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RUN OUTSIDE! IT'S RAINING!

*REMEMBERING HARRY AUGUSTUS BUSH, A SOLDIER OF THE GREAT WAR, DURING THE SOMME
CENTENARY – WITH ASSISTANCE FROM TWO WIZARDS IN SEATTLE*

*All essays by John Haney, deputy copy chief at Tatler, co-curator of PoetrySlabs and the
author of the memoir Fair Shares for All (Random House USA, 2009).*

INTRODUCTION TO A SCREENING OF 'HOWL', A MOVIE ABOUT ALLEN GINSBERG

25 OCTOBER 2015

Irwin Allen Ginsberg. American original. American master. June-third-nineteen-twenty-six to April-fifth-nineteen-ninety-seven. Born in Newark, New Jersey, just three years before the attack of the Great Depression. Died in New York when the worst that Washington had to offer was reducing the Clinton White House to rubble. Everything Allen ever saw, from his first days on earth to his last, became grist to his mill. Which, in 1955, not too long after the armistice in Korea, spat out 'Howl', the most sensational – and possibly the greatest – American poem of the twentieth century.

Allen Ginsberg. Young gay man in Disneyland when being queer could get you a casual kicking. Allen Ginsberg. A Jewish-American who grew up at a time when simply being of what was once called the Hebrew persuasion could, in the US, put you on the receiving end of a boatload of prejudice.

What made the man the writer he was? Where did the lightning strike from? Where do you look for the source of the lyricism and what sometimes looked like lunacy? His parentage had a great deal to do with it. 'Old-fashioned delicatessen philosophers', he once called them. His father, Louis: published poet, accomplished high-school teacher. His mother, Naomi: a dedicated communist with a never-to-be-diagnosed psychological disorder that kept her in and out of mental hospitals for most of her life. And the young and impressionable Allen was often her carer – at considerable cost to his emotional well-being.

Louis, said Allen, went 'around the house either reciting Emily Dickinson and Longfellow under his breath or attacking TS Eliot for ruining poetry with his "obscurantism"'. I grew suspicious of both sides.' And Naomi, he said, 'made up bedtime stories that all went something like "The good king went forth from his castle, saw the suffering workers and healed them"'. Such, in part, was the sentimental education Allen took with him into academia in 1943, as an undergraduate at Columbia. As an assiduous but unconventional student with an already conspicuous interest in William Blake and Walt Whitman.

Blake. Seventeen-fifty-seven to eighteen-twenty-seven. Britain's greatest outsider. The man who knew his despots and thoroughly detested the pantomime of monarchy. Blake, who struck through to the root of all mystery with all the force of prophecy. Blake in fact 'stuck' with Allen – who, in 1948, had an auditory hallucination that he later interpreted as the voice of Blake himself reading three poems from *Songs of Innocence and Experience* – including 'Ah, Sunflower'.

Ah, Sun-flower, weary of time, / Who countest the steps of the sun, / Seeking after that sweet golden clime / Where the traveller's journey is done: / Where the youth pined away with desire, / And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow / Arise from their graves, and aspire / Where my Sun-flower wishes to go

'I felt,' said Allen, 'a sudden awakening into a totally deeper real universe'. The sunflower connection, incidentally, persisted. It even re-emerged in the 'Sunflower Sutra' of 1955, also the year of the first public reading of *Howl*. Here's how it ends:

We're not our skin of grime, we're not our dread bleak dusty imageless locomotive, we're all beautiful golden sunflowers inside, we're blessed by our own seed & golden hairy naked accomplishment-bodies growing into mad black formal sunflowers in the sunset, spied on by our eyes under the shadow of the mad locomotive riverbank sunset Frisco hilly tincan evening sit-down vision

And what of Whitman? Eighteen-nineteen to eighteen-ninety-two. All-American democrat. Poet, essayist, journalist, humanist, government clerk, opponent of slavery, volunteer nurse during the Civil War. Whitman. Aptly epitomised by Allen as a 'lonely old courage-teacher' in 1955's haunting *and* hilarious 'A Supermarket in California'.

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys / I head you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my angel?

Whitman. Often called the father of free verse. Author of *Leaves of Grass*. An epic paean to the common man – and, it must be added – woman. The poem caused more than a bit of a stir in its time and was sometimes damned as obscene for its overt sexuality. And nothing I can say about Whitman will tell you any more about the man and the poet than the following extract from the section of the poem headed 'Song of Myself':

*I am the poet of the body
And I am the poet of the soul*

*The pleasures of heaven are with me, and the pains of hell are with me
The first I graft and increase upon myself ... the latter I translate into a new tongue*

*I am the poet of the woman the same as the man
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men*

*I am he that walks with the tender and growing night;
I call to the earth and sea half-held by the night.*

*Press close barebosomed night! Press close magnetic nourishing night.
Night of south winds! Night of the large few stars!
Still nodding night! Mad naked summer night!*

*Smile O voluptuous coolbreathed earth!
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!
Earth of departed sunset! Earth of mountains misty-topt!
Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!
Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!
Earth of the limpid gray of clods brighter and clearer for my sake!
Far-swooping elbowed earth! Rich apple-blossomed earth!
Smile, for your lover comes!*

*Prodigal! you have given me love! therefore I to you give love!
O unspeakable passionate love!*

*Thruster holding me tight and that I hold tight!
We hurt each other as the bridegroom and the bride hurt each other*

Fast-forward to San Francisco. Early 1955. William Blake's acolyte, Walt Whitman's disciple, has been hanging out with the 'bad boys' – William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, John Clellon Holmes, Neal Cassady, Peter Orlovsky, Lucien Carr – on both coasts, and in Colorado, for quite some time. A painter named Wally Hedrick asks him to organise a poetry reading at the Six Gallery. Allen says no – but, having written a rough draft of *Howl*, changes, he later said, his 'fucking mind'. He knew what he had done.

And yet... I need to bring in one last maverick poet here. William Carlos Williams, a Rutherford, New Jersey, doctor, who, when not tending to his hometown's working poor, had, by the 1950s, turned out a substantial body of modernist work – including early versions of his impossible-to-classify *Paterson*, a poetic portrait of the town in New Jersey where Allen grew up – and had also, along the way, been thunderously criticised for his artistic and sexual politics by a leading Dadaist. Williams, who knew Ginsberg very slightly, also had a big fat problem with TS Eliot, just like Allen's dad. Eliot's own inimitable masterwork appeared in 1922, a year after the publication of *Spring and All*, Williams's best-received collection. 'I felt at once,' the hapless doctor later wrote, 'that *The Waste Land* had set me back twenty years... Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt we were on a point to escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself – rooted in the locality which should give it fruit.'

Fast-forward yet again, this time to 1956. Allen, still 'suspicious of both sides' in the squabbles over modernism, has just turned 30 and has himself now produced a 'new art form' of his own. Williams, a venerable 73, is asked to write an introduction to *Howl* for City Lights Books, its publisher. Here's what he had to say – in his typically spiky, slightly crabbed (and crabby) and flinty prose style...

When he was younger, and I was younger, I used to know Allen Ginsberg, a young poet living in Paterson, New Jersey, where he, the son of a well-known poet, had been born and grew up. He was physically slight of build and mentally much disturbed by the life which he had encountered about him during those years after the First World War as it was exhibited to him in and about New York City. He was always on the point of 'going away', where it didn't seem to matter; he disturbed me, I never thought he'd live to grow up and write a book of poems. His ability to survive, travel, and go on writing astonishes me. That he has gone on developing and perfecting his art is no less amazing to me.

Now he turns up fifteen or twenty years later with an arresting poem. Literally he has, from all the evidence, been through hell. On the way he met a man named Carl Solomon with whom he shared, among the teeth and excrement of this life something that cannot be described but in the words he uses to describe it...

It is the poet, Allen Ginsberg, who has gone, in his own body, through the horrifying experiences described from life in these pages. The wonder of the thing is not that he has survived but that he, from the very depths, has found a fellow whom he can love, a love he celebrates without looking aside in these poems. Say what you will, he proves to us, in spite of the most debasing experiences that life can offer a man, the spirit of love survives to ennoble our lives if we have the wit and the courage and the faith – and the art! to persist.

It is the belief in the art of poetry that has gone hand in hand with this man into his Golgotha, from that charnel house, similar in every way, to that of the Jews in the past war. But this is in our own country, our own fondest purlieus. We are blind and live our own lives out in blindness. Poets are damned but they are not blind, they see with eyes of angels. This poet sees through and all around the horrors he partakes of in the very intimate details of his poem. He avoids nothing but experiences it to the hilt. He contains it. Claims it as his own – and, we believe, laughs at it and has time and affrontery to love a fellow of his choice and record that love in a well-made poem. Hold back the edges of your gowns, Ladies, we are going through hell.

He contains it. He claims it as his own. This is where, in Ginsberg, William Blake and Walt Whitman live on.

John Haney

INTRODUCTION TO A SHARED READING OF ALFRED LORD TENNYSON'S 'THE GARDENER'S DAUGHTER'

1 MAY 2016

Alfred Tennyson, the son of a Lincolnshire clergyman, was the greatest English poet of his generation and the first man ever raised to a British peerage for his writing. As a man, he was highly temperamental, but as an artist, he was consummately consistent, a craftsman who couldn't stop self-editing until the vision contemplated in any given poem had been rendered to perfection. Robert Browning, a contemporary, thought Tennyson's perfectionism 'insane', verging on 'mental infirmity'.

It can't be denied that grief, loss, and melancholy loom large in Tennyson's poetry – and ever more so as he grows older and increasingly prone to depression. TS Eliot called Tennyson 'the saddest of all English poets'. WH Auden, on the other hand, called him the 'stupidest' of all the English poets, contending that 'There was little about melancholia he didn't know; there was little else that he did.' But the gloom and doom weren't always there – and 'The Gardener's Daughter', which we're going to read in a moment, is a glorious exception. It's an early poem, begun in 1832, when Tennyson was 23, and finished the following year, not long after the death, at 22, of his greatest friend at the time – Arthur Hallam, the subject of Tennyson's masterpiece, 'In Memoriam', written many years later.

'The Gardener's Daughter' is a young man's work, written – as we only find out at the end of the poem – from the perspective of an older man looking back at the greatest emotional experience of his early life. There are some intimations of that perspective earlier in the poem, but Janet and I didn't really get them on the first reading. It's a clever piece of work. It celebrates love at first sight with all the optimism of youth – and the sentiment never feels at all forced or overblown. And the power (and occasional humour) with which he describes falling in love – and love itself – startled us more than once. What's also interesting is that the love described in 'The Gardener's Daughter' is a curious mix of the manly love that Tennyson felt for Arthur Hallam (whom he met at Cambridge) and the love he felt, during the same period, for his first great female 'crush' – Rosa Baring, who came from the Barings banking family. Tennyson was completely smitten with her – but it all came to nothing.

As one of Tennyson's biographer John Batchelor notes, the poem 'reflects rather transparently Tennyson's feelings both for Arthur Hallam and for Rosa Baring...' The intensely close relationship between the two young men in the poem, Eustace and the speaker, 'is in some tension with the attachment the speaker forms with "Rose", who is the "gardener's daughter"'. Tennyson is reversing the social status of the models – in the poem an upper-class man is drawn to a woman very much his social inferior. From the perspective of Rosa Baring's mother and stepfather, the actual relationship between Tennyson and Rosa must have looked like the opposite of

that.' So here are a couple of snippets to whet your appetite – intriguing blends of stylistic precision and emotional power.

**Who had not heard
Of Rose, the Gardener's daughter? Where was he,
So blunt in memory, so old at heart,
At such a distance from his youth in grief,
That, having seen, forgot? The common mouth,
So gross to express delight, in praise of her
Grew oratory. Such a lord is Love,
And Beauty such a mistress of the world.**

This lord called Love can give our perceptions an intensity that anchors them in our memory forever – an intensity that Tennyson evokes in the following lines:

**The lark could scarce get out his notes for joy,
But shook his song together as he near'd
His happy home, the ground. To left and right,
The cuckoo told his name to all the hills;
The mellow ouzel fluted in the elm;
The redcap whistled; and the nightingale
Sang loud, as tho' he were the bird of day.**

And here's an encapsulation, in just four lines, of the earliest after-effects of his first sight of the Gardener's Daughter:

**I, that whole day,
Saw her no more, altho' I linger'd there
Till every daisy slept, and Love's white star
Beam'd thro' the thicken'd cedar in the dusk.**

John Haney

INTRODUCTION TO A SHARED READING OF LEWIS CARROLL'S 'THE HUNTING OF THE SNARK'

4 JUNE 2016

When *The Hunting of the Snark* came galumphing into the world on the 29th of March 1876, its 44-year-old author, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson – aka Lewis Carroll – had already been famous for more than 10 years. *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* had made him a household name – and had also made his publishers a considerable amount of money. Which being the case, nothing could have prepared this somewhat shy and retiring Oxford mathematics lecturer for the barrage of frumious boos and slithy hisses that swiftly greeted his latest venture into the Victorian equivalent of literary surrealism.

The critics behaved, for the most part, like bandersnatches. The *Athenaeum* magazine proposed that Carroll might have been 'inspired by a wild desire to reduce to idiocy as many readers, and more especially reviewers, as possible. At any event, he has published as what we may consider the most bewildering of modern poems...' The *Spectator* dismissed it as an abject 'failure' totally lacking in humour. *Vanity Fair* piled in with the opinion that Carroll was going 'from good to bad and from bad to worse... This book ... deserves only to be called rubbish'. One of the very few good reviews, however – from a magazine called the *Graphic* – loved it for all the right reasons: 'Everybody ought to read the book – nearly everybody *will* – and all who deserve the treat will scream with laughter.'

The *Graphic* was on the right track. One needs to *deserve* this little treat – and all that one really needs in order to deserve it is a functioning – and typically English – sense of humour. The kind of sense of humour that has us falling off the sofa when, for instance, comedians like Bill Bailey, Billy Connolly and Morecambe and Wise break on through from being merely amusing to being so brilliantly improbable that we find ourselves floating in the rabbit hole of the profoundly ridiculous. Nothing succeeds in comedy like an apparently absolute lack of logic. Which is precisely what we find ourselves confronting as we follow the oddly Quixotic adventures of the Bellman, the Boots, the Broker, the Banker, the Billiard-marker, the Butcher, the Beaver, the Barrister, and the maker of Bonnets and Hoods in their ludicrous search for something that may or may not exist.

As Carroll's best biographer, Morton Cohen, notes: 'The poem's real meaning, like the meaning in the Alice books, is anti-meaning. It is more about *being* than *meaning*.' And he adds: '*The Hunting of the Snark* soars at least as high as the *Alice* books in its invention. It is taut and measured, like a symphony or a mass. Its musical quality is important. The critics have spent much energy analyzing its minutiae, but they fail to hear its greatness. For it is through the music of the words that that Charles gets to his readers, not through the transmission of thought ... the

sounds filter through our minds and go directly to our hearts – our emotions soar, our laughter bubbles up. Similar sounds, contrasting sounds ... echoes ... they come together to fuse into something transcendent.’

As to the matter of the nature of nonsense, the jumble of made-up words, the apparent collapse of rationality – there’s an interesting essay about Lewis Carroll, with particular reference to *The Hunting of the Snark*, by the French psychoanalyst Sophie Marret, that in some ways echoes – and elaborates on – what Morton Cohen said about the poem being ‘more about *being* than *meaning*’. She reminds us that Carroll, who was a logician as well as a mathematician, wrote *The Hunting of the Snark* by ‘beginning with the end, after the concluding phrase of the tale [“For the Snark was a Boojum, you see”] unexpectedly emerged into his mind during the course of a walk: how can one not see in this [she asks] the trace of another relation to language, one induced by the unconscious, rather than the one advocated by classical logic.’ She continues: ‘[Carroll] himself underlined the fact that all his nonsensical writings were in fact born from ideas and fragments that came into his mind and which he noted down in order not to forget them, without always being able to relate them to a precise cause.’

But it’s Carroll who deserves to have the last word on his wonderfully bewildering poem. In a letter he wrote to some inquisitive children in 1884, he says: ‘As to the meaning of the *Snark*? I’m very much afraid I didn’t mean anything but nonsense. Still, you know, words mean more than we mean to express when we use them: so a whole book ought to mean a great deal more than the writer meant. So, whatever good meanings are in the book, I’m very glad to accept as the meaning of the book. The best I’ve seen is ... that the whole book is an allegory on the search for happiness. I think that fits beautifully in many ways.’

Was Carroll being a little sly, a bit disingenuous, when he wrote that? I thought so at first – but eventually it began to make a kind of sense. An enigmatic kind of sense, I’ll admit – the mere idea that a search for happiness can end, as *The Hunting of the Snark* does, in something that may or may not be a disaster. We never know quite we are with Carroll – and that’s a good deal more than half the fun.

John Haney

**INTRODUCTION TO A SHARED READING OF POEMS FROM
'PEACOCK PIE' BY WALTER DE LA MARE**

7 JUNE 2016

Today we'll be reading a short selection of poems from *Peacock Pie*, the most famous – and most frequently reprinted – of Walter de la Mare's 12 poetry collections. Last reissued in 2015, it's now been on the bookshelves of children and grown-ups for more than a century. (It's been on my own shelves for more than fifty years, ever since I had to learn a couple of his poems by heart at the age of eight.) Very little poetry – other than nursery rhymes – ostensibly written for children has that kind of staying power, which suggests that *Peacock Pie* is something special. De la Mare, who also wrote novels and short stories and also became a gifted anthologist, was 40 – and barely a decade into his career as a published writer – when *Peacock Pie* appeared, in 1913.

It had something of a mixed reception but can certainly be considered foundational to much of the writing that followed, which later resulted in its author being made a Companion of Honour and becoming a recipient of the Order of Merit. And the fact that de la Mare's career got properly off the ground at all was almost entirely due to his influential acquaintance (and fellow poet) Sir Henry Newbolt, a friend of his parents', who, in 1908, arranged for de la Mare to receive a Civil List Pension, which enabled Walter to leave his humdrum and poorly paid job in the statistics department of an oil company and devote more time to writing without having to worry too much about where the next meal was coming from. (Unable to afford to buy writing paper while working at Standard Oil, he'd been using scrap paper salvaged from litter bins at the office.)

Following his marriage to Elfride Ingpen in 1899 – three years before the publication of *Songs of Childhood*, his first poetry collection – de la Mare lived on Mackenzie Road in Beckenham. In 1906, the couple – who eventually had four children – moved to what Walter described as a 'cramped slip of a flat' in a villa on Samos Road in Anerley. Six months later, they moved to a slightly more capacious house in Worbeck Road, also in Anerley, and, in 1912 – a year before the publication of *Peacock Pie* and not long after Walter got a job as a reader at a top London publishing house – the family moved to No. 14 Thornsett Road, where Walter finally had a room of his own in which to write. By the time they left South London for good, in 1924, he was a household name.

Many of de la Mare's friends – including distinguished men (and women) of letters like Newbolt, Eleanor Farjeon, Edmund Gosse, and Robert Frost – immediately proclaimed *Peacock Pie* a masterpiece. But the letter of praise that meant most to Walter came from Edward Thomas, the Lambeth-based critic and nature writer who was shortly to become one of the most famous of Britain's First World War poets. Thomas wrote: 'I love it & I think not the less because "Magic hath stolen away" all of

me that could feel such things without your help. WH Hudson's are the only other living man's books that give me such perfect pleasure.' In a letter to Eleanor Farjeon, Thomas said that *Peacock Pie* and Robert Frost's *North of Boston* were the only two pure gold nuggets he had ever dug out during his years of dreary hack work as a book reviewer. And in talking once to David Garnett, a member of the Bloomsbury group, Edward Thomas put Frost first and de la Mare second among all living poets (and this at a time, it's worth remembering, when Thomas Hardy was still alive).

Yet de la Mare himself felt a little uneasy about all the acclaim – these were, as he put it, after all 'only rhymes'. He admitted to a friend that he had 'drudged and drudged' even at what he called the 'doggerel'. But most writers find themselves in this boat with some regularity, wishing their latest creation had never seen the light of day. The fact is, however, that they are simply too close to it – still convalescing, as it were, from the shock and the strain of having produced it, still mired in that swamp of self-doubt where many serious writers spend a great deal of their time. It will be up to the reader, post-publication, to discern the book's true merits – and posterity has duly pronounced *Peacock Pie* a thing of beauty.

Is *Peacock Pie* really children's poetry? Or does it just look and sound like children's poetry? Is it actually for grown-ups? Is it essentially written for what's left of the child in the woman or the man? Confronted with questions like these, one can perhaps do worse than simply take these poems as one finds them. Speaking for myself, I found them enchanting at the age of eight, and they have been haunting me ever since. And I see no reason at all why they shouldn't continue to do so. Not least because, ultimately, they are, in fact, a good deal more than mere 'rhyme'.

De la Mare's poetry, like all good poetry, can, if one reads it openly and attentively, take the common reader a little deeper into self-knowledge and self-awareness. And if there is all too often 'an eternal note of sadness' to be found 'creeping in' (I'm borrowing an idea from Matthew Arnold's famous poem 'Dover Beach' here), it is perhaps because, for de la Mare, a sense of sadness, albeit one tinged with whimsy, is inseparable from an appreciation of reality.

John Haney

**ESSAY ABOUT A 'SOMME CENTENARY' TOUR OF WEST NORWOOD
CEMETERY UNDERTAKEN BY POETRYSLABS IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE
FRIENDS OF WEST NORWOOD CEMETERY, THE COMMONWEALTH WAR
GRAVES COMMISSION'S 'LIVING MEMORY' PROGRAMME AND
THE BIG IDEAS COMPANY ON 4 SEPTEMBER 2016**

Run outside! It's raining!

Remembering Harry Augustus Bush, a soldier of the Great War, during the Somme Centenary – with assistance from two wizards in Seattle

The run-up to Remembrance Day, which, as a grandchild of a First World War veteran, I always mark by revisiting Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon, began six months ahead of schedule for me this year, in West Norwood's liveliest gastropub. My wife Janet and I – collectively known as PoetrySlabs and thereby committed to putting poetry on the neighbourhood's walls and pavements – were recovering from a meeting of the politburo of the community film club to which we belong. Having gone to bat for *Céline and Julie Go Boating* as opposed to *Thelma and Louise* – and fared none too well in the process – we were sinking slender pints of boutique Cornish pilsner and somewhat peevishly poking at our iPads when we were pounced on by our good friend Colin Fenn, a management consultant and walking encyclopaedia who also happens to be vice-chairman of the Friends of West Norwood Cemetery, one of London's most historic boneyards.

Colin, whose casual conversation can meander from classical liberalism to laser-guided target-acquisition systems, breathlessly informed us that he'd 'been on the blower' with some people from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's 'Living Memory' programme, which was, he continued, working in consultation with the Big Ideas Company to organise and promote 141 events across the country marking the 141 days of the Battle of the Somme (1 July to 18 November 1916). Commendable, I thought – but why are you telling us this?

The emphasis, he said, would be on commemorating British and Commonwealth Great War casualties buried in the UK – of which there are more than a few interred in West Norwood. He was hoping to put together a tour of Great War-related gravesites in the cemetery, with historical commentary supplied by himself and relevant poetry (and maybe some prose) curated by PoetrySlabs. He was also – and this was the point at which I began to feel a bit dismayed – tinkering with the idea of inscribing the progression of the Somme campaign (units, locations, losses and gains) the length of Robson Road (which borders the cemetery), making use of the super-hydrophobic Rainworks spray with which Janet and I had just begun to pepper a number of paving stones with nonsense words from Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky' – a process we dubbed 'Slabberwocky'.

The way Rainworks works is as follows: track the weather forecasts in search of a 24-hour dry spell, spot one, drop everything, dash out, clean the pavement, lay a stencil, spray the stencil twice, remove the stencil. The words disappear when the spray has dried and only reappear (for up to six months, in good conditions) when it rains. The downside: it takes a lot of planning and, because its manufacturers don't have distribution here, it doesn't come cheap. The upside: children of all ages love it. The brainchild of Seattle-based Peregrine Church (artist and entrepreneur) and Xack Fischer (actual magician *and* entrepreneur), Rainworks spray is now being splashed across the canvas of the USA and is also making waves in parts of Europe.

Despite our misgivings concerning the scale of the projected Robson Road undertaking (and the fact that the funding on offer might only be in the low three figures), we filed the idea for reference and continued to litter the local landscape with words like 'frumious', 'uffish' and 'vorpal'. At the same time, I dredged up the little I'd retained from a Lambeth Council-funded project-management course I'd taken earlier in the year and eventually decided to focus on a couple of keywords: 'SCOPE' and 'CONSTRAINTS'.

It soon became apparent that anything on the grand scale contemplated by Colin would cost thousands of pounds that we simply didn't have. We might, however, without too much discomfort, be able to inscribe the names of maybe a dozen dead soldiers who would be mentioned during the tour on the pavement outside the cemetery gates. Colin, now very much preoccupied with his MA dissertation, duly concurred, and a few weeks later we learned that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the Big Ideas Company quite liked the idea: the names of the dead would be revealed intermittently, passing from sight and returning via the vagaries of the weather. A metaphor of sorts for memory itself – and a very different way of doing remembrance.

A few weeks later, potential disaster struck. Peregrine and Xack had a contretemps with their investors and found themselves forced to suspend operations. Their website stayed grimly blacked out for a month, and all Janet and I could do was hold our nerve and stay in touch with Colin, who was still not entirely sure whether or not our plans would actually get final approval. The ongoing proliferation of 'frabjous', 'slithy', 'manxome' and 'beamish' was draining our bottles and the clock was now ticking with a vengeance. Once we got the green light, our friend Robin Thomson, an artist with access to a laser cutter, began making the stencils. I then began not only leafing through anthologies of First World War poetry but also speed-reading a selection of novels and memoirs.

This was difficult stuff, not least because it brought me closer than ever to what my grandfather must have gone through. A slum kid who volunteered in 1915, Harry Augustus Bush trained as a cavalryman but had to give up his warhorse when it became apparent that cavalry attacks would not be on the cards in Picardy and Flanders. His affinity with horses did, however, mean that he was sometimes deployed in his regiment's transport section, where horses were used to move the

machinery of war and other supplies up to the front. For most of his overseas service, though, he was deep in the trenches as a member of the poor bloody infantry.

Harry never discussed the kill-or-be-killed stuff with me, but I did learn, via my mother and her sister, that he'd had to use the bayonet – and, I supposed in later years, any suitably razor-edged or very blunt instruments (clubs, knives, hammers, mattocks, sharpened spades) he could find when there was simply no room to swing a rifle. He was blown off a horse called Dolly within sight of the slag heaps of Passchendaele in 1917. (Dolly took the full force of the explosion, thus saving my grandfather's life, and died on the spot.) A few days later, Harry was shipped back to Blighty with neuralgia (the polite name for shellshock), an honourable discharge and an armful of shrapnel. He was generally more willing to discuss the lunacy of the war, the hideousness of slipping off a duckboard into six feet of liquefied mud, the terror of tumbling to the toxic bottom of a crater of corpse-laden sludge, the maddening inconvenience of lice and the awfulness of being bracketed by a well-aimed shower of gas shells.

By the beginning of July, Peregrine and Xack were back in business, the tour had been arranged for 2.30pm on Sunday 4 September (which would coincide with that month's West Norwood FEAST fair), the stencils had been cut, Janet and I had made a final selection of 15 poems and I had also finished reading *Goodbye to All That*, Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War*, veteran-turned-pacifist Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire*, Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, John Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers*, Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel*, the memoirs of battlefield nurses Ellen N La Motte and Mary Borden, and Imagist poet Richard Aldington's revelatory *Death of a Hero* (the best and most depressing of them all).

We unholstered a new consignment of Rainworks spray in mid-July and got down to work at propitious times (five in the morning when necessary), finishing up in mid-August despite the distractions of our proper jobs, an indisposed cat and illness in the family. The names of the soldiers, to whom we had both begun to feel a sense of obligation – Major Loudoun-Shand VC, Private Rosher, Lieutenant Greenwood, Private Hoskins, Lieutenant Dean, Lieutenant Jacobi, Private Townley, Private Cole, Private Leakey, Captain Gee and Lieutenant Miles – were now lying in wait for the first drops of water. In the third week of August, Colin and I composed our 'playbooks', putting all the poetry and historical commentary in sequence in binders and taking on board some practical suggestions offered by Colin's wife, Rose, a sustainability-reporting manager at a major multinational and a veteran of many cemetery tours. Janet and I took the precaution of buying some portable loudspeakers should the weather on the day prove windy, and squeezed in a couple of on-site rehearsals. The four of us were, quite simply, on a mission – to do the absolute best we could to honour the dead.

The event itself got off to a slightly misshapen start when an over-eager FEAST staffer watered the words ahead of time, our original idea having been to unveil

them at 2.30 on the dot in the presence of the bigwigs from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Living Memory, Big Ideas and a photographer from the *Evening Standard*. I duly gave them a second dousing in my official capacity, such as it was, and then, thinking 'SCOPE' and 'CONSTRAINTS' and inwardly cursing the fact that the breeze was on the brink of becoming a minor gale, went to talk to Colin about the possibility (my preference) of taking the 60 people who had by now turned up around the cemetery in a single group rather than two, as originally envisaged.

Colin having graciously agreed with my suggestion, we marshalled the crowd back out to the Rainworks installation and explained the tour format. There, in memory of Major Loudoun-Shand VC – shot several times within minutes of the start of the Battle of the Somme, died of wounds later the same day – I managed to read John McCrae's immortal 'In Flanders Fields' ('We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow') without stuttering. At the Cross of Sacrifice, back inside the gates, the lyrics to 'Hush! Here Comes a Whizz-Bang' (in memory of Gunner Herbert Rosher) were a special nod to my grandfather, who had witnessed his best friend's decapitation by precisely that type of high-velocity shell in 1916. At the grave of Sir Hiram Maxim – inventor of the mousetrap, medical inhalers and the machine-gun that bears his name – Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' ('What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?') worked its sad magic. For Sir Frederick Hall, founder of the Camberwell Gun Brigade, who survived the war, composer Ivor Gurney's 'Strafe' ('The "crumps" are falling twenty to the minute') more than explained the author's eventual breakdown. For Lieutenant Charles Greenwood, Sassoon's 'The Kiss' ('To these I turn, in these I trust – Brother Lead and Sister Steel'), with its unusually vicious last verse, left the audience (and, yet again, me) slightly appalled. And I think a shiver went down a few spines when, at the end of the opening line of Walter Lyon's 'I Tracked a Dead Man Down a Trench', two crows in a nearby tree began to caw like claps of doom.

Before we reached Lieutenant Dean's grave, Janet (a great believer in community and sharing) began to ask if audience members would care to read as well. As a result, a woman with a wonderful voice (she turned out to have a background in acting and teaching) read a difficult extract ('Mind the hole/mind the hole/mind the hole to left ... mind the wire/mind the wire') from 'In Parenthesis', by David Jones, artist, writer, useless soldier (he called himself a 'parade's despair') and poet of genius who fought in Robert Graves's regiment and whose work was much admired by TS Eliot. (Even more astonishingly, she had, she said, heard a radio broadcast of 'In Parenthesis' back in the Forties.) At the grave of Frederick Wilkinson, an 'absolutist' conscientious objector from Streatham who died in Maidstone jail during the flu epidemic of 1919, another volunteer – a 15-year-old schoolgirl who happened to be a member of the Army Cadet Force – read Jessie Pope's aggressively jingoistic 'The Call' ('Who's going out to win?/And who wants to save his skin –/Do you, my laddie?') with just the bitterly judgemental edge it needed. We ended the proceedings with a glass of wine and a series of additional readings at the cemetery's famed Greek necropolis, finishing up with Philip Larkin's startlingly

cinematic 'MCMXIV' ('Never such innocence again'), which people seemed especially to like.

So all had gone well. We'd done what we set out to do, albeit by the skin of our teeth. The four of us felt both elated and drained. It was, after all, rather difficult stuff. But not, of course, remotely as difficult or deadly or monumentally desperate as the dire situation our 'chosen soldiers' and hundreds of thousands of their comrades (and opponents) had faced in a bloodied, muddied, grossly mass-murderous corner of France a century earlier. All that was left for us now was to wait for rain, to wait for the dead soldiers' names to sneak up on the unsuspecting, to whisper, not roar, of the 'war to end all wars' (which it wasn't), and, in a way, to remind us of the war that came next, the one that had to be fought in hopes of putting Europe back together.

That evening at dinner with Colin and Rose, Harry Augustus Bush, with his scarred left arm and his fireside silences and memories of standing guard up to his waist in three feet of midwinter water at Ypres, kept coming back to haunt me. As too did Richard Aldington's battering-ram account of a combined high-explosive and gas bombardment in Belgium – and the eventual, suicidal death ("The line of bullets smashed across his chest like a savage steel whip") of his hapless hero. The Great War seemed to be the one that never goes away.

Next stop, perhaps, November 2018, for poetry and prose at the cemetery, I thought. When, again, I'll be reminded of the Remembrance Days of my youth, of parading with my ATC squadron at the local war memorial and not quite believing that the assembled old soldiers in their 60s, 70s and 80s, the scruffy and the smart and the rich and the poor, riders of pushbikes and drivers of Jags, had lived to tell the tale, to listen to the 'Last Post' played by a CCF bugler once more, and had – somehow – retained most, if not all, of their humanity.

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