

Among the Missing: Family and War

by David Ackley

3.

Between the Lines

Eugene and his fellow doughboys came into the war and onto the Western Front late, having to infer what had gone before from the debris of three years of mayhem. The picture was different from that given by the triumphant headlines back home; if there'd been triumphs they'd sunk into the ubiquitous mud, where triumph and debacle were indistinguishable.

What Eugene saw:

The Western Front, some 400 miles of paired trenches divided by a strip of gutted countryside that stretched from the North Atlantic through three or four countries to the mountains of the Jura

A dun landscape, uninhabitable unless seven foot deep, three or four foot wide, mud-bottomed roofless trenches, can be considered habitation. Men share quarters with rats, their clothes with lice. Time in the perennially dank trenches, will birth an aversion to the open air, a preference for roofed quarters and small overheated rooms. Within the zone of fire, farmhouses, churches, villages, silos, chicken coops, cow barns considered potential sources of enemy observation and cover had been obliterated by artillery and dissolved into the generic mud.

...and then came the battle of the Somme, so fierce and so mired in miles of mud that thousands of bodies were irrecoverable.

There is no sign of life on the horizon and a thousand signs of death. Not a blade of grass, not an insect. Hideous landscapes...everything unnatural, broken, blasted, the distortion of the dead, whose un-buriable bodies sit outside dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth...and a week later to come

back and find them sitting there in a motionless group, THAT is what saps the soldierly spirit...

Mud: the earth between and well back of the trenches, everything in artillery range gouged, exploded, inverted, blown up and resettled, all greenery of blade, stalk, leaf or bud shredded into a sterile mulch, the only trace of the color, the dark scum of algae in puddled shell craters.

Rain, and hidden springs, once drinking water for livestock and people and irrigation for crops, seed only more mud, ubiquitous, sucking, calf-deep mud, mud the antagonist : cold, foot rotting sucking mud, grasping every step toward or away from the machine guns; drowning mud, in which the fallen bubble and froth away their lives.

Often when you moved in the trenches you trod and slipped on rotting flesh.

Neither the eye, nor the mind find holds on this sterile, deathly, indefinite terrain unlike anywhere ever seen before or felt before or produced before in the memory of the race.

And so, when they're pulled off the line, marched back behind the lines where houses, damaged but habitable, just barely, begin to appear, where there are fields, animals, crops, the front disappears from memory and few are able to say with any certainty what sort of place they've just left; and when they return to the front after a week or two of relief in places of shelter, of roofed houses, churches, wine shops and fruit and vegetable markets (Oranges!) even taverns and inns, and the front re-emerges before their eyes there will be the same initial unreeling shock of a world utterly purged of life, bereft of bird song, barking of dogs, the murmur of running water, wind through trees, peal of bells, or high human voices, leaving intermittent long silences punctuated by the snap of small arms and the rollicking boom of high explosives.

And of course, the presence of decomposing corpses, and severed limbs, blood, chemical poisons, fuel residues, settled mustard and chlorine gasses, shredded and intact coils of barbed wire and some billions of artillery shell fragments, dented and punctured helmets,

decaying and shredded love letters, spent lead bullets, copper casings, brass shell casings, bone and skull splinters, wedding rings, photographs of orphaned children, unexploded artillery rounds, bombs, mines, and grenades, gold-filled teeth, coins of several nations, in denominations of pounds, francs, lira and marks, pens and pencil stubs, dog tags detached from the original, subsequently nameless wearer, horse-shoes and mule shoes with attached hooves and fetlocks, blank aerograms, shredded bibles, some with missing pages deposited elsewhere as bum-wipe, matches, damp cigarettes, pipe tobacco and broken corn-cob, meershaum and walnut pipes, countless cartridge belts and pouches, packs, pistols, Springfield, Mauser and Enfield rifles, bayonets, punctured canteens, pocket flasks, leather and knit gloves containing intact fingers, boots, puttees, buttons by the cartload, shirts, tunics, capes, kepees, trousers, wrapped, canned or half-digested meats and biscuits, cheeses, liquids being bile, urine, excreta normally drained in the course of exsanguination before burial (each item the metonymy of a line of descent, family, lived life, entire person, un-lived possibilities) these the interred strata and occasional outcrop forming the flattened, dun, pocked, riddled and gouged soil of The Western Front.

In '17 the evidence suggested the generals were content to go on presiding over the indiscriminate slaughter of both foe and their own until the last enemy fell, allowing the few exhausted survivors to claim victory. The men on the line and "the folks back home," seemed of a different mind. Having lost the better part of a generation of young men, most of them in a few battles like the Somme, the Brits were said to have been "bled white." The French army had mutinied and refused any longer to leave their own trenches. The German army had had recent successes, worth a mile or two of geography, but had largely exhausted itself in the effort. At home, in Germany, revolution and starvation were spreading.

Following their own revolution, the Russians had bailed, the winning bolsheviks signing a separate peace, leaving their French and British allies in the lurch.

In both geography and time, the war on the western front when Eugene arrived had frozen in place.

No-man's land between the trenches belonged to the machine guns and their gunners. Their raking fire, yes raked like closely spaced tines those with the temerity to come into range; they harrowed and files of men fell. Patient snipers waited still for hours, to snip an incautious hand or ear or rifle. But the world of the trenches largely belonged to the artillery, whose concussive clustered detonations could descend without warning like a summer storm from the grey sky. Rounds which overshot made a rythmic shushing as they passed overhead. Barrages couldn't be described, much less written about to Lela. They might last for seconds or minutes or hours that seemed like days, blunting the senses to leave them deafened, blinded, dumb except for some soundless screaming, unless a great heave of earth flopped over you, mud, floor boards, stones, etc heavily, useful only if you were killed, otherwise a wet encumbrance from which you must flounder and rise or be pulled like a swamp creature, slick, mud-daubed and spitting dirt amid the stunned silence and the overpowering stench from myriad released sphincters.

For the American doughboys the only way home led through the enemy trenches and the only escape from a hell which threatened to become eternal , was over the top to attack with a ferocity fueled by disgust with this moment and this non-place and homesickness and nostalgia for the places they'd left.

4.

Planting

That spring, around the same time as Eugene's letter arrived, twisting Lela's heart in a knot at the quietly desparate measure it

provoked, Fred had already begun work on his vegetable garden, expanding the one he had been cultivating for years, partly in response to the national move to "increase food production," so that the nation's resources could now be more fully directed to the support of the boys in the trenches.

And with you, Philip, at his feet, as he seeded, and raked in his overalls, after a full day at the waterworks, he'd work away on his bean hills, and poles, his tomatoes, his squash and pumpkin hills and the long mounds of potatoes stretching across what was formerly lawn. You waddled between rows poking here and there with a stick, and at times he'd have to nudge you a little with a knee, when you threatened a shoot or seedling, but gently, as was his way, his tenderness more a physical thing than one of words; and when he'd pick you up in one strong arm, and turn toward your mother, Lela, seated on the porch in her rocker, you'd have no idea of the look that passed between them and all it might contain of meaning and particular history of that moment and its past nor that it included you, and them, and the others, and far away, far pole to their stretched and encompassing hearts, your brother Eugene.

Inch by inch, that long summer of the war, when the doughboys were increasingly at the front of the action, American casualties rising, the list of them on the Telegraph's front page lengthening by the day, the tendrils of the bean shoots wound higher on the poles Fred had set a few feet apart, steeping upward into the air above the poletips. Tomatoes fattened from green hard knobs to globes streaked with red and orange. In the potato hills, his long workman's fingers probed into the black, fecund soil and found the sweet new spuds, slightly larger than marbles, which he selectively detached from the roots, to be steamed along with the baby new peas and eaten drenched in butter from the farmer who on his horse-drawn wagon delivered it with their milk bottles.

"The peas in your father's garden are coming in now, so sweet; we had them with the new potatoes for Sunday dinner." She pauses, to think; should she even write this to Gene? She has to trust it won't make him feel worse, longing to be back with them at the family

table, tasting the sweet, baby peas, the new potatoes. But she remembers his own words to her “ ...what I spend half my time, a-thinkin' on...” and tries to let the words come that will say what he wants to taste, and feel, and see.

Perhaps some elements of victory, after all, grew in Fred's garden and “all those things” for:

“ ... if victory shall be achieved [it] will mean safety and permanence of all that we hold dear.”

August 24, 1918

Nashua Telegraph P. 1: **BRAY HAS FALLEN ... BRITISH ADVANCE 4 MILES ON A TWELVE MILE FRONT**

BRITISH CONTINUE THEIR VICTORIOUS SMASH INTO HUN LINES.

ITEM: Elsewhere on the Western Front with Eugene, were an Austrian common soldier, another artillery runner, Cpl. Adolph Hitler, who would be wounded in action, hospitalized for the humiliating end of his war; and on the American side, Lt. Colonel Douglas MacArthur, who would receive the Silver Star, for valor in action, taking his command on a victorious charge through German lines in the closing campaign that would lead to Germany's capitulation, and abject defeat. And in the Vosges Mountains, a Captain Harry Truman, commanding an artillery battery of boys from his native Missouri, who would say interestingly of his service, “My whole political career is based on my war service and war associates,” a proposition that would apply to his German counterpart as well.

PRIZES AWARDED FOR WAR GARDENS

“ First Prize of the silver cup among 70 entrants was awarded to F. R. Ackley...”

Mr. Ackley has been gardening on his land for the past ten years, much as the first settlers did."

A clipping to enclose in a fall letter to Eugene, one of the last, with victory in sight, she'd have to send. She'd can the tomatoes, pickle the cucumbers, brine the cabbage for sauerkraut, despite the unfortunate connotation. She and the girls would shell navy beans in hopes of a homecoming for Gene to include that most traditional of New England dishes, though he might arrive having sworn to never again: eat beans, sleep under the open sky, obey without question an order. And to never speak to them at all of what he had lived through.

5.

Homecoming

You're playing on the screened porch, and hear, breaching the usual somber silence of the house, raised, even joyous voices, a relative commotion. The porch door opens and a figure appears, a giant, dressed all in olive drab: but you sense friend and are unafraid, in your already calm, not particularly fearful nature.

Hey little brother, it's me, Eugene! Hoisted up almost to the ceiling, you look down into the laughing face, at the fascinating broad brimmed hat, which shortly will descend over your ears.

Take that off him, Eugene, don't give him any ideas, just when we've got you home, safe and sound.

Ah, mother. Ain't you heard? We just won the war that's going to end them all.

6.

Friday Supper: Baked Beans, Cod Cakes, and Brown Bread

One family tradition, common enough among New Englanders, was the Friday night supper of Baked beans, Cod Cakes, and brown bread. Why Friday night, always? Who knows? As with a lot of traditions, it just was, and seems always have been so. (What is family tradition, anyway, come to that? A lifeline we throw to our forebears, to haul them up, if only briefly, from oblivion ?) The recipe for the beans is kept on an index card in a small metal box covered with painted daisies of similar cards containing sometimes faded handwritten recipes. Reading them, as with letters from the days, not really that long ago, when people actually wrote to each other "by hand," brings the person closer.

I've always liked baked beans; probably you did too. Perhaps it began with our mothers, Lela—my grandmother--in your case, Dot in mine, putting spoon to our curious infant lips. A scent rounded and rich, a malty, deep smell that went with the nameless color and these pebbly but soft, easily gummed objects, that mashed on the tongue gave up the sweet of molasses, edged with the slight tang of mustard and the viscous scent-taste-feel of stewed salt pork all melted together in its six hours or more in the oven... But what did we know or care about any of that? We tasted and found it good! And that was that forever.

The recipe was passed down to Lela by her mother, and its ingredients, cooking, timing and usual accompaniments convey something of our history-- back at least to Cutler, Maine on the North Atlantic coast, and who knows how many generations of word of mouth or handwritten recipes descending mother to daughter, among Lela's Dennisons. The white beans, so easily grown, dried, stored, transported that after miles and years at sea, my seaman forebears might have nearly mutinied when, boiled, they surfaced yet again from the galley pots.

Molasses aside from rum, was the preferred medium for shipping sugar in centuries past: almost black, barely pourable, malty in great wooden barrels. In 1919 such quantities were still in use that when an enormous vat of it burst in Boston, twenty one people were killed along with several horses in the mammoth flood of sweet goop

down the streets of the North end. For years after, on hot summer days residents could still smell molasses bubbling up from the substrata. The event doesn't appear to have suppressed the taste for baked beans. Back in Cutler the salt pork would have come from hogs fattened and slaughtered by George Ackley, whenever he was ashore on the saltwater farm where his son, my grandfather Fred, was raised.

And so Friday nights, at home in Nashua with Lela at the far end of the table and Fred at the head; you, now four years old; my father Harry, nine; and the full grown sisters, Ruth ,Olive, Jeanette along either side. And now, in early winter of that year, in his uniform shirt, and matching green wool trousers, Eugene, safely back from the front.

In front of Fred would be a brown earthenware pot with two rudimentary handles, the lower half dark brown the upper beige, with a small brown lid, which when lifted, released a steam of the rich compounded smells. And on the table, a platter of cod cakes, crusted and golden; and dark brown bread steamed in its own can. Back in Cutler, the cod, fresh or salted, would have come ashore in wooden dories manned by George, or his father James, or other Ackley seamen going all the way back to Benajah Ackley Jr. in 1751 the first of our line to settle along the Gulf of Maine where Cod was so plentiful it was called the fish that built New England.

The smell of beans, baking, fill the house with their redolence a nostalgic aroma to breath across and fill the gap between then and now that was the time of the war. Lela smiles, a slightly worried smile across the table at her son, her first-born come home.

Who jokes with his sisters across the table about the crowds of boys he'll have to run off the steps. They laugh and tease back, and slowly are talked into the notion that he is after all no different than the sturdy boy they'd tearfully sent off from the station with his father's cool farewell and their tears, just a year before. That was the daunting unanswered question, had the war changed him. And if so how?

The bean pot is set in front of Fred, he scoops helpings onto the plates and passes them around the table. Grace is said, a prayer of thanks for all being at table, together. In the trenches the smell of beans was intermingled with the sweetish smell of the scorched unburied flesh, ripening nearby. The soldier fed himself, forcing the food down past the urge to expell it, the incipient nausea, feeding his body as necessary maintenance of a tool, the same way he cleaned and oiled his Springfield rifle. Now, he looks up from his plate, helplessly smiling at the expectant faces of his own people: they want him back so much, want him to enjoy all this again: What can he say?

Might's well be eatin' maggots...

As close as they all are, within himself the returned soldier stands on a far shore across the river of mud that was the Western Front, carrying all that frenzy and no more meaning than the river of molasses which once assailed the Boston streets, and left the sweet, unurgeable stench of its passing.

The question hovers, a shadow over the uncertainly festive meal, but in their heart of hearts, each knows the answer, the war having infiltrated not only Eugene's but all their lives for the past year and more. They have all been changed by it. It had gone from unlikely abstraction to impossibly total fact; once lodged, it will linger, and afterwards each will read life as sufferers of a chronic illness for symptoms of its return.

