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Death at a distance

By CATHERINE YİĞİT



“Cast a cold Eye/On Life, on Death.”– [William Butler Yeats](#)

In over eight years living abroad I've lost two uncles, a grandmother and an aunt, in addition to many acquaintances. I didn't make it home to any funeral.

For people like me there may be no choice but to heed that Dublin poet's cold-eyed epitaph. At some point [the long-term expat must face death](#). It could be an acquaintance, [celebrity](#), or worst of all, friend or family member. Whatever the degree of closeness, we become aware that home has diminished; the web of friendship centered on the deceased has lost its node.



Memorial by CYigit

I didn't make it to the funerals but I attended anyway.

I followed the [rites](#), watched the coffin close, followed the removal to the church, the funeral mass the following day and finally the burial. I shed tears with the family and dropped a rose onto the coffin six foot under. I witnessed the family reunions that any funeral becomes; sandwich in one hand, pint or cup of tea in the other.

The Turkish [tradition](#) of quick burial seems rushed, there's barely time for the body to cool. Sensible in the hot climates where Islam was born, but to someone from a culture with a [wake](#) it leaves too little time to adjust, too little time to say goodbye.

And what about when the ritual isn't followed? What [then](#)?

This death-at-a-distance wraps me in a cocoon.

I realize how selfish my sheltered grieving is. I am not there to help, to search, to listen, to share, to support. I am not there.

How do you cope with death-at-a-distance?

In loving memory of Breacan Mooney 1978-2009.

+++++

[Catherine Yiğit](#) is a native of Dublin, Ireland and writes from Çanakkale, northwestern Turkey where she lives with her Turkish husband and two children.

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- [http://www.Sezin.org/ Sezin](http://www.Sezin.org/)

Oh Catherine, this post made me cry (I took a picture of it to send you 😊). You have expressed this experience perfectly and eloquently.

I am not sure I would call this “sheltered grieving” selfish. You are not there to help, but nobody is there to help you either. When we are far away from our family and there is a death we actually have it the hardest. We must be self-reliant in a way most grievers do not have to be. Sometimes our partners never met the person and so we can tell them about who they were, who they are to us, but that connection is not there. Grieving solo is one of the hardest things to do, and it wasn't until reading this post that I realised for how long I've been doing it. Grieving solo can also prevent us from the closure that other people receive from going to the funeral, the wake, the reception.

That you've mentioned the death of a celebrity also hit home very hard. When Michael Jackson and Patrick Swayze died I was devastated. These were two men to whose art I grew up watching. They were a constant through my childhoods in Asia, Africa, my university years and afterward in the USA and Europe. They were constant in a way very little else was. They provided the soundtrack to so many beautiful moments, and when they passed all the memories came up, but I had no one with whom I could share.

Thank you so much for this post, Catherine. It has brought up lots of emotions in me, lots of unresolved pain, but I am glad it did. There is no healing until the hidden abscesses of grief surface, and you have brought me several steps closer to fine.

Much love and much respect,

Sezin

P.S. I'm wondering if my Druid Warriress assessment of you wasn't entirely accurate, and actually what you are is a Druid Priestess. Yes. That sounds much more appropriate.

- [http://twitter.com/benzo8 John Sullivan](http://twitter.com/benzo8)

When we moved to Spain from the UK, we drove to pander to my morbid fear of flying. My girlfriend would fly by to England every week for work and I would stay, piecing together our new home in a strange city where the language(s – the city being Barcelona) meant little to me and culture even less.

A few months in, one of my best friends just dropped dead. I had done a radio show for him the day before and we were chatting that morning, and then, in the afternoon his wife appeared in an IM window and told me to sit down...

I couldn't attend his funeral, though my girlfriend went in my place and I say 1.000 miles away, feeling ineffectual and alone.

A year later, my father was diagnosed with liver cancer and seven months later he passed away just shy of his 70th birthday. I had not managed to fly home in that time, and worse – I had not managed to drive either. I didn't attend his funeral either...

Since then I've faced my fear of planes – too late for my friend and my father, but just in time for me – now I can share both joy and grief with my family and friends, despite living my own life in another country, far, far away...

- [http://sheroffthebeatenpath.blogspot.com Sher](http://sheroffthebeatenpath.blogspot.com)

Hi Catherine,

What a moving post. I agree with Sezin—solo grieving is not selfish. Grieving is a very important process. I feel for you. I've been an expat for four years, and have so far not lost a relative or friend, though our family has had its share of health emergencies. The most recent was in April when I

Anyway, thanks for your post and expressing this process in such a moving way...it really touched me to the quick.

- <http://www.expatharem.com/identity-messages/Anastasia>

Thank you for this, Catherine. Condolences. I'm glad to hear about the webcams you have used to follow memorial services from afar.

When I wrote about my own experience losing someone 12 time zones away from me, someone replied that grieving alone in a foreign land is all that much more alienating. I'd have to agree. Grieving alone is not selfish, it is *disadvantaged*. The lack of support and understanding makes the process more difficult.

You mention celebrity deaths. Sezin's comment nicely builds on why they matter to us, and perhaps even more when we are distanced from the loss. Princess Diana died when I was in Malaysia, and I recall being very affected by it even though I wasn't aware that I had any particular feelings about the woman. She was lodged in my consciousness. Her death also came three years after my friend's death, and perhaps the very visible mourning that took place around Diana was a substitute for me to mourn my friend anew — and more publicly. EVERYONE knew Diana.

- <http://www.skaiangates.com/Yazarc>

Oh Sezin, I'm sorry to have raised some tough emotions for you and yet glad you're working through them. It's taken me months to write this post, even though I knew I wasn't the only one to have faced this.

It feels selfish to have life continue on as normal when a life is over. It feels wrong, somehow. Even taking time out for a memorial is followed by the inevitable return to normality.

Funny what you say about celebrity, the Irish radio personality I mentioned was a constant from my childhood (added to by the fact that he lived in our neighbourhood) yet I never listened to his radio programme! But he became a code for something completely different, among Irish people anyway.

Big hugs to you, sister,

Priestess, eh, there goes my bronze bodice... on with the flowing robes 😊

- <http://www.skaiangates.com/Yazarc>

Thanks for sharing John.

It's good to see grief as a force for positive change, opening your horizons to joy.

- <http://www.skaiangates.com/Yazarc>

Thanks Sher,

I remember you talking about going home on your blog (or was it Twitter) and I thought it must have been a blessing and yet such a tough thing to do.

It brought it home about my grandmother too. She spent a month in hospital before she died and I ached to go back and be with her. But pregnant with a young toddler I couldn't arrange it.

- <http://www.skaiangates.com/Yazarc>

I don't think anyone can forget Diana, whether you cared an iota or not, the outpouring of global grief was something else. And like you say some of that may have had more to do with personal losses than her death.

Disadvantaged, I think that's true. In order to get support we have to tell everyone about it, there is no one who will spontaneously come and express their condolences, as neighbours and friends would if we were home. That can feel self-indulgent, telling all to elicit sympathy, but maybe what we need. It's not something I do well (if you check the date of Breacan's disappearance you'll see the proof of that.)

- [dutchessabroad](#)

Dear Catherine,

Reading your post I flash to the curb in front of The Mailbox where I've opened so many letters announcing the death of someone in the Netherlands. I remember sitting in my car, reading the news, grief hitting me double it seemed, so far away from the others who were there, who were able to go to a wake, sit shiva, comfort each other, pay respect to the deceased and the family. At such moments I grieve double, not just for the person who has died, but for a life that no longer is mine, or of which I no longer am part because I can't take part.

How do I cope with death-at-a-distance?

I take time to grieve, no matter whether it's delayed by weeks, or months. Usually I tell Gary about him or her. Bringing up memories that way helps to get a flow started. Then I write a eulogy, summing up who s/he was, what she s/he meant to me. Often I use Gabriel Rico's clustering method. Sometimes I send the eulogy to a surviving member of the family, or if appropriate I post the eulogy on my blog.

It's never too late to write. Often the immediate circle while have gone back "to normal" long before the grief has worn off. The misconception that people don't want to be remembered of the loss keeps others from communicating. Too often it seems the memory of the dead person dies as well, because his or her name is no longer mentioned.

My heart goes out to you Catherine, please allow yourself to be selfish now and then. Writing the above post is a touching way to remember Breacan Mooney and your other dear departed ones.

Hugs,
Judith

- <http://twitter.com/DutchessAbroad> Judith van Praag

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To call "sheltered grief" selfish is to deny yourself the right to grieve over someone who meant something to you.

Know that your grief, expressed in a eulogy, in a letter, will mean something to those left behind. Remembering the loved one is a compassionate act.

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- <http://www.expatharem.com/identity-messages/> Anastasia

When you're mourning it's hard to tell anyone, especially people who don't know you well. But that's where little black ribbons (or armbands) come in. Wearing one in public (if people understand what it is) gives you much more leeway for weepy morose behavior! Wish people would let us know they're in mourning, the way they did in the past with mourning dress (although I wouldn't want to *have* to wear it, or for any conscripted length of time).

- <http://www.skaiangates.com> Yazarc

Thank you Judith. Tough as it is now in the internet age, I can't imagine how hard it would be to find out when funeral and all is over.

I know what you mean about a double mourning, it brings home the fact that the place we left has changed forever.

I have written about some of my losses, interestingly not all of them though. It did help so that's probably something I need to explore more. I find I can't do it immediately, I need time to process it subconsciously.

- <http://www.skaiangates.com> Yazarc

Funny you mention mourning. A visual signal is a mixed blessing from the strict Victorian mourning to a simple ribbon. It lets people in and that may be something we want or don't want depending on our mood.

My Granny attended my Grandad's funeral in a red coat – he always said he didn't want her going into black, so she took him at his word and never wore black for him.

- [rosedeniz](#)

It seems this week is a reminder of your post, Catherine, fresh off the loss of someone I had never met but who had worked with me on, and published, my first short story. In some ways, I'm always holding my breath, hoping it won't be this week or this year or the next decade that I get news and have to decide – go home or not? On the other hand, I have missed funerals even while living in the US. I have a quiet agreement with the deceased that our relationships continue. Call it morbid,

[...] Koehler, inspired by Catherine Yiğit's "Death at a distance" 0 Responses Something to say?
Tags: Catherine Yiğit, Cubby, Death, expat+HAREM, Grampa [...]

- <http://www.skaiangates.com> Yazarc

So sorry to hear of your loss Rose.

In a way our relationship to the dead does develop after death, we may learn more about them and their actions as our own lives continue. I'm so glad it's helped you cope with such a huge loss as that of your mother.

Best...

- <http://www.bazaarbayar.blogspot.com> Catherine Bayar

Thanks for this post on an emotional subject, Catherine. This is probably the most troubling aspect of living so far from family, and it's not just for expats, as my Mom pointed out to me after reading your post. Especially in the US, families tend to live quite spread out from each other, years going by without actually being in the same place. Little wonder so many people of all ages use Facebook and web cams – we all know how tentative live can be.

I see I have a lot in common with Rose – the loss of my Dad when I was a teenager, as well as a close friend and mentor in my 30's, has left me always looking for signs of them and keeping the relationships alive in my mind and heart. She's right – that does bring peace. Getting that chance to say goodbye is never guaranteed, even if you live in the same place. The shock of the loss is too new to deal with at a funeral, so they usually do not resolve anything for me – that takes time..

The recent news of another friend's death at the young age of 43 had me writing to her family and 6 year old daughter my recollections of our friendship. Maybe that tangible message will last longer than if I'd been able to attend her memorial.

Though the funerals in Turkey happen too fast, I agree, at least it is more commonplace to show abject grief in public – that part of tradition here I think is very healing. Seeing people wailing and bereft in your childhood might be better than learning to keep emotions bottled up inside.

- <http://www.skaiangates.com> Yazarc

Thank you Catherine. I'm so sorry for your losses.

Very true about the scale of a country influencing our reactions to death. In Ireland the few days of the wake allows virtually everyone interested to attend the funeral.

Writing to the family helps. And for the families too, I remember my Granny finding it both tough and comforting to read letters sent after my Grandad's death.

I can't quite reconcile myself to the open grief shown here, though ironically Ireland used to have a tradition of 'keening' by the grave <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keening>. Seems the Catholic Church stamped it out and left us with a more severe, austere grief that I certainly haven't managed to break through yet.

- [taraagacayak](http://www.taraagacayak)

Catherine, I keep wondering what I'll do when my maternal grandmother passes away. Of all my grandparents I am the closest to her and I keep thinking I would be devastated not to get to be with her when she passes or attend her funeral. Your post made me feel that even if I don't get to be there physically, that it will be OK. Somehow I will find a way to honor her. As it is I carry her with me even though I can't be with her every week the way I used to.

- <http://www.skaiangates.com> Yazarc

That's very true Tara. The whole process makes us much more aware of who is still with us and reminds us to make use of that time well. We should strengthen our ties while we can...

- <http://www.bazaarbayar.blogspot.com> Catherine Bayar

Ah, I'd forgotten about keening – now I understand why the wailing women here resonate so much with the Scots/Irish part of me!

- <http://www.sezin.org/2010/09/08/remnants/> Zuzu's Petals | Remnants

[...] August 31, 2010 my only remaining grandparent passed away, another example of the Death at a Distance phenomenon discussed by my friend Catherine Yiğit in a recent expat+HAREM post. At the time of my [...]

- <http://topsy.com/trackback?>

[url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.expatharem.com%2F2010%2F07%2F28%2Fdeath-at-a-distance%2F%23comment-64837992&utm_source=pingback&utm_campaign=L2](http://topsy.com/trackback?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.expatharem.com%2F2010%2F07%2F28%2Fdeath-at-a-distance%2F%23comment-64837992&utm_source=pingback&utm_campaign=L2) Tweets that mention Death at a distance « expat+HAREM, the global niche — Topsy.com

[...] This post was mentioned on Twitter by Anastasia M. Ashman, Tabitha Jayne. Tabitha Jayne said: RT @Thandelike: grieving alone is not selfish — it's disadvantaged <http://bit.ly/ddadPX> #expats #grief – great perspectives [...]



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