

DEATH MOTIF IN TOM FRENCH'S *TOUCHING THE BONES***Dr Hossam M. Al Ashqar^(*) & Dr. Ramadan Al-Azzawi^(**)****Abstract**

The current debut study examines the motif of death as central to Tom French's *Touching the Bones*, where it serves as both a literal and symbolic force, shaping each poem's exploration of loss, memory, and the passage of time. Through stark and poignant imagery, French examines the impact of death on individuals and communities, from family members and close friends to historical and cultural figures. The poems traverse the intimate, personal grief of a mother mourning her drowned child to the collective sorrow of animals encountering the bones of a fallen companion, underscoring the universality of loss. French's vivid portrayals extend beyond physical death to encompass metaphorical "deaths"—such as the lives of unskilled laborers trapped in a state of stagnation, and the fading cultural identities of Ireland's past. This collection captures a spectrum of responses to death, reflecting on themes of transience, dignity, and the resilience of memory. In *Touching the Bones*, French transforms death from a singular end into a continuous presence, subtly woven into the fabric of human existence, serving as both a reminder of life's impermanence and an invitation to honor what endures.

Keywords: Death Motif, Tom French, *Touching the Bones*, Ireland**فكرة الموت في ديوان توم فرينش "لمس العظام"****مستخلص**

يشكل الموت محوراً أساسياً في مجموعة توم فرينش "لمس العظام"، حيث يعمل كقوة حرفية ورمزية، تشكل استكشاف كل قصيدة للخسارة والذاكرة ومرور الوقت. ومن خلال الصور الصارخة والمؤثرة، يفحص فرينش تأثير الموت على الأفراد والمجتمعات، من أفراد الأسرة والأصدقاء المقربين إلى الشخصيات التاريخية والثقافية. وتنتقل القصائد من الحزن الشخصي الحميمي للألم التي تنعى طفلها الغارق إلى الحزن الجماعي للحيوانات التي تصادف عظام رفيقها الساقط، مما يؤكد على عالمية الخسارة. وتمتد تصويرات فرينش الحية إلى ما هو أبعد من الموت الجسدي لتشمل "الوفيات" المجازية - مثل حياة العمال غير المهرة المحاصرين في حالة من الركود، والهويات الثقافية الباهتة لماضي أيرلندا. تلتقط هذه المجموعة طيفاً من الاستجابات للموت، وتتأمل موضوعات الزوال والكرامة ومرونة الذاكرة. في *لمس العظام*، يحول فرينش الموت من نهاية مفردة إلى حضور مستمر، منسوج بمهارة في نسيج الوجود الإنساني، ويعمل كتذكير بعدم ثبات الحياة ودعوة لتكريم ما يدوم.

كلمات مفتاحية: توم فرنش، لمس العظام، أيرلندا

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The Death Motif in Tom French's *Touching the Bones*

Theme of Death in Contemporary Poetry

In contemporary poetry, poets approach the theme of death with varied tones and perspectives, reflecting modern sensibilities and personal connections to mortality. Rather than portraying death solely as a somber or fearful event, they often explore it as a nuanced part of the human experience, sometimes bringing in elements of acceptance, beauty, and even humor. Themes of memory, legacy, grief, and the fleeting nature of life appear frequently, with poets delving into how death shapes our identities, relationships, and understanding of time.

Patricia Smith's *The Undertaker* (1998) offers an intimate and unflinching exploration of death and the rituals surrounding it, as experienced through the eyes of an undertaker. Smith, known for her visceral and deeply evocative style, delves into the physicality and solemnity of the work, portraying the undertaker not just as a professional but as a caretaker and witness to grief. This perspective reveals layers of tenderness, reverence, and complexity in a role often viewed solely through a clinical or detached lens.

The undertaker in the poem does not shy away from the realities of death. Smith's imagery is vivid and direct, bringing readers face-to-face with the sensory aspects of preparing a body for burial. Rather than euphemizing or romanticizing the process, she employs concrete, sometimes graphic language, showing the intimacy of the undertaker's work. This approach grounds the poem in realism, emphasizing the weight and dignity of caring for the dead and transforming the physicality of death into a ritual that respects and honors the body.

Throughout the poem, Smith's undertaker is not merely a technician; he becomes a kind of healer, providing comfort to grieving families by presenting their loved ones as peacefully as possible. There is a sense of quiet pride in the careful, almost artistic precision with which he carries out his work. In this way, the poem elevates the undertaker's role to that of a guardian of memory, offering solace by preserving the dignity of those who have passed.

At its core, *The Undertaker* addresses how individuals confront death and the emotional toll on those who care for the deceased. Smith subtly reveals the undertaker's own relationship with mortality, hinting at how the daily exposure to death may bring a greater awareness of life's fragility. This presence of death might be isolating, yet it also fosters empathy and a deep sense of responsibility.

Ultimately, Patricia Smith's poem serves as both a reflection on the delicate work of handling death and a meditation on the humanity behind it. It brings readers into a space where death is not feared but faced with grace and resilience, honoring both the dead and the living:

When a bullet enters the brain, the head explodes.
I can think of no softer warning for the mothers
who sit doubled before my desk,
knotting their smooth brown hands,

and begging, fix my boy, fix my boy.
Here's his high school picture.

In another vein, Mary Oliver's *When Death Comes* (1992) contemplates death with curiosity and a sense of wonder. Oliver imagines meeting death "like a hungry bear in autumn" and expresses her desire to "step through the door full of curiosity." Her approach is not one of dread but of openness, viewing death as part of the larger journey of life and seeking to live fully until that inevitable moment arrives:

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse
to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox
when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

Oliver wants her life to be defined by engagement and wonder. She envisions herself as "a bride married to amazement" and "the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms." This marriage metaphor underscores her commitment to life, to experiencing everything with passion and depth. Her final wish is not to merely "have visited this world" but to leave it knowing she has fully participated, created, and connected. In this way, *When Death Comes* frames death not as a loss, but as an impetus to live richly and authentically, making death a powerful call to celebrate life.

In the same context, one of the recent studies that celebrated the concept of death in modern poetry is that of Yuliia Torhovet (2024). Through her survey, she approaches a number of modern poems taken from an internet poetry site called "Hello Poetry". In her approach, Torhovet states that most poems involve the idea of inevitability of death as tackled by Guragai's *Death*:

Who am I to give you advise, my friend

Death is the ultimate destiny which we can't change (122)

The same idea still runs through other poems like Stevenson's *Soon to Pass* that stresses the quality of death as an unavoidable real fact:

Death is inevitable and unforgiving

Emotions just as unforgiving and unrelenting (123)

In like manner, death is viewed in Jamesb's *Falling* as the inevitable end of every living thing however life lasts, it must come to an end:

We are all falling
Life is a drop towards ending.....
And we reach our journey's end. (123-24)

In addition, death is estimated, in Jahmal's *Funeral* as a liberation from suffering in life which is viewed as a threshold towards death, and the scene of funeral is one of the occasions that involves all:

At the cry of one's death
I shall cry tears of joy (125)

Similarly, death is seen to be the last asylum of the suffering souls in life as it represents the last resting sleep in Matthews's *I Just Want t be Dead*:

I just want to be dead
To go to sleep
And never leave this bed (126)

In like manner, Emily Dickinson, believes in the deathless nature of death; she devoted numerous poems to the theme of death which is regarded as a riddle. She perceives that death is the pain of the body while decaying in the dust. In *Death is a Dialogue Between*, the dialogue is between the body and the spirit whereas the spirit refuses death's argument to dissolve, but declares its ownership of a distinct future. She states:

Death is a dialogue
between
The spirit and the dust
"Dissolve", says death.
The spirit,
"Sir, I have another
trust"
(Wetzsteon 91)

Later, in her career, Dickinson understood that death liberates the soul; it is not a bugbear to terrify humans, but it became the eternal rest instead of the gloomy life on earth. In addition, she conceives tombs as the place of this eternal rest; rather, she believes that life becomes safer in tombs:

Tis not Dying that hurts us so
Tis living ... hurts us more
But Dying is a difficult way

A kind behind the door (112)

Moreover, Dickinson, views that death is an “inanimate friend, not an enemy” (qtd in Agrawal 54). She had a deep belief in mortality through the activities of nature: sun-set, sun-rise, flower-blooming; those activities represent the phase of rebirth after death. Thus, her perception of death has been varied, inconsistent, idiosyncratic and fluctuating.

Touching the Bones

Born in Kilkenny in 1966 and raised in Tipperary, Tom French is an accomplished poet whose collection, *Touching the Bones* (2001), won the Forward Prize for First Collection in 2002. He currently lives with his family in County Meath, where he works in the county library service (The Gallery Press 46). His journey through literature began with studies at the University of Ireland and the University of Limerick, laying the foundation for a career that would see him become an influential figure in contemporary Irish poetry. Known for his delicate, evocative approach to themes of memory, place, and personal history, French's work resonates deeply with readers:

Since his debut, French has published five more collections with Gallery Press: *The Fire Step* (2009); *Midnightstown* (2014); *The Way to Work* (2016); *The Last Straw* (2018), which was shortlisted for the *Irish Times/Poetry Now Award*; and, most recently, *The Sea Field* (2020). He has also published two e-chapbooks with digital publisher Smithereens Press, *The Night Ahead* (2013) and *Taking the Oath* (2015). He also edited the local poetry anthology *A Meath Anthology* (Meath County Library Service, 2010). His poem “West” won the Dermot Healy International Poetry Prize in 2015, and in 2016, he was awarded the Lawrence O’Shaughnessy Award for Poetry. He has been featured repeatedly on RTÉ and at the Cúirt Literature Festival and has appeared in publications including *The Irish Times* and *Poetry Ireland*. (The Adrian Brinkerhoff Poetry Foundation *para* 3)

Throughout his career, he has been recognized for his contributions to literature. In 1999 and 2006, he received Bursaries from Chomhairle Ealaíon, The Arts Council of Ireland, reflecting the value of his work within the Irish cultural landscape. In 2000, he was awarded the inaugural Ted McNulty Prize for Poetry, marking an early milestone in his career. His accolades continued to accumulate with international recognition, such as the Dermot Healy International Poetry Prize in 2015 and the Lawrence O’Shaughnessy Award for Poetry in 2016. These awards highlight not only his skill as a poet but his ability to connect with audiences both within Ireland and abroad.

French's bibliography is a testament to his growth and exploration as a writer. His early works, such as *The Fire Step* (2009) and his widely acclaimed first collection, *Touching the Bones* (2011), delve into themes of family, loss, and Irish identity, offering readers a poignant reflection on life and the past. This debut collection was particularly noted for its lyrical quality and emotional depth, establishing him as a poet of note.

Following his initial success, he published *The Night Ahead* (2013) and *Midnightstown* (2014), where his voice matured, and his explorations of rural Irish life, tradition, and the subtleties of human experience continued to evolve. These collections solidified his reputation for crafting poems that feel at once intimate and expansive, resonating with universal themes that touch on the complexities of human experience.

In *Taking the Oath* (2016), French further expanded his thematic scope, exploring oaths, pledges, and the promises we make to ourselves and others, grounded in the familiar landscapes of Ireland. His more recent collections, such as *The Sea Field* (2020) and *Company* (2022), reflect a seasoned poet who has honed his craft, capturing both the beauty and brevity of life with precision and insight.

Through each collection, French captures the spirit of Ireland, not merely as a geographical location but as a tapestry of memories, traditions, and the shared experiences of its people. His work continues to inspire and resonate, earning him a place among the cherished voices in modern Irish poetry.

French's *Touching the Bones* is a captivating collection that bridges personal and historical narratives, blending traditional Irish influences with a modern sensibility. The collection garnered attention for its striking exploration of family, memory, and rural Irish life, often touching on themes of mortality and legacy. French's poetry has a conversational quality, drawing readers into intimate scenes that feel both familiar and hauntingly reflective.

The title poem, "Touching the Bones", epitomizes this blend of the intimate and the elegiac. It reflects on the loss of loved ones and the way the past interweaves with the present, shaping identity. French uses imagery of bones as a symbol of what remains after death, exploring not only physical remnants but also the emotional and cultural imprints left on those who survive. This exploration is characteristic of French's style throughout the collection—his poems often reveal a deep sensitivity to the landscape of the Irish countryside and the lives it holds and has held over generations.

What stands out in *Touching the Bones* is French's ability to infuse ordinary moments with a sense of reverence. His attention to small, everyday details and

his use of understated language makes his reflections on family and loss particularly moving. This debut collection was well-received and marked French as a significant new voice in Irish poetry. The book went on to win the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, signaling French's impact on contemporary Irish poetry.

This debut paper seeks to explore the motif of death in *Touching the Bones*. As French's debut collection, the themes within *Touching the Bones* are both unique and varied. His poems encompass a Siberian legend, meditations on twentieth-century wars, complex family relationships, and tributes to fellow artists. The tone of the collection is largely shaped by grief and frustration, lending the poems an atmosphere of somber introspection. Marked by sincerity, dignity, and an exploration of challenged faith, *Touching the Bones* reveals a deep honesty. The selected poems in this study focus on the ways in which the living interact with the dead, both physically and spiritually. The recurring imagery of these final touches upon the deceased captures the profound coldness, selfishness, and desperation of human beings at their most vulnerable.

This paper offers a critical analysis of selected poems from *Touching the Bones*, focusing on the portrayal of death across ten works in the collection: "The Last Resort," "Ghost Ship," "Touching the River," "Touching the Bones," "Singing in the Underground," "The Botanic Gardens," "Ash," "Hip," "Pity the Bastard," and "Burning the Great Coat."

French's opening poem, "The Last Resort," which resembles a recipe, introduces the theme of death through a haunting image. The poem centers on the transformation of milk, rising or turning into a dream, as the poet evokes a grisly vision of death by suggesting the act of using a dead man's hand in the churn:

Like five white candles burnt to different lengths,
His work-thick fingers drained of human strength,
We thrust them to the wrist into the milk
And shook them gently till the last drops dripped.
(*The Last Resort* 11).

The imagery in these lines powerfully conveys the motif of death through a haunting blend of visual and tactile details. The comparison of "five white candles burnt to different lengths" to fingers suggests the passage of time, with each "burnt" candle standing for a life that has been partially, or fully, consumed. The fingers, "drained of human strength," further emphasize the presence of death, as they now lack the vitality once associated with a living person. This draining of life evokes an image of death as a gradual process, where life is slowly extinguished, just as candles eventually burn out.

The act of thrusting the lifeless fingers "to the wrist into the milk" and "shaking them gently till the last drops dripped" deepens this sense of finality. The

milk, often a symbol of life or sustenance, is disturbed by these dead hands, as if representing how death touches and affects all aspects of existence. The final image of "the last drops dripped" conveys a sense of dwindling life and inevitability, resonating with the quiet acceptance of mortality. These vivid, almost ceremonial gestures toward the dead capture a chilling intersection of life and death, underscoring the ephemeral nature of human existence and the lingering presence of those who have passed.

In his second poem, "Ghost Ship," French describes an art installation by Dorothy Cross, featuring a ship in Dublin Bay that has been entirely and luminously painted. The "Ghost Ship" is portrayed as "anchored in the Winter harbor, waiting,/disappearing into the dark, and reappearing" (Ghost Ship 12). French's interpretation of the Ghost Ship evokes a blend of the eerie mystery of the *Mary Celeste* and the haunting descent of Achilles into the underworld from the *Iliad*. This lyrical poem is steeped in themes of death, creating a powerful, ghostly atmosphere dominated by the presence of the dead:

I want to go below to the immaculate galley
 ...
 And slip into the private sleeping quarters
 To touch the tucked meat berth of the dead,
 their metal lockers filled with personal effects,
 Their snapshots of the living, our locks of affairs;
 (*Ghost Ship* 12)

In these lines, death is depicted as an intimate yet unsettling presence within the hidden spaces of the "immaculate galley" and "private sleeping quarters." The speaker's descent below deck symbolizes a journey into the private realm of the deceased—a place where life and death intermingle quietly but poignantly. The description of the "tucked meat berth of the dead" combines the harsh physicality of the human body ("meat") with the tenderness of a "tucked" berth, suggesting both reverence and vulnerability in the way the dead are laid to rest. The stark, almost clinical image of death here emphasizes the body's transformation from a living presence to a cold, inanimate form.

The "metal lockers filled with personal effects" intensify the intimacy of death, as these small, personal items serve as remnants of a life once fully lived. The "snapshots of the living" and "locks of affairs" convey the powerful connection between the dead and the memories or relationships they have left behind. These objects capture fleeting moments, a reminder of love and connection, contrasting with the permanence of death. Through these images, the poem reflects on death not as an isolated state but as a bridge to the living—a haunting reminder of lives intertwined, yet now forever separated.

In "Touching the River", French explores themes that often highlight life's transient nature, family connections, and Irish identity. This poem, like others in *Touching the Bones*, reflects on the idea of "touch" in a metaphorical and literal sense, linking it with memory, place, and legacy. This approach helps create a powerful atmosphere of remembrance and loss, which is central to his work and the motif of death within his poetry. The poem tells a moving narrative centered on a mother's profound grief after the drowning of her child. In one passage, the image of the mother placing her deceased infant in the river expresses her loss and despair, symbolizing the divide between life and death. When a medieval saint refuses to revive the child, he is later struck by compassion as he observes the mother's sorrow, and, moved by her grief, reaches out to "touch the river" to restore the child to her. However, the mother's plea to the saint reveals the depth of her pain: she asks that her child does not endure death twice, nor she the agony of losing him again. This portrayal of grief and suffering, resulting from the inevitability of death, resonates through *Touching the Bones* as a whole, infusing the collection with themes of sorrow, compassion, and the limits of human endurance in the face of profound loss.

In the poem of "Touching the Bones", French's preoccupation with themes of death and elegy is evident as he draws on a striking scene from a wildlife documentary showing elephants encountering the remains of a deceased bull from their herd. The elephants' reactions convey a profound sense of collective grief. As they find the sun-bleached bones near a dried watering hole, they respond in a manner almost ritualistic, rubbing their skin against the bones and rolling the skulls in the dust, as though attempting to "wash death from them." The tenderness with which they interact with the bones—circling and nudging them with their massive feet—suggests an understanding of loss that may even exceed human expressions of grief.

French portrays death as a definitive boundary that forever separates the living from the dead, as seen in the elephants' inability to reconnect with their lost kin despite their profound attempts to engage with its remains. This symbolic division between life and death resonates throughout the collection, emphasizing the universality of grief and the permanence of loss:

We grieve because the dead forget us.
 We bury their bodies in boxes underground
 And when we chance on them in sleep
 And reach to bring the skulls up to our lips
 To slake our griefs in their crevices and curves,

...

To roll the shinbones and the thighbones
 And the ribs in dust, to touch them with our flesh,
 Our dream hands reaching toward them make us
 wake.

(Touching the Bones 15)

This poem reflects on death through a haunting meditation on the distance that death places between the living and the dead, which even memory and dreams struggle to bridge. The lines suggest that grief is intensified by the feeling that the deceased have moved beyond any ability to remember or interact with the living, creating a sense of isolation and loss. The imagery of attempting to "bring the skulls up to our lips" and feeling the shapes of bones emphasizes an intimate longing to reconnect physically with those who have passed, even if only in a dream.

The poem also confronts the limits of this connection: the act of reaching out to the dead only awakens the dreamer, abruptly ending the moment and reinforcing death as a boundary that separates people forever. The depiction of "dream hands reaching" captures the yearning and ultimate futility of trying to touch the dead, showing how death severs the ties to those we love, leaving only memories, dreams, and the unfulfilled desire for a connection that can never be fully regained. Through these images, the poem powerfully conveys the depth of human grief and the finality of death as an impenetrable divide. In other words, the image of bringing the skulls of the dead to our lips "to slake our griefs in their crevices and curves" is a wonderful one, stressing how much and how badly the living need the dead to make them live and endure the griefs and difficulties of life. The living needs the dead to console them and provide them with solace. The image of rolling "shinbones and the thighbones/and the ribs in the dust," and touching "them with our flesh", indicates that the dead are a source of warmth and solace to the living.

In the following passage, French reflects on the powerful, often painful origins of his poetry, linking his need to write elegies—poems of lament and mourning—to his deeply personal encounters with grief and loss. His reference to A.S. Byatt, who speaks of being "hurt into writing," and Marguerite Duras, who struggled to accept her brother's untimely death, suggests that these moments of suffering and disillusionment serve as a profound impetus for creative expression:

I heard Antonia Byatt in an interview once
Talk about being hurt into writing and
It was a family tragedy that got me started.
Also an interview with Marguerite Duras,
Speaking of the death of her brother at a
Young age, saying, "je ne pouvais pas absolument
Accepter le morte de ce jeune home". I always
Knew it was unacceptable but it was
Nice to hear someone, apart from myself,

Saying it. And poems seemed a way of saying it.
The impulse to write elegies for the more
natural deaths that have happened was out
Of a desire not to be struck dumb by absence.

(<http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/publications/poetrynews/pn2003/tomfrench/2>)

French is drawn to writing as a means of grappling with what he finds unbearable. When he hears Duras's words, "je ne pouvais pas absolument accepter le mort de ce jeune homme" ("I absolutely could not accept the death of this young man"), he is comforted by the shared resistance to the finality of death. Her sentiments echo his own, affirming that it's not only him who struggles with the idea of mortality being definitive and irreversible. This mutual acknowledgment—finding others who vocalize what he himself feels—is meaningful because it reassures him that his sentiments are shared, that there's a common humanity in refusing to accept certain losses as inevitable or acceptable.

Elegies, for French, become an act of defiance against silence and oblivion. Instead of letting the memory of loved ones vanish in "absence," he writes to ensure they live on in some form. His words reveal that for him, poetry is more than artistic expression; it's a way of giving voice to absence, preserving the memories of those lost, and maintaining an ongoing relationship with the deceased. Thus, his obsession with death isn't morbid or macabre; rather, it is rooted in a deep-seated desire to understand and articulate the nature of loss, to resist the silence that absence threatens to impose. Writing, in this way, becomes an act of remembrance and a way of confronting and accepting mortality on his own terms.

The theme of death remains persistent and recurring throughout the entire collection. For French, life is overshadowed by death, resulting in a constant separation between the living and the deceased. "A Sudden Passing", states:

Their mother is a double agent
operating for life and death,
traipsing through the winter rooms,
searching out her five surviving ones"

(*A Sudden Passing* 20).

In the same poem, the theme of death reappears, highlighting a contrast: the lives of the living are defined by cold, rain, and mud, while the realm of the dead is characterized by warmth and heat:

When I stumbled on the grave digger's
Wellingtons, tucked into each other

To keep the rain from getting in,

...

Lying on their side behind to by Maher's
Headstone and slipped my hands in
He couldn't have been that long gone.
The feet were still at body heat and holding.
(*A Sudden Passing* 21)

In this excerpt from "A Sudden Passing", the motif of death is vividly evoked through the intimate, almost tactile details of the scene. The speaker's discovery of the grave digger's boots, still warm from recent use, serves as a powerful symbol of the proximity between life and death. The warmth lingering inside the boots suggests that the digger was "not that long gone," imbuing the scene with a sense of the lingering presence of the living even as they work among the dead. The act of slipping hands into the boots, which have been left by a grave, creates a strikingly physical connection between the speaker and the grave digger's task, hinting at the inevitable nearness of mortality. The warmth left behind contrasts sharply with the cold, rain-soaked environment of the cemetery, symbolizing how life and death coexist side by side. In this way, the warmth and the recently departed presence of the grave digger emphasize the fragile boundary between the living and the dead—a boundary that is continually crossed in the act of burial. This moment captures the human impulse to touch or feel what is absent, to experience a sense of connection to death, even as it remains mysterious and unreachable.

In the poem entitled "Iron", the poet stresses the point that the dead are more alive and conscious than the living:

You have never been more alive
Than in that instant when I thought
...
You most dead, when you opened your mouth
And spoke in your normal voice about the fear
You had of the iron on the towel on the table
Being felt plugged in and all our hopes
...
Of a life together going up in smoke.
(*Iron* 25)

In this passage from "Iron", death is portrayed not as an abrupt finality but as an ever-present shadow that can suddenly feel disturbingly close, even within moments of everyday life. The speaker recalls a moment of intense fear and vulnerability, where the other person seemed "most dead," perhaps either emotionally distant or physically inert. However, this perception is overturned when they unexpectedly speak in a "normal voice," grounding the scene in an

almost mundane but powerful sense of reality. The mention of the “fear” about the iron, left precariously on a towel as though it were still plugged in, introduces a powerful metaphor: the iron represents the constant, underlying danger that threatens their shared future, the “hopes of a life together.” The image of these hopes “going up in smoke” invokes the fragility of life and relationships, where something as simple as an unattended household object could cause destruction, just as an unnoticed or ignored aspect of life could lead to loss. In this way, death is portrayed as something woven into the fabric of daily existence—an invisible yet potent force lurking behind routine objects and actions. It’s a reminder of life’s transience, as even the smallest mishap could disrupt everything, underscoring the tension between life’s fragile continuity and the omnipresent possibility of its sudden end.

In "Singing in the Underground", the fifth poem and an elegy for Jack Mitchell (1932–1992), French’s perspective on the afterlife is most vividly expressed. He envisions that there is singing beneath the ground:

We do not know if there is singing underground.
The Greeks believed in it and couldn’t
get enough of Orpheus.
They say the birds and rocks and fields all wept
for him
And even the trees inclined to strip themselves
of leaves.
Big rivers swelled to bursting with people’s tears.
(*Singing in the Underground* 26)

Here, the motif of death is reflected through the mythological figure of Orpheus, whose music and mourning transcend the boundaries between life and death. The speaker acknowledges uncertainty about what lies “underground,” yet draws on Greek mythology, where Orpheus’s music was powerful enough to stir emotions in both the living and the dead. The image of birds, rocks, and fields weeping, along with trees shedding their leaves and rivers overflowing with people’s tears, creates a vivid portrayal of collective sorrow, as if all of nature mourns along with Orpheus. This scene emphasizes death’s profound impact—not only on individuals but on the world around them, blurring the lines between life and death. The weeping landscape symbolizes how deeply death resonates, echoing through nature and human emotion alike, and suggests a vision of the afterlife filled with music and mourning. Through these mythic and natural images, death is shown as both an end and a source of continuity, with grief connecting those above ground to those below.

In "The Botanic Gardens", French pays tribute to Ann Kennedy by entwining her memory with the enduring beauty of roses and flowers, suggesting

that she continues to live on in the collective memory of those who knew her. The absence of actual blossoms in the garden is compensated by the remembrance of Kennedy, who becomes as cherished and celebrated as the flowers themselves. French reflects on her recent passing, noting that her “first full day of being dead is over,” yet her presence remains vivid and enduring, much like the miniature nameplates in the garden that honor the flowers even when they are not in bloom. This comparison subtly highlights how memory can keep the essence of a person alive, filling in for the physical presence that is now gone. By listing the flower names—“Tamoretta, Lochinvar, Lough Bawn, Cantabile, Moylena, Torchbearers, Stray, Golden Halo, Vigilante, Frousseau, Dancing Flame”—French creates a litany, invoking these beautiful varieties in a way that enshrines Kennedy’s memory in the richness of nature. The names themselves are evocative, each one suggesting unique characteristics, just as Kennedy herself was a unique presence. This recitation of names transforms the flowers into symbols of remembrance, turning the garden into a place of quiet homage. Through this elegy, French portrays the act of remembering as a way to keep the dead alive among the living. In his poetic naming of flowers for Kennedy, he transforms her absence into a celebration, connecting her memory to the vibrant beauty of life that persists, much like the flowers that will bloom again in time. The imagery reinforces the theme that memory can sustain life’s beauty even in the face of loss, honoring Kennedy in a way that is both gentle and deeply reverent.

In "Ash", French uses the act of scattering Chris O’Neill’s ashes as a profound metaphor for life’s continuation beyond physical death. The poem captures a tender, symbolic moment: Aisling O’Neill and her mother scatter Chris’s ashes from a shoebox on White Rock Beach, with the mother wading into the frigid Irish Sea to release handfuls of her lover’s remains onto the water. This image of scattering ashes on the sea carries a sense of renewal and transformation, suggesting that life does not end at death but rather shifts into a new, eternal form. The use of a “shoebox” as a container for the ashes lends a sense of intimacy and familiarity to this ritual. Ashes, once part of a vibrant, living being, will now mingle with the elements, becoming part of the sea, sky, and earth, and perhaps even nurturing new life. This evokes the idea that the atoms of the deceased will be absorbed back into the natural world, transformed into seeds, plants, trees, and perhaps even into future generations of human life. The earthly end of a person, then, is the beginning of a new, boundless existence as their essence disperses and integrates into the greater cycle of life. French also compares the weight of the ashes to that of a baby, creating a powerful image that implies rebirth. This comparison between ashes and the weight of new life hints at the cyclical nature of existence, where death leads not to finality but to the genesis of something else, something enduring. The ritual of scattering the ashes becomes a symbolic act of creating a new form of life, one that will “last for eternity.” The poet’s line, “When she calls to your daughter she calls her ash,” suggests that Chris O’Neill’s legacy endures through his daughter,

Aisling, whose very name (a word meaning “dream” or “vision” in Irish) signifies continuity and memory. In this way, the ashes become both a memory and a presence—a continuation of the deceased within the lives of the living. The scattering ritual, then, is more than a farewell; it is a celebration of Chris’s life, his work, and the enduring impact of his spirit. Through this act, French expresses a vision of death not as an end but as a passage into a different, eternal form of existence, a transformation where life reemerges from death, much like seeds sprouting into trees, carrying forward the memory and spirit of the departed.

In "Hip", the eighth poem—a beautiful work intertwining themes of love and death—French draws a comparison between planting a young shoot and the passing of a loved one, juxtaposing the cycle of growth with the sorrow of loss:

When, as if to plant some shoot,
You scoop a handful of earth
From the earth itself and then,
Instead of rearranging roots
And tamping earth about them
In their bed, you slip your hip
Into that delved – out space
And settle there and sleep. (*Hip* 46)

In this passage, death is reflected through the metaphor of planting oneself into the earth, as if one were a plant being set into a grave-like space. By "scoop[ing] a handful of earth from the earth itself" and then "slip[ping] your hip into that delved-out space," the speaker likens the act of lying in a grave to that of planting. Instead of planting a seed, however, it's the speaker themselves who nestles into the earth, suggesting a return to it in death. The imagery of "settle there and sleep" evokes a final rest, the kind associated with death, while the gentle language of "settling" and "sleeping" softens death, making it seem as natural and as inevitable as planting a seed. This earthy metaphor reinforces the cyclical connection between life and death, suggesting a peaceful return to the natural world.

The poet continues:

I know when I hold that tidy heap
Your hip displaces in the hollow
Of my hand, I want, when all of this
Is finished, my clay hand to be
Resting on your clay hip, on your skin
To be left the impress my kiss leaves
On this small mound of earth, and me
To be trickling through your fingers
As through my fingers now your hip –
Clay trickles back into the earth (*Hip* 46)

This passage delves deeply into the theme of death, intertwining it with a sense of intimate physicality and the bond between two beings. The speaker's desire to hold another's "tidy heap" – a metaphor for their loved one's body – becomes a way of confronting mortality, reflecting the longing to stay connected even after death. The "clay hand" and "clay hip" establish a powerful link to the earth, evoking the idea that human beings, made from dust or clay, eventually return to it. This reinforces the image of death as a return to nature, highlighting the inevitability of decay and the merging of human forms back into the soil. The phrase "when all of this is finished" suggests the speaker's acceptance of life's transience and the desire for unity beyond the physical realm. By wishing to rest their hand on their partner's "clay hip" after death, the speaker envisions a final merging where their physical essence – clay – trickles away into the earth. Here, death is depicted as a serene process, where the body gradually disintegrates, dissolving into nature and into the loved one, much like clay slipping through fingers. This passage thus reflects the speaker's yearning for an intimate, everlasting connection that transcends physical death, symbolizing a continuous cycle between life, love, and the inevitable return to the earth.

Reflecting on his poem and the change of its title from "Love Poem" to "Hip," French notes that his editor's suggestion for a more subtle title and a streamlined structure added value to the piece. His original intention was for the poem to consist of a single sentence and one full stop, creating a continuous flow. Now, in its refined form, the poem feels more cohesive, with nothing extraneous or missing. Typically, French refrains from altering poems that have already endured his initial writing process (Adapted from Tom French, Poetry Society 2).

In "Pity the Bastard", the ninth and central poem of *Touching the Bones*, French vividly captures Ireland's recent past with a depth few poets have matched. The poem depicts the world of the bachelor uncles he visited weekly throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. It focuses on the lives of unskilled farm laborers, who endure an existence that feels like a living death. Through this, the poet calls on readers to feel compassion for these "bastards":

Who lived in the eternal bastard present all their lives,
 Knew bulldozed boundaries and ancient names
 For fields and had no names themselves apart
 From Christian names, who cycled miles to Mass
 In market towns the livestock saw more often
 Than themselves, and swayed up boreens, pristine
 in their best and pissed when the God of churches
 refused to let them do the hard work they were born to
 do. (*Pity the Bastards* 54)

In this passage, the theme of death is intricately woven into a depiction of lives trapped in perpetual stagnation, evoking a sense of "death in life." These unskilled laborers live in an "eternal bastard present," suggesting a time that never progresses—a life with neither growth nor change, confined within "bulldozed boundaries" that erase the past yet fail to provide a future. They remain nameless, known only by Christian names, highlighting their lack of individual identity or legacy, and further intensifying the idea of a life that is invisible, nearly erased. Their ritual of cycling to Mass, passing through market towns that are more familiar to livestock than to them, underscores their isolation and detachment from the larger social and economic spheres. Even their physical connection to the land—swearing and laboring in the fields—is thwarted by the "God of churches," who denies them their purpose and leaves them adrift. This denial of the work they were born to do serves as a metaphor for a spiritual and emotional death, where not only their labor but their identity and dignity are stripped away. Through these lines, French captures a haunting image of men condemned to live out a kind of death while still breathing, shaped by invisible social boundaries and condemned to obscurity. Their existence becomes a lament for lost potential and the crushing weight of circumstances beyond their control, turning their lives into an elegy for those who endure life as if already dead.

Again, the poet asks us to

Pity the bastards whose winters made them
 Good at lighting fires, who kicked Moroccan
 orange crates to bits for tinder, whose mothers
 were their sisters and their fathers rogues,
 who lived in dread of country homes and dreamed
 of dying in their own beds, ... (*Pity the Bastards* 57)

Actually, the poet elegizes those labourers who die in winter cold, having been deprived of both fathers and mothers. The image of the labourers' mothers being their sisters arouses our sadness and pity for them. These poor bastards live in absolute dread, lacking any sense of security, and the only dream left for them is to die in their beds. The poet pities the labourers "who were stuck to the ground/by a hard frost once like Gulliver, who spent/their lifetimes travelling sixteen acres extensively,/who spoke no language only English and thought/it lovely when the young ones picked up German" (*Pity the Bastards* 58).

The image of the labourers' being frostbitten arouses readers' sympathy for them, and stresses the fact that their life is worthless and insignificant. They waste their lives working hard, "travelling sixteen acres extensively." They are more like machines or animals than human beings, experiencing the meaning of factual death. To stress the theme of death in life undergone by the labourers, the poet goes on to say:

Pity the bastards who slept in extra rooms,
 They helped build, in beds that smelled of fields
 And sheds, who vividly recalled the automatic
 Telecom exchange when it was Carey's forge,
 Who sacrificed one lung to TB or the God
 of nicotine, who coughed until they coughed
 blood, who thought themselves lucky.

(*Pity the Bastards* 58)

The image of the labourers' bed smelling of fields and sheds articulates the degree of humiliation and degradation they have to endure. They are treated as if they were animals or insects. Despite experiencing death in life, they will soon undergo actual death by sacrificing "one lung to TB or the God of Nicotine". These labourers consider themselves happy despite their coughing blood. The poet adds:

Pity the bastards whose requiem
 Masses were long, convulved concelebrated affairs
 Attended by Kin who went into the church
 And wound up on the missions in Brazil.
 And pity them, because they left behind them
 Nothing, ... (*Pity the Bastards* 59)

Even the requiem Masses performed for the dead labourers are extremely complicated and difficult to follow. These labourers die leaving nothing behind them or anybody to mourn their passing. The poet finally asks us to pity the labourers "who took more jigs and reels and slow airs with them/than a human could play in a lifetime, to their graves (*Pity the Bastards* 59).

The image of the labourers' taking "more jigs and reels and slow airs with them ... to their graves" raises the hope that they will start a new better life after death. Their afterlife may redress the injustice, deprivation and degradation they have gone through in their lifetime. *Pity the Bastards* begins and ends with as a past-tense litany of the life of the pitiable labourers, brilliantly adopting the "epic device, incidentally linking the concerns of the collection's personal lyrics to a broad social context, elegizing the labourers' world with a vivid, brutal and memorable rush of images. ..." (<http://munsterlit.ie/southwordnew3/reviews.html> 3)

In "*Burning the Great Coat*," the tenth and the last poem in this collection, the poet finally laments his brother's death, elegizing the moral death of all human beings:

Brother, have often thought of you
 Stretched in the wet earth of a Tipperary graveyard
 That day our griefs were gathered under one roof

And we traipsed away into the warm Mmunster Arms
 For mugs of sweet tea and plates of Bourbon Creams
 And left you in the frozen ground where you belonged.
 (*Burning the Greatcoat 71*)

The image of his brother's dead body stretching "in the wet earth of a Tipperary graveyard" is visually awful and presents a lamentation about the fate of humanity. Again, the image of the griefs gathering under one roof is terrible and highlights the intensity of grief and sorrow. Yet, the poet makes it clear that it is the dead person who pays the price of death, for while the mourners gather to drink "sweet tea" and eat "plates of Bourbon Creams", the dead brother is "left in the frozen ground" where he belongs. The poet imagines a possible Lazarus-like resurrection for his dead brother:

They say it was a woman named Lazar who found you.
 I liked that the –the good sign- so, if you do rise
 And the day is cold, look for the embers of the coat
 I have hauled around the cities since you died.
 I tried to make it fit me but it kept your shape
 Follow your nose. (*Burning the Greatcoat 71*)

The poet's wishful thinking of his brother coming back to life articulates how much he loves him. He does not forget to advise him that if "the day is cold, look for the embers of the coat." The coat becomes a symbol of identity, belonging and warmth. The image in the line "I tried to make it (the coat) fit me but" still dominates the scene, and occupies his thinking. Finally, the poet says:

The stink of diesel will be strong
 Because I filled the pockets first and held it well
 Before it burst into flames. I stamp the embers out
 And leave the ashes to the early rain. I'd spread them
 On the earth but they'd do no good. So, I stand above it,
 Stoking the remainders into life, way of the flames,
 The clothes I stand up in, the only things to my name.
 (*Burning the Greatcoat 71*)

Conclusion

Touching the Bones by French masterfully explores the motif of death and its profound impact on human existence. This collection captures the horrors of twentieth-century wars, family bonds, and the elegies of fellow artists, with grief pervading the atmosphere of many of the poems. Marked by honesty, dignity, and a sense of tested faith, French's poems resonate with repeated images of the living connecting with the dead in moments of poignant farewells, highlighting a profound, chilling separation among human beings. As a skilled poet, French reflects on life's absurdity through varied, powerful images.

In "The Last Resort", he opens with a disturbing image of a dead man's hand in the churn, setting a tone that confronts death directly. In "Ghost Ship", French conjures a haunting scene of touching the bodies of the dead below deck, a powerful reminder of mortality and shared human fate. "Touching the River" captures a mother's grief over her drowned child, evoking deep sorrow and sympathy for her suffering. In "Touching the Bones", the centerpiece of this collection, French depicts elephants grieving over the bones of a lost bull, illustrating that animals, too, can experience profound loss, even beyond human comprehension.

French's exploration of the afterlife reaches a crescendo in "Singing in the Underground", where nature joins in a symphony of lamentation for the deceased, capturing the communal sorrow of loss. "The Botanic Gardens" serves as an elegy, where he honors his late friend by likening her to roses and flowers, making her memory a permanent part of nature. In "Ash", French draws a parallel between a dead person's ashes and the weight of a newborn, symbolizing both an end and a new beginning. Through "Hip", he likens the planting of a shoot to mourning, expressing the transient beauty of life and love.

In "Pity the Bastard", French reflects on Ireland's history, particularly the life of unskilled laborers, portraying them as slaves to circumstance—machines rather than humans, experiencing a death in life. The collection closes with "Burning the Great Coat", an elegy for his brother, where French expresses longing for a Lazarus-like resurrection, symbolized by the coat that represents identity, warmth, and connection.

Through *Touching the Bones*, French transcends individual grief to explore humanity's collective sorrow, illustrating the universality of death's impact. His skillful weaving of personal loss with universal themes underscores the role of death as a defining motif in this powerful collection, capturing a vision of both suffering and deep, shared humanity.

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