

Donn Goodwin Prize-Winning Poem 2011
By Timothy Walsh

Grandma Walsh's Wake

After the viewing in the funeral home—
all the young cousins marauding through
the ghostly upstairs rooms,
our parents whispering solemnly below—
then came the night-long wake in the apartment
of the bachelor cousins,
the newest arrivals from the old country,
the casket brought there by eight strong men.

Next day would come the funeral Mass
in the stone cathedral,
the procession of black limousines through the cemetery gates,
the varnished coffin lowered into the clay mouth of earth—
a startling sight for ten-year-old eyes—
the coffin a capsule jettisoning our grandmother
into the reaches of eternity.

It was a rollicking, high-spirited hullabaloo—
the wake, I mean—
everyone moistening memories with drink,
summoning spirits with smoke,
laughter and dancing,
the old piano tinkling out tunes,
cousins, aunts, and uncles each taking a turn giving a song,
everyone thundering out the choruses.

The coffin was off in an alcove,
someone sitting beside it always,
the nearest window kept open.
All the clocks were stopped, and the mirrors
were turned to the walls.

We kids squeezed in at the long table,
between glasses of whiskey and pints of porter,
the new cousins still wide-eyed with the tall buildings,
stupefied by the great city,
the established New York phalanx nodding knowingly,
bolstered by their wonder.

A bottle appeared—holy water, the cousins said—
poteen—the name sounding like a sneeze. *Poteen*.
Brought from the green hills of Sligo, from
the old stone cottage at Culdalee.
They poured it into eager glasses,

and floods of new memories came—
Cloonacool, Drimina, Attymas, Tourlestrane.
The words were magic, town names, we could tell,
but when the old people began speaking Irish,
we were whisked away to an even stranger land.

I tried to stay awake,
bobbing on the boisterous sea, but surrendering
at last to sleep—
all of us children curled up on couches and chairs
like storm-tossed wreckage.

As dawn crept into the canyons of Manhattan,
there were mugs of strong tea,
the smell of bacon sizzling on the stove,
a hush of aftermath in the room,
the family satisfied they'd ushered another soul
safely across.