Edward in April: An Unwritten Poem

"I never understood quite what was meant by God."

~ a note for an unwritten poem, from the last diary entries of

Edward Thomas, killed in action, April 9, 1917, Arras, France

"Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon"

~ Edward Thomas, "Rain"

I never understood quite what was meant by God.

There was a Face I strove too hard to see, I think,

Whose image my own was made in. His didn't blink,

Though, or flush like my schoolboy face with breath and blood,

Or idly entertain itself by pulling odd  
Expressions, or snort so loud with laughter the drink

Spilled out its nose. Or—not that I could picture—wink.

It smiled, or it glared. It looked distantly sad.

And what child needs such gods? Only when I gave up

On him, to footsore through a solitary world—

Of clouds and willow-herbs—where blackbirds sang, and curled

Dipped bills of curlews dimpled the mud to sup—

Did Ghosts of him rise from the dirt hollows. Welsh bogs

Lovely with mist hooted an orison of frogs.

A Flanders rainfall, silvering the pitted mud,

Flushed a field's barbed lines with blazons of poppies' blood.

First published in *Poetry Virginia*. I'm fond of the poetry of Edward Thomas, and I wish he had lived long enough to write this poem himself. I thank him for the single line he did leave us with, and I apologize for the ways I may have misrepresented him by building it into a lyric poem of my own.

Ray's Fig Trees

My father planted this fig tree.

25 years ago, the last time my folks visited.

The flight back got too much for them—missed connections,

no sleep, lost luggage. And I put in a sapling plum,

with dad’s help, but that one's died since.

I thought the fig was dying too,

but on the phone, my dad just laughed.

*The day that fig tree dies is the day that* I *die.*

We scattered the ash of him five years ago, but his fig tree

is healthier than ever—we had some pines culled,

and it's bulling into the new light.

I'm 70 myself now, younger than he was then,

but weeding around it today, spraying the poison ivy,

bending, uprooting, there's wheeze in my breath, there's wince

in my bones; I've begun, just this year, to feel old.

*Ray,* I was calling him by that visit,

adult to adult. As we had all

begun to: his children; his grandchildren. And all of us

had Ray's fig-trees: wherever we settled, he planted cuttings.

The original shaded the house where I grew up;

it's the first one gone, now: the new owners

uprooted his whole orchard. Perhaps,

after we're gone, his children and his grandchildren,

whoever comes after us will do the same to ours.

He had to smuggle our cutting into America,

in a suitcase that got lost on the trip back.

Today, a new green, thumb-slim limb

bows low and bobbles,

as I finger two spring nubs, and uncover two others,

criss-crowned with leaves—four fat baby syconia.

The best crop we've had in years, I'm betting.

*Well, Ray,* I tell his tree, *I guess you're not dead yet.*

Originally published in STREETLIGHT MAGAZINE*.* I rarely invent much of anything when I write about my family, although there are a few poetic exceptions.

A Kiss

When Walt Whitman was a Brooklyn imp of five, a big person lifted him in the air and kissed him. To the imp this was bigness as usual, but the boy Walt became would feel, somehow, anointed—because from such a man, what might such a kiss signify?

The morning, till then, had been barbarous. He had been brought with a hullabaloo of other imps to a big hole in the ground, rough-dug and rubble-strewn, where they were paid no attention and left free to frolic, when this big person rode in on a fine horse. And everyone got all *behave yourself*, and *make way for the General.* The collective bignesses bustled to hoist the clambering urchins to perches less hazardous and clamorous, where they were now to be still and proper.

It was the General himself who plucked Walt from that melee; who set him where he belonged;

who placed, with a kiss, his seal on him.

The boy Walt took stock of the facts. What was being dug was a public library, intended to serve such as the imps: the soon-to-be literate young. The General was the Marquis de Lafayette, come to lay its cornerstone. Along with which, to kiss imp Walt.

His smell against Walt's face had been an odd one: spiced and foreign, yet not unpleasant. The tickle of his bristles had felt, somehow, cozy. Like his father's kiss—but ritual. It had been, Walt decided, a kiss of consecration. To solemnize *what*? Would even the Marquis know?

It was in Brooklyn, employed as an office boy, that Walt learned to read. He *revel'd* (his words) *in romance-reading of all kinds*. So while the kiss might yet mean many things; might have marked him for future greatness, fit for the General's mantle: a champion of democracy and liberty—a personage as large, perhaps, as to be found in novels­—at which Walt chuckled, for he was only ten—more likely, it was to baptize him as a reader: *Child, this library* *is for you. Grow wise in the use of it!*

A call he vowed to heed! Here was a new volume of Sir Walter Scott's. He weighed it in his hand for a moment, scrupulous in his faith's observances. First, he must enter with a prepared spirit, for what lay bound by it was a promise: of lands where anything was possible, and of lives larger than he could yet conceive.

He turned its first, crisp, delicately musked pages; he waited for them to yawp into a world.

First published in *Endlessly Rocking*, an anthology of pieces written in tribute to Walt Whitman. I've written a lot of these biographical vignette pieces in the last few years. I may (and do) imagine myself into my subject's skin, and fancifully interpret, but I try also to stick to the known facts.

A November Prayer

Divest him of everything that is bluster:

of the proofs he trumpets without naming;

of the beautiful plans he promises and can't muster;

denude him of the sycophants who swell   
the echo chamber of his sneers, and of his blaming,

tolling his wild boasts as their temple bell.

Unvarnish his every lie, Lord, of its Big Man luster—

to double talk, doubled down on—the hard sell

of nothing multiplied by nothing, which is nothing—

scrub his every orifice of the murderous whiny

insinuations with which he fans his minions' loathing—

until lo! Stripped of the smoke blowing from his heinie,

the man who would be emperor has no clothing;

and behold, his wiener is tiny.

First published by RIGOROUS in 2021, I believe under the title “Because He Just Won’t Go Away.” Which I expected not to stay apt. By the time *Sort By Title* turns into a book, perhaps it will be an amusing curiosity. Perhaps it will seem so dated in its concerns that I’ll cut it. One can only hope.