the last blossoms are faded now, and crimson geraniums are stalks of brown seed and yellowed leaves. Everywhere the countryside is tattered, wind-wild. You can feel that somewhere in the deeps of the earth something is slowly souring which once was sweetening.

Across the valley small herds of cattle move and stand and move again for shelter. Between the showers huge blackbirds come and alight in your garden. I raise my hand from the table and they do not fly off. They wait there, as though burdened with some significance, when I know they have none.

Rain comes again and streams down the window.

*

I have read Margaret Atwood say that all writing is an attempt to bring back the dead. To journey into the past and bring back what is vanished. Something like that. Some act of resurrection. But tonight while the salt wind off the Atlantic makes rattle the cottage windows all such claims seem unreal and beyond me.

All I can do now is tell the truth. Tell how it is. Do not make a story.

If only I could do that.

The world slips away from me here. I do not watch the television news now. When I walk outside in the night and look up through the whirl of wind that pulls the clouds across the stars, I think of the God that I once believed existed where now there is only absence and emptiness, the deep and the darker blue as the stars vanish.

I come in and go through the cottage in the half-light, gathering up Jack's clothes or Hannah's books and magazines. I make tidy little stacks. I think I am doing very well, but then something of you breaks through. I see one of your paintings. I feel a tightness close at the base of my throat and I think, I cannot do this. I do not believe in a heaven or any hereafter. In books I have written, I have pretended that I did.

Once, I imagined all the dead souls reunited as in a dance and the mending of all loss. But here tonight I know I do not really believe this, and my forehead films with a clammy sweat and nausea twists in my stomach.

The house is utterly still. The children sleep. Night fills the valley.

*

Tell the truth. The truth begins with me sitting here trying to tell it. I sit at this long table that overlooks the garden and this valley in the west of County Clare. Truth. The ocean is not far. Truth. It is the autumn of the year two thousand and one. This is the place where in the wet green stillness I try to write stories. I have written many, and poems too, but none that seem real to me now. None that capture the ice-fire of grief that is in me now. All seem so artificial and unreal and I wonder what is the use of all my books now?

The children are home from school. I hear them moving about restless with the empty time. Hannah comes and asks me when will I be going to the village. She needs shampoo. Ten minutes later Jack who was eight years old two days ago stands at the doorway and asks why we do not live in America. They have better television in America, he says.

I want to tell him that television is not important. I want to take him inside my arms and hold him here beside me and say I know how things are for you. I know the harrowing the world has already made in the soft places of your spirit. I know your fears and pains and because I am your father I cannot know them for an instant without wanting to make them pass.

But the words, or perhaps the means to say them, seem stolen from me, and instead I say I will try and get better stations on the television.

'I don't like it here,' Jack says, and turns and goes off.

Help me.

Begin.

Begin with the image of a woman with blonde hair diving into a blue pool in high summer. The pool is at the end of a long lawn that runs down from the big house. The house is in Westchester County, New York, near the town with the Indian name of Wapaqua, where the woman and her brother grew up. Now it is the house where her divorced mother is to live alone, for that summer the woman is to marry and her brother is to leave for a life in California. The woman dives into the pool and a man stands and watches her. It is the hour when evening is falling quickly and the shadows of the hemlocks and cedars are lengthened and blue. The heat of the day is passing but still trapped somehow in the falling of the dark and so the air is thick and heavy, and the perfect strokes of the woman as she swims length after length are a kind of coolness that is lovely and soft and easeful. She swims with remarkable beauty and it is as if the water is her true element and while within it there exists for her nothing but the motion of her body and its fluency. And at that moment when the evening has just become night, from up at the house her mother stands and turns a switch and at once the pool is a blue and golden dazzle, lit from beneath, and the swimmer like a fabulous creature fallen from above.

But all of that is so much later.

Instead, here is a boy. He is a boy as thin as a stick. He is a boy happy in the world still who lives along a country road outside the small village of Dun in the west of County Clare. His hair is

fair, his nose saddled with freckles. His eyes are green. He has a brother five years older than himself and a sister, Louise, an infant.

His father is Tom Foley, a big, quiet man who works in the post office of that village. He operates the switchboard and connects the calls that link Dun to the world. He is a man measured in everything he does, a man who never raises his voice. His day is filled with the quiet interrogative '*Yes?*' he repeats over and over as he answers a call. '*One moment now, please,*' he says two hundred times a day. And then, without the slightest inflection of victory or pleasure, '*You're through now.*' In a black Morris Minor he travels the two miles between the house and the post office. Though he is not yet old his hair, once a dark brown, now grows in silver wings over his ears. His eyes are a soft grey like flannel. When you look into them deeply you can see tiny flecks there, minor speckles that might be tears in a cloth revealing something of what lies beneath.

There is a crinkled picture of him on the steps of some building in Dublin beside the stout and grave-looking figure of the boy's grandfather who died two years later and never met his grandchildren. In the photograph Tom Foley's expression is youthful and even what was once called dashing. He wears a white shirt and a narrow tie beneath his dark jacket and looks out from the picture with an open face almost smiling. In his eyes there is optimism and hope and valour. But in time all these have vanished. Few traces of that youth remain. The man he has become sits in the empty post office, leaning forward and balancing his forehead in his right hand as if holding there memories of that time long ago. A man of few words, when the bell rings above the door, his head rises, and, summoned back from far away, he says the name of the man or woman in soft greeting.

The boy's mother is from Dublin. Her name is Marie. She is slim and fine-boned with long black hair turning silver and worn up at the back of her head. She is older than her husband. He met her one rainy night in Liverpool when he thought he was on his way to join the British army. She was in Findler's Lane crying on

the ground. Though it is a secret, shared only with Tom, earlier that day she had given birth to a girl that had died. She thought it punishment for sin, despite the fact she had planned to have the child and raise it a Catholic and had told God as much many times in the nine months previous. Tom Foley squatted down in the puddle beside Marie and within an instant had chosen love over war and decided to bring her back to Clare.

When he first brought her to the village, they lived above the post office and she worked with him behind the counter. She tried to know all the Marys and Annes and Bridgets of Dun and the parish beyond. For a season she attempted to win them, to smile and ask of their children, to know who had a son gone for a job in Dublin, whose daughter was sickly and who was hoping for a position in the bank. But it was of little use. Marie was an outsider in that place. Her clothes were too fine, her make-up too elaborate. The people did not warm to her, nor she to them, and after a while she stopped going downstairs to the shop. Soon Tom bought a cottage out in the countryside and Marie did not have to be in the post office or sell the newspapers there on Sunday mornings when he was gone to Mass.

Now, years later, she is beautiful still. Her beauty is older and has a sorrowful quality sometimes when she stops in her kitchen and is held on the thorn of a memory, or the loneliness of her life rushes in on her. But she breaks free of this and her silver-black hair falls to her shoulder and she turns swiftly and her green eyes capture you when you look at them. 'Now, what's next?' she says. She cooks thick dark stews that sit all day on the turf range and fill the house with rich savour. In summer she must have flowers brought into the house, and goes out along the roadside and plucks foxgloves and snaps branches of honeysuckle to bring inside. In the house she works diligently, making neat warm towers of ironed clothes and calling the boys to take them to their rooms upstairs. Her sons quietly obey.

Matthew, the oldest, is tall and earnest, and is in his school the brightest boy at maths. When his father comes home to his

dinner, Matthew sometimes has to walk the infant Louise in her pram and does so without complaint, pushing the navy blue carriage with the white rubber wheels along the bumpy road at the top of the valley, past the yellow meadows. Sometimes the younger-brother-that-is-I, Jim, runs some of the way after him and catches up and makes foolish faces, but Matthew does not mind. He goes on ahead and I run back home. I lie down in the wild grass at the side of our house and sometimes read comics or *Boy's Own*. My mother comes and stands by the front door. After his dinner my father sits in what is now called the television room and watches the news of our country. When the news is over he will turn off the television to save electricity and smoke a cigarette and then open the newspaper he has already read. He rereads it carefully, every word, and when he is done he adds it to the soft yellowing stack that rises alongside his chair.

When Matthew returns I jump up to meet him and he raises his finger to his lips and makes a shushing sound to tell me our sister is asleep. I hold up my two hands and flap them by the sides of my ears to make him laugh. I twist my face about and come close to the pram, but he does not laugh and waves me away before skirting by the old hay barn to the back door. He does not come back out. I already know he won't. I know he will drink a glass of milk and my mother will come out to the kitchen and thank him and take Louise and carry her upstairs. Then Matthew will go in and say goodnight to my father though it is still bright, and he will say he has some work to do upstairs for school.

I lie outside on the grass. It is May. The sky, like a blue sleeve darned with flies, is too bright for sleep. There is the first tangled scent of the meadows thickening, of wildflowers new-bloomed, of woodbine and fuchsia, the warm smells of the animals in Mick Hehir's bog meadow. I am a week from my First Communion. My thoughts are pure things and are like so many white birds floating about me as I lie there. I do not go off to play elsewhere or to seek company in one of the farms down the road. I am somehow empty and filled at the same time, and I think I am aware

that this is a time I will remember later on in my life. I lie there with no shoes on and read and turn over and look at the sky as if it were a window. I do not know what I am looking to see. My eyes are too poor to detect the coming stars. I believe in God up there. I think of Him in His vast terrain where He can run in gigantic strides across it. But then such thoughts dissolve and I am thinking of nothing. I am a boy lying on the grass in the May evening in the turning of the world. My father comes to the front door to call me in for bed.

'Jim,' he says softly. He says nothing more, and I rise and go in.

For the first time, I have a room of my own. Matthew is next door and sits studying at his table. I say goodnight to him and he turns and looks at me briefly and the look is one I cannot translate and so I make a face to see will he smile and he does and I go to bed.

I cannot sleep. My mind runs. I think of that day and the one before and the Communion coming and fuse one thing into another until the air is threaded back and forth with the long thin webs of a small boy's thoughts. It is too warm for sleeping, but I am meant to sleep. I must not turn on the light, and so instead take one of my library books and hold it up by the window to read in the half-light that falls there. It is a child's version of the story of Marco Polo. From the words and pictures of its pages another world comes and fills the bedroom with sailing ships and strange names and spices I have never tasted. I read because I cannot sleep and then I cannot sleep because what I read is more real than my own life. At some moment my eyes fall from the page and yet it is as if I am still reading on and within the story. I roll back and forth in my bed so it rocks softly. It is a ship sailing out to sea from Venice.

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My mother is a devout woman. She has a sister who is a Sister, a nun in the missions, and a small statue of the Virgin in her room,

and in summer she fills a vase with hedgerow flowers to stand beside it. She prays when she wakes up in the morning. One of the prayers is in Irish and to my boyish ear seems all the more holy for that. God understands all languages, I have decided, even made-up ones. And in that year of my First Communion I test His comprehension with my own invented vocabulary. I kneel by my bed in my pyjamas and mouth soft plosive sounds, weird vocables of devotion, untranslatable by all but Him. *Hayem guam tagus eefa nunc qua inta novi* God. Through the wall I can hear my mother murmur, and hear too the small sounds of my sister in her cot beside the big bed. My mother's prayers float over her as I imagine they did once over me although I cannot remember. I know not to disturb her and to get dressed and go downstairs and have my breakfast with my brother. Though I carry a small grudge at this, a short fat wedge of resentment at my sister taking all the prayers, I do what is asked of me without complaint.

I know that Louise has arrived in our family unexpectedly, as a blessing, my mother has told me. 'A wonderful, wonderful blessing.' I know that in some unspoken way the family was finished when I was born, that although my mother longed for a daughter she had come to accept there would only be Matthew and me. But I do not know then of her own private sense of grief and atonement, or the anxiety that wormed in her for the nine months she was waiting, wondering if this would be a girl, and the final sign of forgiveness.

When my mother comes down she wears a bright dress and is made up, her hair brushed so the black waves of it fall softly. The baby is in her arms sleeping. My mother moves about with Louise cradled there. She whispers that Matthew was just the same, waking at every hour of the night and asleep again as soon as he was in her arms.

'Yes. You were. Do you not remember?' She is smiling over at him.

Matthew looks down at his toast intensely as if a mathematical puzzle is drawn there.

'You don't. I know you don't. But you were. You didn't know night-time from daytime.' My mother turns to tell me. 'He wanted to sleep all afternoon and I would have to shake water on him to try to get him to wake up. Then he'd wake up for a few minutes and next thing you know his head would be down and he would be asleep again.' She laughs as she tells it and I laugh too but Matthew does not. 'Your sister is just the same.'

'Was I the same?'

'You were the best boy,' my mother tells me. 'You knew what was right.'

My father comes into the kitchen and is clean-shaven, wearing a white, ironed shirt that makes his own spirit seem ironed out, flattened.

'Tom, here's your tea,' my mother says and pours it thick and dark from the pot the way he likes it.

My father sits down like a man made of cloth. He makes no noise.

'Morning, Matthew, Jim,' he greets us, but does so in such a way it would seem an intrusion or disturbance of some kind if we were to do more than just nod in reply. It is as though he is a conduit only, connecting the line to someone else but not to him. He looks above the net curtain at the weather. The sky is overcast and rain is coming. A little flickering of response happens around his mouth, a tightening, which may be a net to catch his words.

My mother comes to the table.

'Bless us, O Lord,' my father says, 'Jim?'

And I say the prayer I have learned and then we sit there, ordinary, without event, in the plainness of time, sipping our tea and eating our bread.

On a sunlit day I make my First Communion. I hold the perfect circle of the host in my mouth and feel I am like a candle lit. The holiness of the world astonishes me. I am so deeply grateful for all things created and not least the simple life of our family. From the church I walk up the main street of the village with my hands held flat together but a tiny space in between them, as

though cupped between my palms is the delicate airlike wonder of my soul. I am a big boy now. I can take over some of Matthew's chores and free him for his schoolwork. I bring in turf for the range. I gather kindling in the grove beneath the high whoosh of the sycamores. I ask to take Louise in her pram, and my mother hesitates but then allows it. I do not truly want to take her but I want to spare Matthew.

I push the pram out along the upper road at the top of the valley. But soon Louise is crying and I run faster, bouncing the pram over the road, and faster still when she does not stop. We fly along, hedgerow and fenceline a blur. Her face is a small red knot as her cries continue. I extend my arms and lengthen my stride. 'Stop it,' I tell her, 'Lou, stop; stop, Lou. Lou-Lou,' and shake the pram in a sideways motion even as we race forward. But she does not stop. She wails as if some precious thing is broken. And still I try and push us forward, fast forward, thinking perhaps to outpace or outdistance the pain or fear or that we will arrive in a place, a pocket of air or countryside, where sanctuary is. I run on, half wild now with panic. When I slow at all, Louise cries louder still. Cows turn in the field. I talk to her in what I think are the tones of my mother's voice. But it is no good, her face looks boiled, and I turn the pram around and I am running with it back toward home when I see my mother out in the road with her arms folded across her chest, waiting anxiously for our return. As I arrive in front of her Louise is bawling still. My mother's face is grey. She reaches in and lifts the baby in her arms and as she does feels the pillowcase soaked through.

'She wouldn't stop,' I am breathlessly saying. 'I tried . . .'

'Shush shush,' my mother says, but whether to me or my sister or both I cannot say. She is already turned and heading back into the house and I am standing there with the empty pram.

And in that same passing of time, the same even measurement in which one moment seems identical to the next but is not, our life is struck and falls apart.

One morning in the season of Advent that year, I wake and a

frost has fallen. The dawn, if it has broken, brings no light. In the distance the few street lights of the village are still burning and hide the last stars and make a pale amber glow. I wake and look out of my bedroom window at the garden and can already feel some fracture in the world. I stand at the window in my pyjamas. I press my nose and my lips to the glass and see my breath come up and cloud and slowly fade, and for no reason that I can yet shape, I do not want to move away from here. I think Christmas is not coming, as if there has occurred a strange anomaly, a flaw in the workings of calendars and chronometers. The stillness of the house is like an enormous being that sits in every room but mine and swells out and takes up all the air. I am afraid to go out and face it. I stand there a long time as everything of that morning enters me, frozen whitened ground, the church spire, the stilled village, twisted knotted clumps of blackthorn hedgerow, thin white webs hanging, the grey birdless air. There are lights on now in Keane's and Dooley's across the valley; where I can see it, the road glitters and Hehir's fields are a greyish white. The frost is not quite snow but is yet like a drapery. It should be festive and cheery on this morning, and my brother should be at my door and we should be thinking of what presents will come soon and how later we will go outside sliding along with arms waving. But it is not like that. My breath mists against the glass. When at last I move I move as if in a trance and, opening the door of my room, I feel a heavy weight fall upon my heart. Behind her bedroom door my mother is softly crying.

I hear a moaning that is soft and continuous, and in its rhythm I can picture my mother rocking back and forth and back and forth again. I wait there. I am afraid of thresholds, afraid that I will not be able to go forward to what awaits me, and afraid that once I do the world will be changed forever and there will be no way back. Matthew is still sleeping when I go to wake him.

'Matthew? Matthew?' My voice is quiet. My hand shakes him.

When he first raises his head he seems to be looking at a dream. It is a moment before he props himself up on an elbow.

'What time is it?' he asks me.

'Mammy's crying.'

Matthew knows more of the secrets and formulae of how the world works and knows that I should go back to bed.

'Go on,' he says, 'go back and go asleep for another bit.'

'Mammy's crying. I heard her.'

He looks at me and he rubs his eyes and then he gets out of the bed and we walk together across the landing to stand outside my parents' room, where he can hear the crying too. For a time we say nothing outside the closed door. It is painted in white gloss paint and shines. The handle is a silver bar like a blade and, along with everything in our house, has been cleaned for the coming of Christmas. My brother looks at me. 'We should go back to our rooms,' he whispers. Then my hand is reaching out and opening the door where the crying is louder and where my mother rests on the edge of the bed with Louise in her arms. My father is in his pyjamas, sitting in the chair upon which he normally hangs his clothes. His head is low on his chest. There is the smell of cigarettes and then the small thin plume of one burning in an ashtray beside the bed. I watch it as if something is revealed in its slow steady expiration.

My father does not move at first. When he does the motion of lifting his head to look at us seems to require a great energy and when his eyes meet ours some last vestige of hope that this might not be true snaps away. His chin rises and trembles and his face seems to fold in upon itself as if he weeps inwardly, his hands clutched to his knees all the time. My brother and I stand there for what seems forever. My mother does not look at us. She sways with Louise. On the floor at the bottom of the bed scattered in bright boxes are the yet undelivered toys of our Christmas.

Louise has died in her sleep. She has passed through a portal in the dark and stopped breathing in the night while my mother was not six feet away and the statue of the Virgin turned toward the cot. My mother holds her and tries to clutch the heat in the infant body that is fading with every second and the soul is already

long departed. My brother and I are struck wordless and do not know if we should walk out of the room and go back to our beds. Neither of us is crying. We feel strangely affixed to the scene and yet entirely removed from it, as though it happens through some veil that falls between us and our parents.

At last I step away from my brother and walk around the end of the bed toward my mother. Her eyes are wet and swollen and closed, her cheeks raw. I do not know how but I want to be able to help her to stop weeping. It is as if I imagine myself to be an agent of healing, as if something like grace is flowing through me and if I can reach her and touch my hand against her face it will in some way be the beginning of repair. I do not understand the feeling in such terms yet, although that is what it is. I want to touch my mother's face. That's all. When I get close enough and she does not open her eyes and has no sense of me being there in the frosty dawn light by the empty cot where Louise has died, my father speaks.

'Jim,' he says. He says the word like it is glass he must swallow cleanly. He tilts his head back and his eyes appear in water. 'Jim, stop.'

My mother does not open her eyes.

My father reaches and draws on his cigarette and the tip of it flares red and his right eye shuts as if he has been wounded there. 'Come here,' he says.

He raises his hand from his knee and holds it out toward me. Matthew is still standing inside the doorway. My father holds out a hand to him in turn, but Matthew does not move. I go to my father. He puts his hand around my back, his large strong hand, and holds me to him where I feel the damp and smokiness of his pyjama shirt against my cheek. His head comes down to rest on the top of my head. He says nothing. My brother stays apart from us. After a time he goes out of the room.

When my father lets me go, he holds me back from him. I see all that is inexpressible in his face and see too the raw feeling that is already retreating into the deeps of him. It is moving away even

as I am trying to take hold of it. Then it is gone completely and his eyes reassume a look of dark pools.

'Go downstairs now,' he says to me. 'It'll be all right.'

I know that it won't be. Even as a child I know that nothing in our life will ever be the same again, but I nod to him.

'It'll be all right,' he says again. 'Little Louise has gone to heaven.'

My mother is weeping and rocking with the baby in her arms.

'Go on now,' my father says more loudly.

But I do not go. I do not want to move away from that spot for already I can sense that this is only the beginning of the pain. The moment I move, the future begins and with it the dull procession of mourners out from the village and from the villages and houses far away across the countryside, the thousand handshakes, the black stream that will come and go from our front door and print a smudged stain up through the garden along the immaculately frozen path. From this moment – to which my mind will so often return in the years to come – will come all the rest. So I stand in the room and do not go when my father tells me to. He tells me again, but I won't move. I stay rigid with my hands by my sides. Perhaps my father speaks to me again. Perhaps he raises his voice, I do not know. For then his arms are about me and he is lifting me up and carrying me from the bedroom and I am crying out and kicking and thrashing and telling him to stop and to put me down. But he does not. He lifts me higher until I am over his shoulder and we pass out through the doorway and across the hall and I am screaming out and crying for him to stop but he carries on, as if he has rescued me and I am to be delivered across a threshold where suffering and death cannot reach.