Blacktopped Shadows

It's the hill that always stops me when I leave the door at Kindrochet. Looking up, I usually pause and then turn right to walk the flat stretch by the river. That means going over the bridge and towards the old railway line, passing the plaque remembering the child, Hugh Broderick, drowned August 12, 1856. Turning left past the Grandtully Hotel is the path where the flower petals fall onto the old railway tracks. "In the shadows of the flowers," my mother used to say as we skipped ahead of her. That way, now partly blacktopped, was my favorite walk until two weeks ago when she died.

From her doorway, I wave goodbye to Father Colingwood, Mother's old friend who has just visited us here at her cottage by the bridge. He said how surprised he was to see the three of us–my brother, sister and I still alive. He remembered catching us boys when we were small in the kitchen with Julia strapped to the door as we practiced our knife throwing, just like we had seen performed the day before at the circus. Yes, we are all alive, her children.

This evening the hill does not dissuade me. I turn away from the bridge and my familiar path, seeing ahead the war memorial. At its base, a posy of poppies lies in homage from D-day. It was one week later, June thirteenth, that Mother died. I read the names--Walker, MacDuff, Ramsay, Murray, Robertson, Macdonald--down from the Celtic cross. They are some of the fifteen lost from this tiny village in the Great War. Below them are fewer, six crowning the base, six men downed in the next war, World War II, and three more names around the side, Menzies, Cameron and Shaw.

It reminds me of the headlines today, the attack at Glasgow airport, the suicide bombers striking on the first day of the school holidays. Doctors cum terrorists, takers of the Hippocratic oath shattering through that glass window, aiming at those children waiting with their gameboys, those children still alive mercifully, alive because the scientists botched up their experiment.

As I walk from the war memorial, Blackie calls his evening song from the hedge at Bendarroch–Bendarroch, owned by Volker and Jackie, German and English together in Scotland. Volker never mentions the War. The mauve rhododendrons bordering their Victorian gardens drip rain onto the coping, slurring its edges. The white of a roe deer disappears into the trees below Lyon Cottage, probably heading for some fresh rose bud. Rabbits scamper towards the golf course, having dined on lettuce from Mr. Ramsay's garden, the fake owl and plastic scarecrow notwithstanding. I avoid the pebbles in front of Mungo Conacher's gushet so as not to disturb his mother as I head for the seventh tee and the path to Pitlochry.

On second thought, I turn west to take in the whole golf course and the fifth hole at the back, Spion Kop, named after the Boer War battle both sides thought they had won and both sides thought they had lost. The mist and the hill played them both. War everywhere, man's bloody bootprint. A cock pheasant blurts out of the mist, calling for its mate in the fairway.

We buried Mother in a plain pine coffin in the churchyard at Logierat, down from the Pictish crosses and elaborate family plots, near the back and the corner of the cemetery where the river rumbles steadily beneath the plane tree. Even though she was not

Scottish, she said she belonged here as much as anywhere, in this valley where she had lived most of her married life, where she had watched her children grow, learning the wildflowers with them—from the bluebell to the blue speedwell and the paler forget-me-not with its yellow centers and the sweet buttercup said to glow under the chin of the child who loved butter.

She had resisted it at first, the smallness of the village and being everybody's business. It was the look she gave our father that I understood now, the look she gave him of complete surprise that she had fallen for all this when she fell for his face. One kiss and she was deep in this valley, now deeper as she lay at last in its Scottish soil, rich and rocky. That look I was only able to understand later, after I had married, the otherness of my own wife, a certain resistance to me, not antagonistic or angry but wonder at who I was, what she could ever be doing with the likes of me, how we had ever ended up together in the same room forever.

I turn back to the path, past the eighth tee and towards the woods, feeling in my pocket for the pieces of earth Mother had collected. We all hold on—some to a chin, to a glass, to a table, to a book, to another's knee. I release her pressed Philadelphus virginalis back to the earth, her bride's bloom decades dead of its orange blossom scent. I pass her friend Elizabeth's periwinkle house, fenced up between the sixth, seventh and eighth holes: Elizabeth, a widow of many years, having retired to Scotland after a life in Rhodesia in the fifties; her African story, a wonder to her grandchildren.

All Rhodesia gone into a Zimbabwe much destroyed by the insane Mugabe. I stop at the gate. What if the people just stopped, stopped going to work, stopped struggling to

find that last miniature bottle of cooking oil? If everyone just gave up, stopped, sat down, would the unquenchable fist of the tyrant begin to slip its well-oiled grasp? Just behind Elizabeth's house a gnarly oak heavy with a summer load of green looks itchy with all its Spanish moss, grumpy. I continue to climb into the woods.

Pulling the gate shut behind me, I look down to a copper carpet of beechnuts leading up the path feathered with light. A rookery sends out its black cawing flares. The steep bits come in starts. Through another gate the path grows rockier, slippery with moss. I keep my firm foot below. Before I see its flight, I hear the tawny owl calling in the long light with no help of darkness. A smooth pebble I let slip through my fingers back to the path. Where had mother picked up that one—the Lake District in her search of the romantics or maybe Combray from Swann's way?

The woods open up and I turn to the valley I had left, the river cutting deep into the green fields, church crosses challenging trees, whitewashed cottages permanent beside the slow motion of sheep and cows. I look across the mountains, my heels set in the hill. The sun is behind me this mild evening; the rain has stopped, letting the light through. The hills sink into my heart and hold me.

As I turn back upwards, I lean down for an acorn for my pocket, pulling a rose from an acorn like Mother? The Wizard's stone cottage graces the flat lull before the next rise. An old Harrovian, the Wizard turned away from his upper class background to become a dyker, a builder of walls, although there is not much of a wall around his own place. He fills his hearth and lungs with homegrown pot and rejects hardly a modest trust fund. The burn runs just to the right of his place, widening higher up for a wooden bridge that I

soon cross. It is muddy on the other side and braced with thistle. Soon I pass through the kissing gate and the open moor beckons, treeless.

We got the text message while we were in Normandy. “Mother’s had a stroke. Come back.” We had seen her before we left Scotland and she seemed in good health. She had suggested we go to Combray on our way to the Loire. My wife agreed even though she like me had never read Proust. I can still hear my mother warning, quoting, “How often is not the prospect of some future happiness sacrificed to one’s impatient insistence upon immediate gratification?” Patiently, we had driven across flat fields rising only intermittently to church steeples until we came to the old French steeple of St. Jacques. We passed through its cumbersome dark narthex to admire the carved wooden ceiling and to light a candle for Mother at the altar of the Virgin where Proust used to place his offerings of hawthorne. The little town of Illiers, or Combray, didn’t look to have changed much in a hundred years, Proust’s rite of the madeleine ensured.

Taking out a piece of shortbread, a pocket habit from childhood rambles, I let the butter and sugar dissolve on my tongue as I climb. The wind has run off with the rain. Only the bird chatter grows with the approaching night. I love the long summer nights of the Northern Kingdom. No wonder the cows and sheep, even the horses lie down by day with so little darkness for dozing.

It had been a comfort to see Blackie come out of the Normandy hedges, her song a restorative as she ‘glissandoed’ across the war graves, her orange beak high. We had

gone to Normandy for D-day to try to imagine it all. Our fathers had been in the war but not in France–my wife's father, an underwater demolitionist in the OSS during the Pacific war; my father, with the SAS parachuted into Yugoslavia to help the partisans.

The German cemetery at La Cambe in Normandy was secondhand. Originally, Americans were buried there until they were shipped home. Some of the Germans were mere children, fifteen year olds sent to man the front. Those flat unassuming graves rose every so often to five dark crosses, plain and melancholy. It is as if they gathered every seventh wave for worthiness.

In Bayeux, the great cross in the British cemetery was shaped as a sword. Surrounded by chestnuts and firs, each white gravestone had its own rose or permanent plant well-tended, remembered. Further west was the American cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer with its endless white crosses and Stars of David, all stretching diagonally to the Normandy cliffs, dramatic and tortuous dropping to the Atlantic and Omaha Beach, still cold and windlashed like then, unremitting against our faces.

My hand in my left pocket feels a leaf I had picked from a hedgerow in Normandy, those too-tall hedgerows tragically overlooked by the D-day invasion planners as they caught the gliders unawares. I drop my leaf into the quiet Scottish air. A quarter of an hour and I am across the moor and at the top. I turn left rather than go down towards Pitlochry. I will miss the standing stones but I soon discover a cairn. It's bad luck not to leave a stone on top of a cairn. I have another stone of Mother's left to place. A raven croaks its thick promise as the mist settles around me. Then out of the cairn I see Neil

Shaw, a Royal Engineer from the Great War followed by Donald MacKinnon with his OBE from WWII.

Sitting down I remember my grandfather saying, “Take the path from Strathtay to Pitlochry and turn left at the top. Along the way you will find a cairn.” I look at it again. Out comes Donald Ramsay of the Royal Highlanders, piping silently, dead at the battle of Spion Kop. What did they all go for? God, country, adventure, comraderie, fear of censure? I can hear the footfalls that lead up to me.

Then I see my grandfather in his kilt standing to attention, the mist whirling around his fine figure. I stand up, to attention too. Is it duty or Mother’s excess of love? Bewildered, I place her stone on the cairn and turn to follow the rise of the first faint star. The mists lower below the mountain peaks and the sheep and cows begin to laze westward, rows of white moving in the gloaming. I turn back to the cairn, the marker now empty of its inhabitants. The reminder remains, our duty to each other. The stone in my heart lifts and leads me down to the blacktopped shadows below.