

A Hallowe'en Meditation

Ghosts are supposed to hunch you down - make your shoulders roll forward, protecting the neck.

You're afraid of that chill air, of that distemp'ous cloud of spirit world and gibbous moon and dark decay. The street is empty; the wind rises behind your back and you think: *now they will strike ...* You sense them swelling with the wind, and then like ghostly fullbacks they start the onrush to the forward line, and you, solitary pedestrian, you are about as protected as a buttercup in centre field. The sheeted dead come sweeping over you, squeaking and gibbering like wet Jell-o in your ear. When you get to wherever you're going you're all plastered with dead leaves.

As someone who lost most of the family early - in fact all of the family early - I know something about ghosts and those autumn visitations, walking to and from work too early or too late. Especially too early for some reason. How cogent, how reliable is our spirit-world mythology, our collective unconscious of the dead? I've been worrying about this since the ghostly age of thirteen. Now decades later I sit down to tackle it again, to make a final stab in the direction of corpuscular metaphysics. Or do I mean crepuscular? The metaphysics of departure.

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They were an ordinary family, really: odd mostly in their disembarking so soon. Every one of them left early, packing their bags and disliming into air, into thin air; not quite like the old 'baseless fabric' but near enough. They died singly or in pairs, suddenly or over a year, young, old and middle-aged. But in the end they didn't go far; I meet them on the road several times a week, and they still seem ordinary - typical, kind, well-meaning, chaotic, middle-class. There was trouble with the paperwork now and then - my father's will was unsigned when he died, for example. Not unwitnessed, just unsigned; Uncle Frank who was gay, and Uncle Jim,

who was also gay, signed as witnesses to a non-existent signature about a month before he died. He knew he was dying, otherwise he wouldn't have had them sign, and as it happens I was a witness to the scene, one of those single-frame memory shots from those last few weeks: my father seated, Uncle Frank leaning toward him in the act of passing back a document and pen - but when the will was read my father's classically beautiful signature was missing. Kids in Glasgow in the early part of the last century learned writing well, even in the Gorbals apparently.

Those uncles ... there were many. Several of them fought in WWII, landing like my father on D-Day on Juno Beach and getting shot, mined and medalled. They were infantry, sappers and two clergymen, the latter landing unarmed, with the dog-collar just visible beneath what passed for a bullet-proof vest. A brisk day of business for the clergy, D-Day. Somewhere there is a photograph of my Uncle Ray administering the last rites, his left hand on the shoulder of a dying man propped up against the overhanging bluff. This uncle, who was also my godfather, was 6'1", red-haired and a ready target: the dog-collar was an attraction for a certain kind of sniper; the kind of sniper who knows his own hours are numbered. But he got off lightly; a mere stone-deafness in one ear, from the guns.

They say Achilles in the darkness stirred ...

and Priam and his fifty sons / wake all amazed, and hear the guns / and shake for Troy again.ⁱ

I have a letter he wrote to me in 1981 - a wonderful letter. He died at home, very suddenly one night in 1985; I had an unfinished letter to him on my desk. He left me a little laquered box - Russian, old, beautiful. He had a dreamy voice, my Uncle: a sound like a great tolling bell, deep and melodic. Did I mention that he was gay? So was Achilles, some say.

Uncle John B. – now he was the sapper, laying communication lines in France and Belgium, often working at night; I can't imagine how. He too made it home, becoming a recording engineer for RCA Victor in Montreal, among other record companies. Recorded Oscar Peterson and friends. Wonderful stories, wonderful uncle. He too was gay.

Don't ask, don't tell.

Tales of war in the evening centred on the narrow escapes, the wonderful homemade liqueurs the Normandy farmers supplied the soldiers with, and the men and women of the French, Dutch and Belgian Resistance who brought them food, and hid them and fought alongside. The darker side of the trenches was almost never mentioned, at least when I was in the room. My father was wounded just before the battle of Falaise; a mine - I still have a piece of shrapnel they dug out of him. He woke up in hospital and couldn't feel a thing below the waist; he kept asking the nurses if his legs were still there. They were, but it was 3 weeks before he believed them. A rather sore point in the family, this not knowing whether your legs were still on: one of his uncles - Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders - had come home from WWI minus a leg, although like my father and unlike so many fellow Highlanders he was lucky to have survived at all. A photograph shows him sitting up in a hospital bed, holding a single rose. On the same album page he stands tall and proud with other Highlanders, wearing some extraordinary-looking tartan pants – I believe the technical term is 'trews'. Under the hospital photo my Aunt has written "My hero".

My father was patched up and slated for the Pacific, until the terrible bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. He was demobilized, came home and took whatever jobs he could find: actor, reporter, boxing coach, musician. Then he was called up for Korea, and without actual training or any higher education he became a psychological evaluator for men about to be sent overseas. Plenty of work for a

time: he remained in full-time employment until 1957, when he was replaced by a 'college boy'. Then his last job – though he continued as a reservist - was as a clerk in a shipping office: two-finger typing all day long. He might have gone crazy then, but if he did I didn't see it, even in those last few months. 1971: the Last Post, a flag-draped coffin and that slow descent into the grave. The Field of Honour, Pte Claire, Québec.

Was my Father bisexual? I wonder: a sizeable number of his friends who gathered in our house of an evening were gay. Soldiers, workers, artists; all representatives of that proud, injured, war-soaked generation.

Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp. 1939-45 Star. France and Germany Star. Defence Medal. War Medal 1939-45.

But don't ask, don't tell.

My mother served in Britain from 1940, when she turned eighteen, to 1944, when she was invalided out of the navy for damage to her eyesight. About the work itself she said very little. "Close work", which seemed to refer to poring over documents in bad light, perhaps at night - and once only, "radar". She was assigned to a ship, but rarely spoke of that either. Three medals, a pension, and afternotes of camaraderie and loss.

Her father was an air warden, out in the streets of London while bombs fell and sirens wailed, and her mother drove a canteen truck in the early hours of each morning, for the benefit of those labouring in the new piles of rubble where houses had crumpled over night. Long before the war when my grandmother was very young, she'd supported her family, her abandoned mother and two younger brothers, becoming the sole wage-earner at the age of fourteen when she'd joined what she thought was a breadline – a line of children like her desperate for food – that turned out to be a casting call. From then on she got job after job in London's theatre

world, in children's plays, chorus lines and pantomime. She saw both younger brothers through school, marrying someone who would help pay the bills when she was 19. That meant abandoning her lover, an actress in her early twenties who went on to a successful, if sometimes lonely, career. My grandmother came to live with us a few years after my father died; by then she was a serious alcoholic. She had what we called her 'falls', passing out, again and again. An almighty crash would shake the house, and someone would stay beside her on the floor until I came home since by then I was the only one who could lift her.

The saviours come not home tonight / Themselves they could not saveⁱⁱ

Don't ask, don't tell. And lie at school.

She was also Jewish, and the revelation of the camps after the war had their own effect. There were survivors from Auschwitz, but they committed suicide in the 70s – something I wasn't able to begin to decipher before reading Levi's *The Periodic Table*.

My grandfather's family – the airwarden's - now they were jolly. They were uproarious; even their letters from the front breathe life and humour. They had grown up in Northern England in the shadow of the Tabernacle, or 'Chapel' as they called it; as a child I took Chapel to be some kind of element or substance, a sort of antimony to Anglicanism. They recognized the hard-won virtues in it all, but nevertheless my grandfather, his siblings and his cousins were in full flight from it. Some of their breakout tales were alarming, others gloriously fun. One wanted to be a painter, so he was sent to learn drafting in an engineering firm. Northern practicality. He had two children, both sons; they were cheerful lads of many tales. Both were Battle of Britain pilots, and both were killed. My great-aunt Nyree managed to make a career for herself as an editor of a literary review; one that published a young T. S. Eliot and a slightly older A. E. Housman. She kept a 'salon' with another woman and they were rumoured to be lovers, and surely they were.

When the publisher of Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* with its 'Invert' heroine, a lesbian ambulance driver in WWI, was put on trial for obscenity, my great-aunt's name was on the list of volunteer witnesses for the defense.

For when I gaze at you / no voice is left me / But my tongue breaks / and a thin fire runs beneath my skin ...

And I seem to myself to die

Sappho ca. 600 BCE

Late in the day my great-aunt married an actor who routinely fell in love with younger actors on the London stage: a 'lavender marriage'. They were said to have been very happy. A second great-aunt, Nyree's sister Dora, lived with a woman for many years, until she died and left my great-aunt all she possessed. They were quite reclusive, I believe.

Ask me no more, for fear I should reply / Others have held their tongues, and so can I / Hundreds have died, and told no tale before ...ⁱⁱ

Alfred Edward Housman, scholar and poet, gay. Afraid of eyes averted on the street, tale-telling whispers, sudden knockings on the door, nightmare arrests and hushed convictions, harsh sentences – or compulsory hormone treatments, the unmaking of Alan Turing: WWII hero and saviour of Britain, code-breaker of Enigma. Dead at 41. *I, a stranger and afraid / In a world I had not made.ⁱⁱ*

Don't ask, don't tell.

And die alone.

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When I was born there were still plenty of survivors: family survivors, straight and gay and bi (at least I think some of them were straight), all fighters and rememberers. I and my second cousins were the only representatives of our generation. You learn to think in part like the adults; unless you spend a great deal

of time with other children, and I did not, your experiences always seem to have that extra spectral layer, that ghostly veil of another generation's thoughts and sighs. You watch them die, nurse them, bring gifts to hospitals, even scrub floors they can no longer reach, and all that time you can scarcely think. But after they die and after you start noticing things again, they're still there – cheerfully, perhaps, if you're very lucky, and I was lucky. Even when the last one died and I thought I was facing the world truly alone (*no family, not one; no family* and similar refrains) the last one was still there. Is that the meaning of those 'packing' dreams, when you follow them around strange rooms trying to have a conversation while they insist on filling suitcases? Always packing, never leaving? Finally one day on a deserted street you realize you have plenty of family: they're following you everywhere - sometimes a sobering thought. But they are good ghosts, not bad; the bad ghosts, as I also learned when I was young, turn out to be the living who stalk you in ghostly ways. When I was young the truly spectral world was the real world that waited in the streets at night, at least where I grew up. The contrast between 'gay', cheerful family and the decaying urban night with its predators and demons was indecipherable.

The centre of the family world was my parents' house, a duplex on what might have been a quiet, peaceful street if it hadn't been for the overpass three blocks to the west, the hospital two blocks south, the restaurant on the corner whose kitchen opened onto our street, and the furniture warehouse on the same block that exploded one night in the late 60s – the showroom window blowing out in spectacular sheets of flame reaching out towards my Aunt, who had just started to cross the street and was now frozen midway. A gentleman at the bus stop opposite tried shouting at her, then hauling her to safety when neither French nor English produced the desired effect. There was always an air of conspiracy about the place: illegal boarders in basements and second floors that we were told to lie about if any 'inspectors' – men with clipboards? - happened to ask us, as we played softball and street hockey between the parked cars, how many people lived in Mrs. So-and-so's

house, or in our own for that matter. The odd arrest on the street kept things lively – I witnessed three, but no doubt there were more. The problem was more in the area of arrests that should have been made, and weren't.

There were mysterious events connected to the porn cinema on the next block but one, and the bar just beyond the expressway where an exceedingly obvious pimp, a stranger-than-fiction caricature of the genre, held court, openly counting bills. One or two mafia killings – no arrests - and a local gun-running operation. But what the adults in my family were most aware of was the vigilantes, the on-our-way-way-home-from-drinking or the prostitute's bar or the porn cinema, individuals who constituted the greatest danger to them. As long as my father was alive and well, we were all protected; the former boxing-coach came home with bloodied knuckles now and then, and we'd all be safe for a time. At my mother's instigation my father tried to explain the bandaged knuckles to me; after some struggle he said: "They weren't nice men." Simple as that.

The problems faced by my uncles extended well beyond those streets they negotiated in pairs, rarely alone. After my father died my mother and a friend of hers would go on holiday to Mexico or Florida as paid guests of one of the gay couples: the two women would stroll down the beach in the evening, the uncles would walk behind and it would all look happily heterosexual. This was the price of a moonlight stroll for two men who'd lived together for 30 years. Who'd survived the war, and had yet to encounter AIDS. All brave, all gone now, at least where no one can hurt them.

Hundreds have died, and told no tale before:

Ask me no more, for fear I should reply -

How one was true and one was clean of stain

And one was braver than the heavens are high,

And one was fond of me: and all are slain.

Ask me no more, for fear I should reply.

A. E. Houseman, 1939

Outside the streets continued to be alien and hostile, the violence even escalating for a time in the 70s. Children on my street had to walk past the cinema every day our parents sent us to the grocery store beside it, and I had to walk by that restaurant kitchen door, open because of the heat, every day, increasingly running the gauntlet of aggressive heterosexual sneers; and then, at 14, having to outrun pursuers, and once having to stand and fight – lucky, all that boxing training from my father that he started me on when I was seven. Or rather not so much lucky as prescient on my father's side; he knew all about the neighbourhood. And yet it was better than the two he had grown up in. Progress.

And home was still home. While they all lived, the house was – well, *gay*: full of music, full of laughter and respect. I'd come home from school and there'd be elaborate dinner preparations, my father at the liquor store, my mother cooking casseroles and me instructed to answer the phone: "Uncle Frank says to tell you he's bringing champagne", or "Uncle Alan and Uncle John are bringing a new dish – begins with an s - can't pronounce it – but they'll be here soon". After my father died they were all so good to me. Graduation presents, chocolates on Valentine's Day, taking me out to dinner and writing me letters – all the things my father would have done.

And all of that remains. Persists in various realms and ghostly disguise.

... *And like this insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a rack behind ...?* I think not; the spirits are not actors, but are real, all real.

Word count: 3,095

ⁱ Rupert Brooke, 1887-1918. In: Edward Marsh, *Rupert Brooke: A Memoir*, NY: 1918.
Transcriptions of fragments from p. 2 and 14 of Brooke's notebook written on the way to Gallipoli.

ⁱⁱ A. E. Housman, *The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman*, London: 1939.