

It's Not Even Past

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1

*"It takes the past a long time to happen"*

—Ken Kesey.

In human lives, events occur that seem, either at the time, or more usually in retrospect, some sort of demarcation: that was the first part of my life, it ended, and then this happened, and so the next part of my life began. The actual event may be as conventional a marker as a graduation, bar mitvah, confirmation, wedding; or it may be a painful, tearing split: the death of a loved one, parent, or longtime friend. Or the time before and the time after may be separated by an almost fatal illness recovered from, or by the dislocations of war, or by the ruination of homelands and the memories they are made of by urban sprawl or mountain-top removal. Much more rarely, I'd guess, the former part of the life and its latter part or parts may be divided as a result of unexpected great fortune: winning the lottery, being named a MacArthur fellow, getting fired from a lousy job. There are dozens of ways of slicing our lives into segments, separating one part of development or experience from the next, like chapters in a book, or like the biological stages of metamorphosis, or even, I suppose, by analogies to the various geological eras of the planet. "What's with that guy?" someone might say of a cigar-smoking, climate-change-denying red-faced curmudgeon. "Ah, he's still sort of Carboniferous in his thinking." But in some lives, the parts are not as disconnected as they might seem; cause and effect, for example, may come into play. I collected insects as a kid; now, as an adult writer, I still make whole poems about them, or essays, and may commit brief allusions in conversation to some odd and obscure beetle phenomenon. On the largest, cosmic scale, what we think we know as past and present may not be separate from one another at all, as in the claim of William Faulkner. "The past is never dead," he wrote. "It's not even past."

2

*There is a racial memory by which the past is continually accumulated and preserved.*

—*A New Philosophy* Henri Bergson

Even before my father bought a remote parcel of brushy up-land in Appalachian Ohio's Monroe County (which land and the people living around it became a major source of writing for me over a half-century) there was one place among many that particularly ignited my vivid youngster's imagination.

Think of the enthusiasm of the boyish Mark Twain for a life on the Mississippi; I had something of the same enthusiasm, though more precisely a strange, sometimes overwhelming nostalgia, for some dimly-remembered but nevertheless emotionally powerful place and its concurrent life that, as a boy, I thought I could glimpse from my grandparent's front porch in Steubenville.

118 Logan Street stood three houses up from the river; about thirty giant steps could get me from the sidewalk there to the riverbank, and it was a journey I took often in my youth. But I remember equally as vividly sitting rapt in one of the metal lawn chairs on the gritty wooden porch my grandmother scrubbed almost every day, seeing maybe a half-mile away as the crow flies, three hundred feet atop the cliffs Of West Virginia across from the paper mill, a lush green field that I could not look away from. In my imagination, I could feel the slope of that far piece of land beneath me, feel the breezes that must have blown at that height. Oddly enough, I do not remember seeing Steubenville from that visionary point; and it is this detail which hints at the deeper remembering I suspect was going on during those long reveries.

James Cavanaugh Hague, my grandfather, and Helen Madigan, my grandmother, were descendants of Irish immigrants to Steubenville, their ancestors' earliest arrivals, as far as we can tell, predating the mass exodus during the Great Hunger of the late 1840s. Despite there being only the thinnest shreds of information regarding our families in Ireland, one story survived. My Uncle Jack showed me a handwritten letter that said his great-grandmother, (this would be my great-great grandmother) Margaret Cavanaugh, came over as an infant on a sailing ship in the late 1830s. She was fed fresh goat's milk during the voyage, and the ladle from which it was gathered and with which it was served had supposedly still been in the family long enough for him to have seen it as a boy.

I don't know: I never saw such a thing, nor did any of Jack's five kids, my Hague cousins, though I do have great-grandfather Richard's cobbler's stand and hammer. But the point is that the field high atop the West Virginia cliff, unfenced, sloping steeply downward toward the edge, I did see, as if again, fifty years later. In May of 2015, my wife and I stood at the edge of the Cliffs of Moher on Ireland's southwest coast, dizzied not only with the beauty and height and sheer drop of them, but, for me, by an overwhelming sensation of *déjà vu*. Surely, somewhere in my DNA, or in the collective unconscious, whatever you want to call it, I was at a familiar place. That high, steep-edged West Virginia field of my boyhood was here; the Cliffs of Moher were back there, across the Atlantic Ocean and the Appalachian mountains and the Ohio River a half-century before, in Steubenville.

If this were the only such incident of such strong "racial memory," as a Jungian term names it, to strike me in my boyhood, I could write it off as just some sort of odd psychological phenomenon, the result of an over-active imagination working on nebulous speculations, perhaps even the fever-dreams during my boyhood bout with mononucleosis. But it isn't the only occurrence.

3

*"Life can only be understood backwards..."*

— [Søren Kierkegaard](#)

When I was about ten, my father built a concrete block shed, very solid, in our tiny backyard. A great pile of excavated soil lay next to where he'd dug the footers for the foundation. After the concrete was poured, and the trenches for the footers back-filled, the level grassless spot where the pile had been drew me to develop a project that lasted the rest of the season.

At first, I conceived of the excavation I began as a foxhole. However inaccurately or helter-skelterly, boys my age knew that our fathers had been at war not long ago, and the notion of foxhole, I suppose, enabled us to imagine fairly concretely a part of that experience. I dug with a short-handled shovel, as, I imagined, my father had dug in New Guinea, Okinawa, the Philippines. I piled the soil to one side like a berm. At last a crater-like hole, about a yard wide at its top and just as deep, flooded with sunlight in the sweaty afternoon.

But something was not right: this naked hole seemed unfinished; to slide down into it and just sit there created nothing in the imagination—no real sense of danger, no breathless battle fatigue, no thrill of combat, shells screaming overhead, no crazed enemy shouting *banzai* and hurtling atop me, his bayonet jabbing at my ribs, blood in his eyes, and haunting my nightmares for decades after, as it had been for my post-traumatic-stress-disordered father.

One day, I raided the pile of weathered boards dad had salvaged from a stricken barn out in the country and with which he planned to roof the shed. I dragged four or five to the hole and lay them over it; shoved tightly together, they looked like a trap door. I pushed a board aside at one end and slid through the gap into the clayey darkness. Then, crouched inside, I shifted the board from below back into place, extinguishing the light.

This was more like it. I sat there, a tiny boy hidden in a board-covered hole in a backyard not far from an abandoned stripmine, not far from the hissing steel mills just over the hill, not far from the omnivorous river that vomited everything it carried into the sea—trees, broken dolls, wrecked boats—excepting only the swollen remains of the girlfriend I was to lose to it at the end of the next part of my life. In that backyard hole's dank enveloping, still a boy unacquainted with the darker chapters of life, I felt a strange, earthy safeness.

It was at least two decades later that I first learned about the scalpeen, a desperate temporary shelter built by displaced and starving rural Irish run out of their cottages and off the land by the English. The scalpeen, or scalp, was a shelter often constructed by laying sticks or branches over nothing more than a roadside ditch, a hole along the way. On that last day of the first part of my life I was re-enacting, though in full ignorance of it, the experience of my ancestors. In a kind of combined fore-knowledge and ancestral memory of the meanness, violence, and injustice of the world, I huddled, as my ancestors had, though in a womb-like darkness, calm, unformed and uninformed, not knowing I was soon to be delivered into the brilliant blast of light which is the knowledge of evil.

Through the study of history, we make the past usable, turning handfuls of raw facts into meaningful narratives.

—*Writing Between the Past and the Present*, Laura F. Edwards

This ending of what I might call the first part of my life for six decades (though I have recalled it now and again during those nearly sixty years) had been held, undeveloped, almost entirely unexamined; for all intents and purposes, unlived, if living teaches us anything. Is it possible that many of our experiences, though vividly remembered, (even inherited from a distant ancestral past, as far away and as long ago as that archetypal galactic past of *Star Wars*)—is it possible that such experiences have yet to be smelted into what we might dare call self-knowledge, let alone wisdom? Is it necessary to write (or dance, or draw, or compose) about, say, such boyhood memories as we recount here in order to discover (communicate, construct, compose, complete) their meaning?

Here, near the end of some part of my life, (I approach the Biblical three score and ten), while at the same time headed inevitably— but not too quickly, I hope—toward another significant hole in the ground, I am pretty sure it is so. Art is what completes us; it is one way we have of recovering and understanding what seemed lost to time.

Our past is not past. In the case of this writer, at least, as long as there's more to be uncovered and remembered, it's not even finished.