Robert B. Shaw

Back Home

In an essay depicting the farm of his childhood, Seamus Heaney begins by invoking the Greek word *omphalos*, "meaning the navel, and hence the stone that marked the center of the world." With a poet's sensitivity to sound, he glides from this into a description of the pump from which his parents and their neighbors drew water. "The horses came home to it in those first lengthening evenings of spring, and in a single draught emptied one bucket and then another as the man pumped and pumped, the plunger slugging up and down, *omphalos, omphalos, omphalos*."

Reading this, I feel a stir of recognition, for I, too, have heard this utterance as water issued from the earth. But the pump I remember stood in a farmyard an ocean and a third of a continent away from Heaney's County Derry, and my memories are of midsummer, not spring, in a baking, unremitting heat unknown to the north of Ireland.

I am looking at a photograph of the place, a farm house with a shallow-pitched hip roof, white and severely plain, which may have begun as a symmetrical block but at some point acquired an el in back. It was built by my great-grandfather in the early 1890s. Even before the el, the house was on the large side, since there were ten children in the family. (The thought is incredible to me, though even more remarkable is the fact that every one of the children, male and female, attended college.) Two of those children were my two grandfathers, which made my parents first cousins. My immediate family's tie to the place was perhaps doubly strong because of this; to make the two-day trip from Long Island to Ohio was to blend a vacation with a pilgrimage. There was a distinct sense of the place as a *source*, especial-

ly for my grandfathers. As children we knew that the farm was still for them the center of the world, and though we didn't fully share the feeling (how could we?), we were respectful and perhaps envious of it. My father's father had lived for more than forty years in Brooklyn, but when he prepared to make the trip to Ohio he always said, in an Ohio accent that Brooklyn never dented, that he was "going out home."

I visited the place only a handful of times, and never as an adult; and it is strange that I remember it as well as I do. It was in the country outside Yellow Springs, home of Antioch College, which in the Sixties became a mecca for the counter-culture—most incongruously, given the surroundings. Like those around it, our family farm had nothing avant-garde to display. The land was flat and sectioned into a gigantic checkerboard of crops, and when we visited in midsummer it was so hot that we really could hear the corn growing: an occasional yeasty popping sound.

After our highway marathon (the Pennsylvania Turnpike seemed endless, and there was more after that) we were relieved to drive up to the dusty turn-around, a big open space separating the house from the barns and other outbuildings. There was a raised fuel tank (I suppose for the tractor) that I once climbed up on and had a lot of trouble getting down from. There were two corncribs with corrugated metal roofs, and when my brother and I were big enough to climb up and jump from one structure to its neighbor, the noise we made alighting was satisfyingly thunderous. Best of all, there was a pump with a tin cup hung on it by a loop of fence wire. While the house had modern plumbing, the pump still worked, and I persuaded myself that the water from it tasted more interesting than the water from the faucets indoors. I now think that I was tasting the cup; but then, the water seemed to have a deeper, darker quality, a taste of coming from a long way down, as it assuredly did.

Inside, or if they had heard our motor, on the hospitable porch, our relatives greeted us. My great-grandfather had died in 1944, and at the times I visited the house, mostly in the Fifties, four of his children lived there. There had been, and would be, some coming and going of others over the years, for his will gave any of his children the right to live in the house whenever and for as long as they wished. This grand patriarchal gesture was held in awe by my parents, but it probably created headaches for the Ohio Shaws. I suspect that when Uncle Emerson, well on in years and wheelchair-bound, moved back in together with his younger wife, there must have been strain on the household. But even before that there would have been plenty of tests of tolerance in so large a family.

The regular and longstanding residents, the four that I knew, were my two great uncles, Ray and Jack, and my two great aunts, Nettie and Ruth. Uncle Ray's marriage had broken up years before, and the other three had never married. They made an odd but serviceable family unit. They even exhibited a curious complementarity in appearance: all of them were spare in build, but Ray and Ruth were tall and fair while Jack and Nettie were small and dark.

Uncle Jack was the one who ran the farm, which was winding down in its operations by this time. He had rented out some of his fields to other farmers and managed what remained without hired help. At the busiest times relatives would come from their own farms down the road to lend a hand. I don't recall many animals; the barns held equipment rather than livestock. But there was one enormous cornfield near the house, and a sizable kitchen garden. Uncle Jack was compact, wiry, deeply tanned: a brown man with a green thumb. He would show us the new vegetables he was trying, holding out a beefsteak tomato big enough to conceal his hand, cutting plugs out of it with his pocket knife for us to taste. He let my brother and me "drive" the tractor while we sat on his lap, and it was exciting to jiggle the little lever to

up the speed—probably from ten to all of fifteen miles per hour. The Shaws tended to be either extremely taciturn or extremely talkative. He was one of the quiet ones, always in overalls, outdoors all day with his chores, happy to have us follow him around.

Uncle Ray, several years older than Jack and his sisters, was quite different. From what I learned later on, his early adulthood was something of a shambles. He had hopes of a career as an actor, had married a woman with the same ambition, and was traveling in a touring company when his wife "ran off," as people always said, with another cast member, leaving him with a small son to raise. After that his life had a makeshift quality. He would have liked to be a teacher, but although he would slip into a pedagogic mode when a topic appealed to him, he never got certified to teach. He went around as a door-to-door salesman—of school supplies, at the time we children first got to know him. His bedroom was filled with samples: pencil cases, pencil sharpeners, even pencils, and much else in the same vein. I think that making his rounds had become more of a pastime, a way to find people to talk to, than a serious way to make ends meet. Others in the family murmured that he had a way of being out of sight if there was heavy work to be done. He was, as improvident people sometimes are, preternaturally cheerful, and this must have been irritating to his siblings, who were all steady workers. He was brilliant at pitching horseshoes; he would have had more time than the others did to practice. He drifted in and out of the scene, smiling benignly, sometimes offering startling opinions. When one of his grandnephews interviewed him for a family history project, he somehow got onto the subject of evolution. He didn't believe, he said, that human beings had descended from animals like apes. "Well," said the interviewer, "what have we descended from, then?" "Eagles," said Uncle Ray firmly. Just at that moment the clock in the room hooted "Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" We had this on tape.

The aunts, both childless, loved children. Aunt Nettie was for the most part in charge of the house; she was diminutive, dark, and possessed of the tranquil patience that made her a fine first-grade teacher. Like her brother Jack, she was quiet, organized, and unhurried as she went about the household chores. Her opinions were a little less surprising than Uncle Ray's, but no less decided. When she drove east with her sister to visit us in the mid-Sixties, she asked me if we had watched Martin Luther King deliver his "I have a dream" speech. When I said we had, she offered her review of it: "He was *inspired*," she said, and she used the word biblically. This kind of thinking made her and her sister a bit suspect in their chapter of the DAR, which they had joined for social reasons. While on that visit she drove us to the New York World's Fair in her heavy sedan, always going a few miles below the speed limit, infuriating the drivers breathing down our necks on the Long Island Expressway. She was unruffled. There was never any doubt in her mind that we would arrive in time to see Michelangelo's Pietà and sample the new sensation, Belgian waffles.

Her sister Ruth was extraverted to the point of boisterousness. Her zaniness, her mimicry, her giggle would infect people, and crowds around her grew louder. She was double-jointed, and liked to show children how she could bend her wrist and fingers back to touch the top of her forearm. Until she retired she lived at the Masonic nursing home in Columbus where she worked as a practical nurse, coming back to the farm when she could on weekends. I had a hard time imagining her measuring out doses in the dispensary, because she had a gangly, all-elbows way of going about things that often resulted in spilled ice tea and shattered glass. She had trained as a nurse in Philadelphia in the Thirties and lived with my mother's family during that time. (Nothing got thrown out in our family, and her outmoded nurse's cape, silky and funereally purple, became my Dracula outfit for Halloween decades later.) She used to take

my mother, then a schoolgirl, on outings that involved odd bits of daring. Once at the zoo, my mother saw her pet the paw that a sleeping lion had poked between the bars; the beast woke up with a terrific roar. Another time, in a park, she patted a mounted policeman's horse, which swiveled its neck back and clamped its teeth on her shoulder, as if it was arresting her. In one more animal encounter, a tethered goat she tried to feed wrapped its cord several times around her legs and proceeded to butt her until she was rescued. Incidents like these she took in high good humor—or at least she and her companions did in recalling them later on. With her great height, her long pale neck, and her sometimes unruly mass of white curls, she reminded one of some arcane, llama-like creature, but it was hard to get her to be still long enough for the impression to hold. Whenever one of our visits to the farm drew to a close, she would hide a twenty-dollar bill in the pocket of my mother's raincoat, knowing that it wouldn't be accepted without protest.

All four of these engaging people seemed as decisively connected to the house as the paint on its walls. It was impossible to imagine them living anywhere but there; and as things turned out, they never had to.

A lot of my memories of visits are composite, for apart from the day trips we made to places like Ohio Caverns (I recall Uncle Jack feeling the rock above our heads and warning the guide leading us among the stalactites that he had a wet ceiling) the life at the farm was much the same from day to day. There were outdoor suppers on an enormous table that my grandfather during one of his stays had banged together, using a section of barn door and some lengths of iron pipe that served as legs. There was plenty of corn on the cob, their own Silver Queen. Local relatives came over in the evening and with their children my brother and I played shadow tag in front of the porch. The floodlight set in the eaves made our shadows so monstrously long that it was not a game of much skill. The grownups, too, liked games, and

would often be playing dominoes or crazy eights as they talked. The television, when they got one, went into the large family room that had been added to the house. I could not draw a floor plan of the house, but that room has always stayed in my mind. Its specially designed flooring—a dramatic green S against a white background of vinyl-like tiles—made it definitively a family room. So did my great-grandfather's pocket watch, which was displayed hanging on a little stand face forward, like a midget clock beneath its glass dome. Aunt Ruth kept the watch wound when she remembered to. I know now that the people who lived in that house had their share of anxieties, but for a child the pervading feeling was of utter stability in a setting of kindness and modest comfort. It was as though time itself was under control for once. The ticking of the watch was inaudible.

Some of my recollections are less generic. Two of them continue to preoccupy and puzzle me whenever I think about the farm. In the first, my brother and I, awake in the middle of the night, were making our way back to bed from the bathroom when we noticed a door ajar with some light lurking behind it. It was Uncle Ray's room. We peeped in and saw him in night clothes but not in bed, sitting next to a work table or desk in the lamplight. The localized light in the surrounding darkness made the room mysterious. Uncle Ray wasn't apparently reading or doing much of anything. He seemed happy to see us, and we joined him for a long, inconsequent conversation, inspecting his salesman's samples and the other oddly miscellaneous things on his desk. It surprised us that he didn't immediately send us to bed as we would expect a grownup to do. He was content to talk, in a hushed, unhurried way, for as long as we were able to listen. We eventually began to yawn and took ourselves off. Although at the time we were charmed by his welcome, I mined a good deal of sadness out of this unmomentous experience when I thought about it as an adult. How often did he keep that sort of vigil, without the accidental company two

children were able to give him that one time?

The other adventure I keep recalling was mine alone, and it must come from the first visit that I can remember, when I was no more than four or five years old. I had gone exploring in the slant-roofed shed tacked on to the kitchen at the back of the house. It was dim and full of clutter—furniture that needed fixing and the like. On top of a box I saw a cat of a common, gray tabby kind, utterly motionless, its four legs stiffly extended. It was the most realistic stuffed-animal toy I had ever seen. Its fur was just as invitingly soft as our cat's was back on Long Island. I decided to ask if I could have it to take to bed at night. I picked it up and walked into the kitchen with it. The aunts, in the middle of making a piecrust or something, looked at me and froze. What I was holding was a dead cat. This is where I feel some bafflement: how did it happen to be there, in that catchall storage space? There was a platoon of barn cats who were fed scraps outside every day, and I have to assume that this was one that had checked out without warning. Uncle Jack probably parked it there, out of the sun, until he had a chance to bury it. None of this was explained to me. But I got the basic message, that it was not a toy I was holding. "Holy Moses!" whooped Aunt Ruth, as she always did when things got dramatic. I was relieved of the cat and hustled to the sink, where my hands were mercilessly washed. I remember thinking afterwards with a kind of awe: I have put my hands on something that is dead. Over the years my memory heightened the grotesquerie, picturing the cat as standing on its four stiff legs; it must have been lying down. Of course, I would have seen dead animals before, but this was the first one that registered. What I had done made me feel strangely singled out and important.

Great-grandfather's watch ticked on under the glass bell. I grew up, and as life got more complicated I saw the Ohio relatives much less frequently. I missed the sojourn of Uncle Emerson, and I missed the aunts' attempt to make some pin

money by raising chinchillas (as they soon discovered, the profits weren't enough to compensate for the animals' fetid odors). I got married, and said to my wife each summer, "We really should drive out so you can see the farm." Something always diverted us. On a bitterly cold night in January of 1976, the farmhouse, probably because of un-updated wiring, caught fire and burned to the ground. Uncle Ray had died a few months before, but his brother and two sisters perished in the fire.

My wife and I were visiting my parents when the news came to us the next evening. My mother took the phone call and after she got over being stunned told us what had happened. I remember standing later in upstairs hall, looking out the window into the night. In my parents' old house some of the panes were of antique glass with wavery ripples and flaws. I was looking through one of these, and the world outside appeared to be not only dark but warped out of its customary formation.

Almost nothing was salvaged from the house. One item that I heard described by someone who viewed the burnt-out scene has stayed with me as though I had seen it myself: Uncle Jack's World War I army helmet, cradled between charred timbers.

My wife and I went back to Cambridge, where we were living at the time; I was finishing up a term appointment at Harvard. I went through the next weeks in an automatic fashion as my feelings veered between numbness and angry regret. I tried to tell one of the Episcopal monks I had become friendly with about the fire. He drew me out with sympathetic questions, and once he had gathered that the victims were relatives I had been with only briefly and sporadically over the years, he said in a gentle, musing way, "Well, relatives like that become almost legendary." I did not feel like following this up, and probably to his relief as well as mine, I evaded any discussion of theodicy. The word legendary made me impatient. The implication was that my

dead relatives were figures in a personal mythology, and could thus be thought of with some measure of detachment. What he had said was kindly meant, but it was off-target. It was true that the days I spent in the presence of those people would not total much more than a month, and years passed in which we did not see each other. If destiny had been kinder than it commonly is, I would have known them better. But I knew them enough to savor their reality, and to feel shock at their sudden absence from the world. No, they were not legendary, not remote, but all too humanly close to me. They still are.

It is good to have the photograph of the house, though its unadorned clapboard face discloses nothing: like all but a very few photos, this one is ultimately inert. It cannot tell all that much more than a picture of the building's ending—as a black patch on a field of snow—would be able to. The better way for me to see my great-grandfather's house and the progeny it sheltered for most of a century is to close my eyes and think back. Then the building stirs with life, and often with laughter, and the aunts and uncles are as vividly there as any of the vital images that inhabit my mind. In a recovered summer, I taste the water from the tin cup, dependably cold even when the pump, standing like a sentry in the unforgiving sun, was almost too hot to touch. And I feel with my fingers the plush of the dead cat's fur, not yet knowing enough to recoil from the rigidity swathed in its softness.