

JEFFREY LOEB

Resurrection

"MY MIND'S NOT RIGHT." LOWELL'S WORDS came to me as I eased the car off I-70. At the bottom of the ramp, a line of combine-laden semis struggled up the hill. It was nearly harvest time; soft, browning wheat had marked the drive down from Kansas City. I fell in behind them until we reached the turnoff to St. Mary's. I'd decided to go there first, partly because it was closest to the exit, but mainly to get some practice talking to the dead.

Shoddy apartments lined the street—recently built I could tell, intended no doubt for lower-level enlisted families from Fort Riley. The buildings already looked grey and worn. Plastic scooters and tricycles were scattered haphazardly about the dusty, barren yards. At the hospital, I took a right and cruised past three or four blocks of 1950s-era houses, most with peeling paint and small, weed-filled lawns. At the road's end, two open wrought-iron gates yawned, hinged on stone abutments. A chain-link fence stretched both ways, enclosing the rest of the cemetery.

Inside, I saw most of the plots had been newly decorated with flowers, some real in various stages of wilt, others showing the discordant brightness of artificiality. The prior weekend had been Memorial Day, I remembered, or Decoration Day, as my grandparents called it. The entire graveyard covered only ten acres or so, with broad, mature cedars casting late-morning shadows over the marble and limestone monuments. When I was young—about the time the small houses I'd passed were going up—the cemetery was still outside the city limits, enclosed by barbed wire and bordering the undeveloped countryside. My friends and I had spent an inordinate amount of time walking among the graves to reach the green, rolling, long-stem pastures and beckoning cow ponds beyond. New two-story houses with decks now loomed on the other side of the far fence, and there were many, many more gravestones.

It was Carlos who'd suggested I come here—Carlos, my psychiatric counselor back at the Manhattan Vet Center VA, who I saw once a week to discuss my various uncertainties in negotiating both the world at large and my own fragmented interior landscape. His normal

clientele consisted mostly of more-recent veterans, harried, hollow-eyed survivors of the perpetual Middle East conflicts, distressed men and women whose lives were in danger of dropping away from them at any given moment with the simple pull of a trigger. And then there I was: a middle-aged, recently retired teacher sporting a PhD and solid professional credentials, but also an inability to display—indeed, even to *locate*—my feelings about Vietnam. Or, for that matter, any feelings at all most of the time.

I often wondered how I'd managed to make it this far, with a wife (several wives, actually, over the past 40 years), a daughter, two stepchildren, and four grandchildren? After hours of probing my underlying anger and paranoia, Carlos and I had come to the realization that the high rectitude and cold, stony-faced efficiency I presented to society (and especially those people closest to me) ultimately grew in large part out of a lack of grieving. In response to both the physical mayhem of war and my personal moral outrage, I had simply shut down my emotions and spent the next half century walking the land as some dressed-up version of the undead. My mission here in Junction City was to “talk” to these people and share the sentiments I'd denied them while they were alive. To begin the process of grieving.

I drove up one of the narrow gravel roads and pulled onto the grass. Across from me was a modest granite stone reading “Heck,” my grandfather's last name. My own middle name, Theodore, looked out at me from the monument. He and I had been very close as I was growing up, and when he died—during my freshman year of high school—the whole school attended the funeral, which had been folded into the daily 11:30 Mass we all went to before lunch. I could remember my embarrassment at sitting in the front pew with my family, away from my classmates, clenching my love for him so tight that nothing showed. Even then, I now realized, the Catholic Church had started me off, subtly stressing the unseemliness of openly expressed emotion by males. Once the real professionals got hold of me—my football coaches and Marine Corps drill instructors—the deal was sealed: hold it in no matter how much it hurts.

I got out and walked slowly over to the marble marker; it read, “Theodore A. Heck/1889-1962,” and “Julia P./1899-1949.” I stood staring at the stone, recalling my grandfather's gentleness, his work ethic, his dedication to doing right, all embodiments of the nineteenth-century values he was born to. His own parents had emigrated from Alsace-Lorraine following France's tumultuous cession of those territories to Germany in 1872. Seeking a Catholic community to replace their abandoned one, they had settled in Osage

Mission, named for the antebellum Jesuit school founded to minister to that tribe. It was also near the ground that had beckoned to John Brown and the other Free Staters. Indeed, during the Civil War, the town had been held by both Northern and Southern troops.

Though my grandfather was born and schooled there, Southeast Kansas was (then, as now) impoverished country, and he had moved north to the more verdant central plains, where, by 1917, he had come to own a bakery in Lucas. He'd met my grandmother-to-be there—Julia Smith, a farm girl newly graduated from high school. When America entered the Great War, my grandfather joined up in Russell, the county seat, and got shipped straightaway to Fort Riley, where he and Julia (evidently already pregnant with my uncle) married and took up residence in nearby Junction City. In 1918, he found himself shipped very nearly into the backyard of his own grandparents, courtesy of the US Army.

He was gassed and wounded at the Meuse-Argonne, and, throughout the remainder of his life, bore scars on his cheeks and had to hobble with a cane to support his “wooden” leg, which I nightly helped him remove and put away after I'd carried over his dinner from our house next door. Though he certainly must have suffered horribly, I never once heard him complain about anything (except my father, whom he regarded as lazy because he refused to mow the yard). My grandmother had died when I was a toddler, and, though there are pictures of us together, I have no memory of her, so I'd come on this day to speak with him alone.

“I miss you,” I managed to stammer in an exaggerated whisper. “I never told you. It's why I'm here.” The memories suddenly flowed—of helping him work in his garden after my grandmother was gone, his taking me as a tot to see the trains, and later even to ride on them, once all the way to Union Station in Kansas City, where I experienced my first escalator. Of letting me accompany him to his job as City Clerk and spin in his wooden desk chair, even of teaching me how to hunt and fish before he grew too feeble. These were all the words I could muster though; nothing else would come. “Out of practice,” I consoled myself out loud, completely aware of the self-irony contained in the words.

I turned to the adjacent marker, also marble, which read, “Loeb.” It was smaller, so I had to walk over closer to read it, conscious of treading on the dirt covering the coffins, something we were always told was a sin. I stared at the words “Bonnie Heck/September 4, 1924-October 13, 2009.” The inscription reminded me that she'd died on my birthday, and I briefly chastised myself for this base lapse, fully aware it wasn't the only one. I'd always thought she was beautiful—and with good reason, as pictures of her youth proved—wild, flowing, red

hair and piercing green eyes. Her own grandmother, an O'Malley, had been borne hence from the Ould Sod, a Potato Famine baby. When I was young, I'd heard my mother's friends liken her looks to those of Kathryn Hepburn. She'd gone to college in Emporia, at Kansas State Teachers College as it was then called, but only for one year. Even at that, she'd been the first person from her side of the family to pursue higher education. It occurred to me that I must have been the second. She'd spent the war working as a teller in the Central National Bank and married my father within a year of his discharge from the army. Things were like that then.

I'd always loved her, I guessed, but at the end, I hadn't shown up at the deathwatch with my siblings, and then coldly and efficiently executed her will. Suddenly, I felt embarrassed. Why were my attitudes toward impending death so crass and hardened, I wondered. They'd certainly emerged with Jane as well. I said, "Mom, I'm sorry. I did love you. I don't know what happened at the last. It's my fault, not yours. I miss you." I noticed at the bottom of the stone the embedded legend, "Parents of Jeff, Elbie, Kerry, Eric, Lindy, Julie, and Barrie." A feeling of forgiveness overwhelmed me; it was a big load she'd had to carry, with all of us. I silently cursed the ways of the Catholic Church she'd faithfully served to the end, glad I'd left it behind after Vietnam.

On the stone's right side was chiseled, "Dan Benoit/April 18, 1921-September 3, 2000." It occurred to me that I probably had more ambivalence about him than anyone else. He'd taken me along to all the service clubs when I was a child—the AmVets, VFW, American Legion, filled of a Saturday afternoon with his fellow participants in the great enterprise of World War II. Yet he remained a cipher to me, rarely showing any affection—sometimes growing totally distant, especially in his middle years—and I'd simply drifted away. People spoke highly of him (people not in our family, that is), and I know he relished this public recognition, sought it out, in fact. I could remember his and my mother's well-attended cocktail parties when I was young. He'd even let me play bartender at an appropriate age, perhaps seven or so; I guessed it was regarded as cute. He had "married down," I now knew, his own forebears having left their Jewishness behind in Europe in order to embrace the faith most likely to ensure monetary success. Abraham Loeb had gotten them as far as Nebraska, and his sons, Louis and Leo, had "progressed" to Clay Center—a boom-town compared to arid Hastings—and thence to even-wealthier Junction City, having managed to master golf and polo somewhere in the process. Louie's name appeared on all manner of founding plaques and documents, from the local country club to the boards of national pharmaceutical societies.

Despite my father's upper-crust (for Junction City) Episcopalian rearing, his remains resided here in Catholic ground. Late in his life, in the 1990s, after he and my mother had ceased their incessant fighting (and he had more or less given up drinking), we'd managed to get to know each other, and I remembered feeling something akin to love for him. But then the Alzheimer's came, and he simply wasn't there anymore. "Well, old man, I came here to tell you I love you, and I do." It was all I could say.

I walked back to the car and drove over to the other side of the cemetery. This was going to be harder, I realized, in no small part because there wasn't a marker for the person I needed to talk with. I knew exactly where to go because, as kids, Doug and I had often joked about the graves of his forebears when we headed this very way, bound for the open country. We knew there was no death in our futures; it was for old people. I stopped at a limestone monument reading "Breen" and realized there were a great number of Irish names here, just as there had been among my classmates: McCormick, Corcoran, O'Leary, McCleary, Maguire. Catholics, all with big families. And if the names weren't Irish, their late owners had hailed from whatever land the burgeoning needs of American empire had hurled its forces toward over the prior century—trickling into the States to join grandmothers or older sisters lucky enough to have married American soldiers: Perilla, Nardella, DeBruyn, Amato, Vega.

Next to Breen was a smaller stone that said, "Engstrom"—Swedish, I reflected, latecomers of a sort when it came to Catholic cemeteries—but it was really because Doug's father, Leonard, had married Katherine Breen, both from farm families on Dry Creek, though Leonard was barely a generation beyond stonecutting. Any Catholicism he'd practiced was desultory and often marked by sarcastic comments that amused Doug and me to no end when Leonard and his brothers gathered on Sundays to sip bourbon and gently mock both the Church and the ways of the army they'd all been drafted into. Katherine, I remembered, was *not* particularly drawn to their humor and kept to the kitchen. But these occasions, I now realized, had established in many ways the rhythms of my life, not to mention sealing Doug and me together: through school, brief passes at college, into the Marine Corps, and back out again to face the 1970s, our illusions in tatters.

It was Doug's marker that was the missing signifier. His wife, Gloria, had been so broken by the cancer that gradually destroyed him through three operations and at least twenty chemo sessions that she'd had him cremated and taken the ashes with her when she sold the house and moved away to Oklahoma, leaving no traces of my best friend's passing.

I got out of the car and stood in the quiet shade of an overhanging cedar, glancing from stone to stone, with memorials to Doug's family stretching, like my own, back into the nineteenth century, and, picturing him, my eyes at long last filled with tears. Images of his final decline flooded my mind—lying there in his living room on a sort of gurney-bed, no longer able to walk, Gloria flitting in and out nervously, saying nothing but seeming to guard him closely. He could talk, but only barely. I had spent maybe an hour with him, the few precious words we exchanged dedicated only to reviewing memories from our 60 years, as the chilly demands of maleness dictated. When two cousins arrived, I was suddenly desperate to say something that reflected my muddled feelings. I'd reached out and grasped his hand, impulsively blurting out the phrase we alone would understand, one freighted with both genuineness and irony: "Semper Fi." He smiled weakly and returned the words, our private code. I reached for his hand, quickly squeezed it, and turned for the door. I never saw him again.

"Man, you left such a hole in my life," I spoke to the silent gravestones. "I never should've left that room—right up to the end. Ferried you over." Tears were running down my face now. "Semper Fi—shit! How weak was that?"

It was all I could do. I turned away, but suddenly realized I needed to urinate, and badly. I glanced around. There was a red truck back near the gates. I saw a man's head bob up on the other side of the bed, then vanish. Evidently sprucing up a grave. I stepped behind the cedar, zipped down my fly, and baptized the ground, chuckling at my own sacrilege. As I relished the growing relief, I looked around and spotted a flat marble stone about two feet from the wet spot already disappearing into the baked Kansas soil. It bore only one word: "Unknown." I was momentarily puzzled, but then suddenly amused, realizing that it constituted a final ironic joke shared between Doug and me. For us and us alone, "Unknown" would always be his monument.

It was Jane who lay ahead of me. I'd been avoiding her, though she'd lurked in my thoughts the whole time. I drove out past the man in the red truck, who didn't even glance at me, by the aging houses, and down into the city another mile or so, to another graveyard, an older, much larger sibling to St. Mary's: Highland Cemetery, with its imposing limestone wall and enormous entrance, even-larger cedars spreading back as far as I could see, back, in fact, to the 1840s, when the first white settlers (or perhaps their children, born too weak to live) found their way into this forbidding, rocky ground that would have defied their survivors?

dogged attempts at burial—pick-and-shovel labor that in some Calvinistic way must have seemed an integral part of the ritual. Salvation through suffering, I thought; it's the State motto, after all.

I passed beneath the vaulting arches and stopped where the road branched in three directions. Which way? I was uncertain. Was it possible I'd already forgotten? The sun reflecting off the white concrete blinded me. Had the roads been concrete when we buried Jane? I couldn't summon any images of that day, beyond the gravesite itself, the somber crowd gathered around the yawning hole. I patted my shirtfront for my sunglasses. Nothing. I looked down at the console, then along the dash. Zip. I'd taken them off at St. Mary's, I realized, when I started crying; they were still there, perched atop a Breen marker—waiting to stare me down if I went back for them. I pursed my lips, disgusted at myself. I never forgot things. Shading my eyes with one hand, I squinted into the glare. Gradually the white gravestones emerged from within the shadows of the cedars.

I took the middle way once my eyes had adjusted, driving slowly so as to study the monuments. Thick, erect, marble creations festooned with all manner of scrollwork and angels rose on both sides of me, names impressively chiseled into them as if to humble lesser mortals who might pass this way—Gilded Age pomposities, I reflected, public testimony to their residents' private uncertainties about life ever after. Dickinson's words came to mind: "*The meek members of the Resurrection.*" I loved her sly jibes, stripping away the pretense that attended pride and belief. Suddenly my own name swam into vision again: Loeb. It was the plot where my father's parents had come to spend eternity. I'd forgotten about them.

I pulled over slowly and looked out the window. The granite around the name was smoothed to a marbled sheen, the monument itself wide and substantial. Anchoring each side were sturdy, fluted stone columns from which hung chiseled curtains, spreading to enclose the large, deep-set name. On the left was written, "Louis Benoit 1887-1944"; opposite him, his first wife, "Elizabeth Montgomery Loeb 1885-1905"; and just in front of the imposing main stone, a smaller one for his second, "Rachel Campbell Loeb 1885-1986." Louie had climbed into social prominence, I recalled from my parents' stories, by marrying a Montgomery, the union ushering him into the bosom of what passed in these parts for old money. I supposed that's where he'd picked up golf.

My grandmother had lived to a hundred. I smiled at my memories of her. In first grade at St. Xavier, I had daily permission—perhaps the only student enjoying this privilege, for all

I knew—to walk across the street and have lunch in her apartment. Not only had I basked in the sense of privilege this lunchtime arrangement bestowed on me, but I genuinely enjoyed my grandmother's company. She was feisty, as befitted her Scottish background, and I'd once seen her tear the side mirror off a car whose owner had banged his door against hers. As the firstborn grandchild, I myself had been utterly indulged and spoiled by her. If my mother's father had lent fortitude and industry to my character, my father's mother had shown me the pleasures of insouciance. Once, I remembered, when someone had asked her about her love for Louie, she'd replied, "I loved spending his money." I'd failed her too. When she was old and blind and bedridden, it took my mother's entire force of will to make me visit the shabby, evil-smelling nursing home where she lay moldering.

I thought momentarily about getting out, but was stayed by the realization that I had only enough left in me to talk to Jane. So I drove on, deeper into the speckled darkness. At some point, the concrete roads turned into gravel-filled ruts, barely wide enough for a car to pass. Once I was fully enclosed within the gloom of the cedars, the way itself seemed marked. I had only to steer, Charon's boatswain. The stones grew more modest, and suddenly there it was.

Jane and I had been together for 25 years before ovarian cancer had consumed her during three years' horrible suffering. She lay next to her son, Kirt, who, at age twelve—a year before Jane and I had met—was smashed beyond recognition in front of their house by a drunken foundry worker doing 80 in a 30. Her entire life had centered on Kirt, by all accounts a bright, curious boy who took after her rather than his father, whom Jane had divorced immediately after the accident. She had designed the stone for Kirt's grave and reserved room on it for herself. The upright marble monument featured the chiseled image of a boy in a cowboy hat sitting on a fence; Jane herself had created the original drawing with her soft, gentle, artist's hands, and I still found it astounding that, caught tight in her grief, she could manage to undertake such a project. Yet, out of this suffering had also come our daughter, Andi, adopted ten years later in 1988.

The area was marked by other stones sharing Jane's birth name—her father, William L. Brown, born in 1868, eventual owner of nearly a thousand acres of farm and ranch land, dominated by a large limestone house built before the Civil War, and sire to Jane when he was nearly 70. Next to him lay her mother, Astachia, reared in hardscrabble woods on the banks of the Smoky Hill, already the mother to one son when she started as William's housekeeper,

forty years his junior, yet able to father in his dotage two other children—Jane and her older brother, Bill. Finally, there was a small stone some ways off for Roy, the half-brother, who had returned from three years of brutal captivity in the Korean War and was never right afterward, forcing his family into the attic at gunpoint during the enormous lightning storms that would sweep across the plains, protecting them from the Chinese artillery rounds he heard bracketing their house. He'd died a hopeless alcoholic in 1984, somewhere in the Seattle area, his body shipped back to Junction City. I'd never met him.

I hesitated next to the car, across the narrow road from the graves. Like the ones in St. Mary's, these were also brightly decorated. I reflected that Jane would have hated the falseness of the plastic flowers, but then I realized that I myself had not remembered to bring any sort of memorial, floral or otherwise; nor had I thought to write a note and leave it with her, as I'd promised myself I'd do, feeling now the sudden sting of the selfsame inadequacies that had turned me into a steely, efficient attendant in those final weeks at home before the end.

The sunlight penetrated here, and the high noon's harshness bleached the marble stones. The wide, green cedars were as insufficient at shielding the monuments as they were in protecting me from the realization that I had failed both Jane and Andi. I suddenly understood what Joyce had meant by the ancient Gaelic words "agenbite of inwit": the quick, harsh impact of an abiding failure of character. I truly was not worthy, I knew, of this woman who came in for neglect and being taken for granted while I had so heroically and systematically put myself back together again (at least I thought I had) after two disastrous prior marriages, numerous betrayals of my friends, and self-destructive behavior that by all rights should have seen me dead years before I met her. How had she stood me? Why was I here—a weak link in the chain of humanity—and she gone, truly a loving, generous person?

I walked over and stood in front of the monument, by now oblivious to all the decaying Browns surrounding us. I opened my mouth, then closed it. I started one more time. "I'm sorry," I said. "I should've been here a long time ago. I miss you. I miss what we had together, the quietness, the understandings, the sense of purpose—especially with Andi—how kind you were, your gentleness, your shyness. I'm sorry for all the pain you went through—for me I guess. Denise told me you only went through the last two surgeries because you thought I couldn't get by without you. I'm sorry when you came home to die, I couldn't just minister to you, hold your hand, read to you, sit with you for however many hours it took. Why did I

always have to be *doing* something, achieving something, running off to the other room on some invented errand, instead of just *being* there for you? I loved you. I still love you. And I'm sorry you're gone. I'm sorry about all of Andi's problems. I'm not sure anything would have been different if you were here, but at least you would have tried your hardest. Look, Carolyn's a wonderful woman. You'd like her. No one could have been better for Andi, or for me, and I just want you to know that. She's helped make me a decent person, and now I just wish I could have been that for you."

I stopped then and just stood, looking at the gravestones stretching as far as I could see. I reached in my pocket for my phone and took pictures of the graves. I don't know why. There was no real posterity to share them with. I knew Andi had taken her own long before, when she was moving to California. There was nothing else to say, and I wasn't sure when, or if, I'd ever be back, so I took one more last, long look and turned away.

It was over. The grieving seemed to work. I actually felt better—like I'd done something real for a change. No more acting, no worrying about the best thing to say, no people-pleasing. And, most of all, no more sarcasm. *God*, I'd been living behind that front for forty years. I got in and closed the car door with a decisive slam, concentrating on the lightness of redemption. At long last, maybe I'd finally turned myself into a useful human being.

Then Jake Barnes's words suddenly froze me: "*Yes. . . . Isn't it pretty to think so?*"

Note: a shorter version of this essay was presented on Veterans Day at the New York Historical Society as part of their Vietnam War exhibit for that occasion.

Jeffrey Loeb, who holds a PhD from the University of Kansas, is the retired Chair of English at The Pembroke Hill School in Kansas City, Missouri. He was instrumental in the re-issue of and wrote the introductions for two Vietnam War autobiographies by African Americans: Terry Whitmore's *Memphis Nam Sweden: The Story of a Black Deserter* and James A. Daly's *Black Prisoner of War: A Conscientious Objector's Vietnam Memoir*. Loeb has also had articles in numerous journals such as *African American Review*, *American Studies*, *English Journal*, and *War, Literature & the Arts*. He served as an interpreter, field artillery fire direction controller, radio operator and forward observer with Eleventh Marines in Vietnam in 1968 and 1969. He is now a writer living in New York City.