

Irishwoman's Diary, Irish Times, Tuesday, August 2, 2005

By Alannah Hopkin

Lift your right hand off the steering wheel and hold it vertically in the air for a few seconds, acknowledging that there was life, and now there is life no more. No one else in the car knows what you are up to, unless you explain, which you usually don't.

Roadkill, the sudden death of wild things under the wheels of cars and lorries, can amount to slaughter on rural roads, depending on what time of day you're driving. The evidence is at its worst early in the morning, before predators have begun to clear it, and other wheels have scattered the remains. You see any number of dead pigeons, and rooks, badgers, and rabbits, sometimes a pheasant, fox cubs in summer, elderly foxes any time. Cats and dogs are especially upsetting, but often what you think was a dead dog turns out to be someone's old coat, or a greasy rag, and the heart rises again as the hand returns to the wheel without saluting.

I can show you the exact spot near Lissarda where I learnt about the spirit salute. I will never forget the occasion. It was Saturday, 5th August, 1995. I was driving on the hard shoulder in a funeral cortege. The poet Seán Dunne had died suddenly in his sleep, aged 39, of a heart attack. At the time he was Features Editor of the Irish Examiner, and also Books Editor, and had recently edited The Cork Anthology, for Cork University Press.

We all had our "the last time I saw Seán" stories, which we compulsively exchanged. The last time I saw Seán, I had been sitting beside him in the Granary Theatre, attending a colloquium on The Artist as Exile. It was part of a theatre festival organised by a couple of Americans, who spent summers in house near Barley Cove in West Cork. The younger man spoke of living in exile from his books, which had to stay in New York. I wanted to contribute to the discussion, and point out that he was not an exile, he was a part-time émigré-by-choice, and his use of the term exile was insulting to those who really know its meaning. But I was so angry, I could not trust myself to intervene. All I could do was squirm in my seat, and wring my knuckles white, and exchange agonised looks with Seán. As soon it ended we rushed outside to share our rage, then walked off in opposite directions, waving a casual goodbye.

The Lough Parish Church, a big Victorian church in an inner suburb of Cork City, was full to bursting that Saturday. I stood alongside journalist colleagues, hard chaws all, who made no attempt to hide the tears streaming down their faces. Priests, publicans, poets, Seán knew everybody, and they had all come to his funeral. Dermot and Helen Healy, who had met him just once recently, at a literary festival, had driven for seven hours from Sligo, amazed that their old banger had made it. John Montague was there, and Desmond O'Grady, Theo Dorgan, Tom McCarthy, Ellen Beardsley, his partner Trish Edelstein, all the tear-streaked faces. The Mass was concelebrated by several priests,

including a monk from Mount Melleray, a place that Seán had written about in [The Road to Silence](#).

Only during the funeral did most of us learn that Seán was to be buried near the shrine of St. Gobnait in Ballyvourney, about an hour's drive from the city. As we milled around outside on another lovely sunny day, I ran into an old friend, Alex, who was not driving. I was alone, and had not intended to go to the burial. But suddenly it seemed a good and noble thing to drive to Ballyvourney for the final ceremony. I offered Alex a lift, and he, who had not intended to go to the burial either, accepted.

Alex's life had recently been transformed by a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. On his return he grew his hair and his beard long, and wore a large cross on his chest. He did not say much, and we drove west in silence, playing a tape of Peadar Ó Riada's music, *Amongst These Hills*, one of maybe two hundred cars following the hearse. It was awesome to be part of such a large, spontaneous display of grief and affection.

Before Lissarda, just beyond the junction where the road from Crookstown joins the main Cork-Killarney road, a dead pigeon was flattened on the hard shoulder. Alex saw me flinch, and raised his right hand in solemn salutation. He explained that he had learnt the salute from a colleague. 'It makes you feel better, to acknowledge the life that was there, to salute the spirit.'

I have used it ever since. It often reminds me of Seán Dunne, a serendipity he would have enjoyed.