

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 3rd October - FIELDS OF HOME

Summer days and childhood memories! When they come together, they twist our hearts without warning. Like a high-octane cocktail, they hit us suddenly and mercilessly with emotions. The smells, the sights, and the feel of summer so often strike, with painful intensity, at the tender, forgotten and sleeping magic of those special years. There is a pathos, a poignancy and the strangest sadness in those moments of memories 'that bless and burn', as my mother used to say.

This year I feel unusually vulnerable to the mixture of feelings within me as another summer blesses us, and as flashes of my childhood return. You may write it off as sentimentality but, in recent weeks, something within me opened up when I heard, within the space of one afternoon, Eva Cassidy singing *Fields of Gold*, Frank Sinatra's *The Summer Wind* and Val Doonican crooning his way through *The Special Years*. Summer days and childhood memories! It is never easy to put a name on the emotional effect on every part of us, when those almost indelible traces that are etched into our psyches, are touched again.

Another such occasion occurred recently at a small family reunion. Swaying bluebells were all over the wooded areas near the pub where my sister, my brother and myself had a meal. Maybe because we were reminiscing about when we were small, a memory, or something deeper than a memory - more like a vivid, subliminal experience - came flooding back. When I saw those shy bluebells under the trees I remembered, just then, exactly where I was standing, over sixty years ago! It was near St Joseph's convent, across the road from our little shop. I was barefoot. There was an afternoon sun slanting down the roof of the church.

My mother was standing talking to a neighbour in front of our small shop-window. They were leaning on some makeshift metal bars that my father had erected to protect the glass from the shoppers' bicycles, often thrown carelessly against it. (What they usually wanted, on their way home from a long shift at the new Fry-Cadbury's Chocolate Factory, was a packet of Sweet Aftons and a copy of the weekly Kerryman.) I was closing the green gate with the awkward, rusty handle. My sister and myself were holding bunches of bluebells that we had picked, in 'the nuns' field', for Our Lady's altar. I remember thinking, "They're looking at us, they're smiling at us and they're talking about us." Is it the light that makes a moment unforgettable?

I mentioned that I was barefoot. We used to shed our shoes on the first warm day in May. There is a timeless thrill that fills me when I remember, and really physically experience again that first day of summer when we were allowed to go barefoot. To feel the texture of the warm road-tar, the soft grass, the stream that ran through the four green fields behind our house! How is it that my memories of touch are stronger through my feet than through my hands? Strong and gentle as the touch of the human hand is, maybe there is a sensitivity in our feet that carries the more lasting memory.

But back our mini-family reunion. As we were saying our good-byes, we noticed a hawthorn bush and a lavender tree growing in the carpark. In the soft air of that Sunday afternoon, their aroma was strong. 'Do you remember John Sullivan's field?' my brother asked, as we inhaled the smells that stirred the memories of our hearts. Not only did we remember that sloping field, but, in a moment of pure gift, we were transported back there - and back to all the fields of our childhood. It was as though that particular experience, brought on now by breathing in the scent-filled air, had lain untouched and undiminished within us. Maybe this is what Gerard Manley Hopkins meant when he wrote about 'The deepest freshness deep down things'.

Once or twice during this May and June, as though suddenly released from captivity, all kinds of forces have rushed into my consciousness – bright and vivid images from the distant past. (There are, to be sure, winter ones too. But for now, let me stay with summer.) I keep recalling a poem I have always loved. Maybe

a little less quoted now, but *Fern Hill* by Dylan Thomas still does weird and wonderful things to my heart. It allows me to remember with gratitude the times I revelled in being young and new, especially during one long summer morning of childhood.

... it was all shining: it was Adam and maiden.

*So it must have been after the birth of
the simple light in the first spinning place ...*

Before she died I used to ask my mother what was I like when I was small. She invariably said that I was always full of joy, wanting to celebrate everything, forever looking for reasons to break the routine of things. She said my world was a playground. I was a hero; I was a rebel; I was full of wonder. Much too slowly, each dawn arrived, wrapped in another mystery, another adventure. My every breath, she smiled, was drawn in excitement.

*Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
about the lilted house and happy as the grass was green;
the night above the dingle starry; time let me hail and climb
golden in the heydays of his eyes.*

My mother said I was always laughing. And always dreaming. And always wanting more than my head or heart or arms could hold. Effortlessly I moved between the real and the really real. Looking back now I must have been living in some kind of sacramental world. And everything was forever. I cannot remember any anguished striving for anything.

*And honoured among wagons, I was prince of the apple towns,
and once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
trail with daisies and barley down the rivers of the windfall light.*

My mother also said she thought that I was one with nature then. I clung to the high branches of the swaying trees when the Atlantic summer winds blew magic around our house in the Valley of the Rushes. There was music everywhere for my bare and dancing feet. There was a green bough in my heart and the singing bird came to it every day. As Jesus himself said, this must surely be what heaven is about. But, I sometimes wonder, what if that green bough withers? What if that childhood laugh and dance and music grows too silent, too soon within us? What if the bluebells no longer send us catapulting inward to our magic places? This is what worried the poet Patrick Kavanagh when he felt that his adult sophistication had muted the distant drum-beats that still echoed somewhere inside him.

*Sour is he as spinster's mouth/At kissing-time or time of praise;
His well of gladness dry, the drought/Of desert knowledge is his days.
O child of laughter, I will go/The meadow ways with you, and there
We'll find much brighter stars than know/Old Aldebaran or the Bear*

(Tablet article)