

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE IRISH PEOPLE

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FIRE COMMUNITY BOOKS

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From the book The Fire Under the Grass — firecommunitybooks.com

We need to talk about the thing we never talk about.

Not the weather. Not the match. Not the price of things. The other thing. The one under all of it. The one we have been walking around for two hundred years the way you'd walk around a hole in the ground at night — carefully, without looking down, pretending it isn't there, teaching the children to walk around it too without ever once saying its name.

We are a wounded people. Not were. Are.

We know this. We have always known it. It is in the drink we take to quiet ourselves. It is in the joke we make when someone gets too sincere. It is in the way we cannot receive a kind word without deflecting it, as if kindness were a bill we couldn't pay. It is in the young men we bury who never told anyone. It is in the silence of our fathers and the worry of our mothers and the great national instruction, passed down like a family heirloom: *whatever you say, say nothing*.

Say nothing. And we said nothing.

We said nothing about the hunger, though it emptied the land and shamed the survivors so deeply they could not speak of it even to their own children. We said nothing about the language, though losing it meant losing the very words our grief was made of — so that the sorrow stayed in the body with no tongue to carry it out. We said nothing about the centuries of being told we were less, until we started saying it to ourselves, quietly, and calling it modesty. We said nothing about the laundries and the schools and the homes, though the walls of them stood in every town and everyone knew. We said

nothing when the boat took another one, and another, and another.

We became the best in the world at saying nothing. We made an art of it. We made poetry and music and laughter out of the going-around — and it is beautiful, and it saved us, and it is not enough. Because a wound that is walked around does not close. It waits. It passes down. It comes out sideways — in the bottle, in the temper, in the flat grey sadness no one names, in the child who learns before the age of reason that some things are not asked about in this house.

Here is what we want to say to you, and we say it as one of you, from inside the wound, not above it:

We were not always this way. And we do not have to stay this way.

There was a time when this island knew how to grieve. When a death brought the keen — women who stood at the graveside and made a sound that was the sorrow itself, wild and unashamed, so that everyone's grief could ride out on it. When the wake put the loss in the middle of the room for three days and the whole townland came and sat with it. When we understood, without needing a book to tell us, that the only way past a thing is through it.

That knowledge was taken from us. Shamed out of us. Called backward, called savage, called unrespectable. The keen was silenced and nothing was put in its place, and so the grief of a whole people went underground, where it has been ever since — under the grass, under the manners, under the great national performance of being grand.

We are not grand.

And saying so is not weakness. Saying so is the first brave thing.

This letter is not an accusation. There is no one left to accuse who isn't us. It is not a demand that we all fall apart. It is an invitation to stop pretending — to look down, at last, at the hole we have been walking around, and to say, together, out loud: *there it is. That's the wound. It's real, it's ours, and it did not start with us — but it can end with us.*

Because here is the truth the old people knew and we forgot: a people who have been through fire and know it are not a broken people. They are a tempered one. Our wound is not our shame. Our silence about it is the shame — and silence is a habit, and habits can be broken.

So this is what we are asking. Not for money, not for votes, not for outrage. For courage of a quieter kind:

Say something.

To your father before it's too late. To your daughter before she learns the silence. To the friend you drink beside. At the funeral, at the kitchen table, in your own heart at night. Break the instruction. Say the true thing. Let the keen back in.

We were the people who wailed our grief to the open sky and were not ashamed. We can be that people again — not by going back, but by going through.

The fire is still under the grass.

It is time to tend it.

— *from the Fire Community, with love, from inside*