

From "One of: A Family Miscellany"

by David Ackley

1. A Letter from the Front

In 1917 my grandparents, Fred and Lela (nee' Dennison) Ackley, had seen Eugene, the first of their three sons, off to their first war. Eugene was nineteen, the eldest of six children in all: in order of birth, Eugene (b.1898); Ruth (b. ca 1900); Jeanette (b. 190?); Olive (1906); my father, Harry (b. 1910); Philip (b.1915). My grandparents had both grown up on the coast of Maine, a few miles from the Roosevelt's Campobello Island estate across the border in New Brunswick. But after they'd married and had Eugene, they migrated to northern Massachusetts near the turn of the century, in search of a life of greater prosperity and comfort than could be harrowed, hacked or netted from the rocky isthmus between the sea of the great Northern forests and the cold waters of the North Atlantic that had sustained generations of our forebears. Sometime around 1908 they resettled in the city of Nashua, in southern New Hampshire.

Nashua has always been pleased to call itself a city, but it is—or was at the time—an oversized town, intimate in scale, where neighbors worked together in the cotton mills along the Nashua River that wound across the lower stretch of its one-horse Main Street, a place both of backstreet tenements and white clapboard houses with green or black shutters, and an abundance of greenery: lawns, privet and lilac and forsythia, and the elm trees, all missing now, that once overarched and dappled the streets with the play of their leaves and the light.

In Nashua, my grandfather worked for the Pennichuck Water Works; after some years he would become Superintendent, the keeper of "their brooks, ponds and springs," the source of the city's pure water. Brooks, ponds, springs; rivers—the source of Nashua's industrial life; oceans; Antarctic sea ice; the dirty green Pacific; the

icy Atlantic around my and my children's feet; everywhere I see water, as if I am reading our family history through its nourishing, threatening, transfiguring scrim. Ripples. The tumbling waves of the North Atlantic, rising and crashing down on the rock of Maine, the unity, the arc, the break and the white foam. The drawing back into some greater whole beyond thinking or understanding.

In 1917, the teen-aged Eugene had been sent across the Atlantic to fight in France with Battery F of the 102nd Field Artillery, and wrote the following letter to his mother, Lela—one which she submitted to the personals column of the local paper, The Nashua Telegraph, where it appeared on May 25, 1918:

“Dearest Mother,

I am well and sound of limb as yet. We are living, or existing, fairly comfortably. I got your letter dated March 17th; on that day I was attending a St. Patrick's social with the 104th Infantry. I have also got two letters from you, enclosing one of Olive's. She writes quite a letter. But if [Herbert] Hoover could see the paper she wastes...

Gene's letter goes on with a few details of life at the front, no mention of great hardship, shelling, bloodshed or fear, except for a quick and casual account of a friend who'd had his rifle shot from his hands:

“Guess it gave him quite a shock. It would anybody,” Gene comments, with admirable understatement. And then, in what I think is the heart of the letter, there's this untitled verse:

“My Dad just aint the letter-writin' kind—
He'd rather let the women see to that
He's got a mess of troubles on his mind,
But likes to keep them underneath his hat.

...

When I set out from Nashua last July,

He didn't cry the way my sisters did,
He jest shook hands and says, 'Well, boy, Goodbye,'
He's got his feelin's but he keeps em hid.

And so when Mother writes of all the
things
I spend half my time a-thinkin'
of.
There's one short line that every letter
brings.
"Father will write, and in the meantime sends his
Love."

'Father will write'—well, someday, praps he will.
There's lots of funny prophecies come true
But if he just keeps promising to still,
I'll understand, and Dad'll know I do.

How do you like that? I think it describes Dad to a 'T' and his
hatred of writing letters."

...

*A few more lines of prose let leak through some of the
circumstances, self-censored to filter out the worst.*

"The Boche are kind of busy, but they are the least of our
troubles... We have had many scraps but finished fine...The last
holiday will be long remembered by the [*Howitzer*] Battery boys,
and in fact that whole week. I am a messenger now on the front. [*A
'runner,' in other words charged with hand-carrying messages
between the rear and the trenches; an inviting target. Ed.*] It is
pretty fair as jobs on the front go.

Don't worry about me but let me do that for you.

Your loving son,
Eugene"

But I keep coming back to that poem...

Few words have survived from my people; perhaps, because, like my grandfather, they were simply reticent people. There is a temptation to stretch the few I have over their unwritten histories, like a silken Christos fabrication that reveals the hidden form of the rambling and disconnected landscape it seems merely to decorate. But discounting that tendency, there is detectable here, given the context—a son at war, a father who avoids writing—a suggestion, which comes through the jokey manner of Gene's poem, of the need to put a good face on an intolerable circumstance that would drain the emotional reserves of any nineteen year old.

To me, years after, my grandfather was far from the distant, stoical man, who sends his first-born off to war with a handshake and a *Goodbye, Boy*. Fear suppressed can be mistaken for love withheld; perhaps Fred didn't want to distract and endanger him: Let the boy worry about his life, not their feelings. But that was a mistake, because in the trenches solace lay with the letters and packages from home, assuring that "...all the things I spend half my time thinking of."—the cedar shingled house, the streets overhung with elms, the green vales of Greeley Park, the faces at the station, Ruth, Olive, Lela streaming with tears—remain as they were. The nightmare landscape around him threatens to consume the other, as if both couldn't possibly occupy the same reality. Could these be his mother and Philip? Only words from home can affirm not just well-being but their--the city's, the now far-off country's—continuance, as a child waking from a bad dream tip-toes fearfully into his parents' bedroom to confirm that they've not been snatched away into the awful night.

It is notable that Gene chooses to write more of what is absent than what lies before his eyes. The stripped, over-turned, barren land of the Western Front was formless, contentless—the fields denuded of wheat or clover, the living trees replaced by leafless, splintered stumps, all the luminous greens of home reduced to a few tones of dun, denying purchase to the eye and the mind. In a letter

to his own mother from the front, Wilfred Owen described the scene: "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..." It was beyond the look of death, it was the utter absence of life, it was nothingness incarnate. No wonder Gene tries to occupy "more than half his thoughts," with the absent familiars of home and only hints at what is before his eyes.

For her part, my grandmother, having hinted herself to distraction, would have found Fred's indifference intolerable: no caring father could want his last words to his son to be, "Goodbye, boy." But publishing Eugene's tenderly bitter little poem would have been hard for her, a last resort. It would cut her husband deeply. It is the first instance, but not the last, of how war over the years would invade our family, as if its sappers were digging right to the foundations of the little weathered shingle house on Columbia Avenue only a few years after the family had settled in, the first son, Eugene, not even out of his teens, yearning for words of home, thousands of miles across the sea at the front, and his little brother Philip, just two years old, toddling through its cozy safe rooms.

(Not just family history connects these two sons. Somewhere near Eugene on the western front, an authentic American military hero who will be met again, a Colonel Douglas C. MacArthur, writes to his own mother of the glories of this, his first war.)

From afar, from within, from the past and the future, the war attacks us.

I wonder what transpired at the kitchen table as Fred unfolded the morning paper, and knowing Lela's propensity for reporting every scrap of family news, went unsuspectingly to the personals page, and the letter that was really addressed to him. Across from him Lela pretends to sip her tea in an agony of apprehension, for

anyway this cuts there will be pain—for Eugene if his plea is ignored, for Fred as he confronts this cold version of himself that has been broadcast to his world. Our family pauses for a moment here trying to see itself, to understand its capacity for pain and grief and how to cope, here at the little kitchen table (where years later I would sit drinking cold milk, my teeth cracking the thin crust of one of her sugar cookies, satisfying for the moment every yearning of my needy little heart—the window that let the sun shine on the printed cloth, the lawn and shade trees outside, and the hum of the cars on Columbia Avenue just beyond the front door...) And here Lela wages her own historically insignificant action against the War itself. The War which threatens the cherishing that keeps the family from being rent apart, the war whose cold fingers she fears have reached into her kitchen, and chilled the heart of the father to his own son.

The paper crackles in my grandfather's hands, and he emits a small sound that could be anything, a groan, a chuckle. Yet if it was a groan, it wouldn't be for himself. Their feelings came first, and if he had given hurt he would have to heal. I imagine him smiling then, even giving a low, rueful laugh. "Never knew I'd raised a poet. To think he could write something so clever with all those terrible things going on around him." He shakes his head, marveling. "And here he's caught me for fair, hat and all. I'll have to read this again tonight before I write back." He puts on his coat and hat, leans to kiss Lela on the cheek. In his absence will come tears of relief, of pain at least diminished. "Don't worry, my dear," he says in parting. "He'll be fine."

And in the end, perhaps he was. Perhaps they all were, for the time being. My grandmother's wounds, the deep splinters of day after day awaiting a telegram, a call, a knock on the door are the invisible ones. Only she could say how well they healed. The question of how to send son off to war would come up again.

A few notes on history:

Joyce wrote, "History...is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."

I write of the war, "the" war. As if there were only the one that lived through the century, despite apparent changes of time, of place (sometimes), of technology, and avowed purpose: WWI, WW II, Korea, Vietnam. To me, they are like parts of a vast and consuming growth that sometimes flared into the open, then went dormant underground to await the right conditions to flower again.

Most of history's occasions come with casualty lists. Death's enumeration defines the historical.

In the Somme, the English General Haig, by all accounts a great and stupid man, over a day and a half sent 60,000 of his troops fruitlessly out of the trenches to die in the mud and razor wire and machine gun fire of No-man's land. The mud was so deep and obliterating that thousands were never found. They became charter members of the century's fraternity of The Missing.

"No man's land." "The wasteland." The shell-plowed fields of Belgium are the backdrop of 20th century literature, what Eugene saw, and tried to avoid seeing was "the nothing," which Beckett tried to capture.

Eugene's little poem of home, under fire, seems a brave act of the imagination against that annihilating backdrop.

Generals are the terror of my dreams.

Eugene came home, unscathed to the eye. He married Anna Coggins of Nashua on April 18, 1921 and became a salesman of Boiler Equipment and the father of four boys, George, a Fred, of course, John and James. **[Cut of Gene and family.]** He was commander of the Nashua chapter of the V.F.W. and a lifelong member, and in April of 1923 attended the reunion of his old unit, the 102nd Field Artillery. As far as the records show the family lived

the better part of their life on Pine Street in Nashua. If he bore wounds from his war, they are not recorded. He lived an apparently full, but not terribly long life, the first of our family to go to war, the last son to die, in 1952. I never knew him (or if I did, I don't remember him; which comes to the same thing.)

I wish I had.

