The Bodies That Remain

EmmyBeber

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In talking about death, numbers matter immensely. Dates matter; the date illness was first recorded, dates marking the decline, the date of departure, the date that will come round again as the years roll on, reiterating the shock of death however well it was expected or not. Age matters, supposedly to a greater of lesser extent depending on the age at the time of death. The time of death, that point at which our mattering is blown apart, scattered to the soil of a time beyond us where it’ll either bury down into this-or-that subjective or objective meaning or simply evaporate, is recorded, to keep hold of things, to make things ‘sensical’; an adjective that doesn’t officially exist because ‘sense’ has multiple meanings, unlike its ‘nonsensical’ antonym. But language doesn’t abide, it writhes against logic, through logic, creates its own. Language can describe death, but only from the outside. Numbers don’t explain, but they delineate death, and they continue where we don’t.

I had my first encounter with the novelist, playwright, critic and campaigner Brigid Brophy, aged nineteen, in a book of collected texts celebrating women’s fiction from every year of the Twentieth Century. The collection featured an extract of Brophy’s 1956 novel, The King of a Rainy Country, and a short biography, stating that she had died in 1995, five years prior to the compila-
tion’s publication. It is not remarkable to find out that a writer, though new to you and surely a source of further wonder, is dead. But it is strange and saddening to know they might still have been alive and writing should they not have been, as people say, ‘taken too soon’. Brigid Brophy died at only 66 years of age.

Excited by the aforementioned extract, I bought a second-hand copy of *The King of a Rainy Country* on the Internet, as it was very much out of print at that time. It has affected my life like no other novel, not only because of how I identified with the intangible school experience of the central character, Susan, as she fell in love with fellow pupil Cynthia, or because in Brophy’s voice I heard a spectrum of musings on gender deftly issued before such studies on the subject were established, the future reborn in her clear, yet ever-tantalising prose. For these reasons, I found myself angry that it was out of print, angry once more at the howling omissions of writers such as Brophy from the predominantly male canon of Twentieth Century English Literature. Angry that writers like her were dismissed in her time as ‘oddties’ or merely ‘fashionable’ when in fact they were unashamedly progressive and ‘other’, thus writing the experience of many. I realised that I and a good set of friends might have to be the people to re-publish *The King of a Rainy Country*, and reintroduce Brigid Brophy to a new audience. As a result of this endeavour, I find myself, in all humbleness, associated with her name. All because I had once so strongly associated with this ‘cut-down version’ of herself, as she once described Susan, in a rare concession to the autobiographical.

Brophy was staunchly ‘un-autobiographical’, as she touched upon in the essay *Antonia* for the 1987 re-issue of her novel, *The Finishing Touch*. Therefore, an essay written one year earlier in 1986, was surely a concession of even greater rarity than the fictional offering made in *The King of a Rainy Country*. The essay, commissioned for the American Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series, and later published in Brophy’s collection of non-fiction, *Baroque n’ Roll*, is written in 20 short sections,
and called *A Case-Historical Fragment of Autobiography*. The scrupulous detail and phrasing almost surpasses that which we might call ‘typically Brophean’, telling of how Brophy had lived and worked for the past four years under the degenerative, humiliating and surreal effects of what was for two years, a mystery condition. With each section, she systematically logs the progress of events and investigations that led to her diagnosis, in 1984, of Multiple Sclerosis.

Over the years I have collected books and ephemera that have passed through Brophy’s own hands, often bearing her inscriptions. One of these items is a proof copy of Patricia Highsmith’s psychological thriller *This Sweet Sickness* (1960), with Brophy’s keen reviewer’s notes in the margins. The book, as one would expect, is a no-frills paperback proof; musty smelling, with an age-spotted blue-and-white striped cover that had not yet been assigned a final design. It is an exciting object because it represents a connection between two writers I consider my ‘greats’, and is tactile evidence that Brophy, like myself, was a great admirer of Highsmith. This, I can only conjecture to an extent from the object, though I have heard two accounts of meetings between the women. The first was from the writer and Brophy’s long-time partner, Maureen Duffy. She told me about driving Brigid to Switzerland to meet Pat, only to arrive at the reclusive writer’s fortress of a house, with Brigid cowering in the backseat in a rare show of nerves. Maureen conjured a vivid image of the formidable Pat sauntering towards the car, as though she might reach in through the half-open window, like a murderer from one of her novels, and strangle the naïve intruders. Nevertheless, Patricia Highsmith was famously awkward in her physical carriage. Kate Levey, Brophy’s daughter, told me that ‘Writers both, Brigid and Pat had in common a profound shyness about face-to-face meetings.’ In Andrew Wilson’s biography of Highsmith, the writer’s rigidity and discomfort in her own body is illustrated in an anecdote from Barbara Roett: ‘I always remember that she was quite shocked when I once said, “I must go lie down in a bath.” She’d never actually laid down in a bath.’
It is Kate Levey who provided the second story- a childhood memory of being off school sick, and, for want of her mother finding a babysitter, reluctantly taken to lunch at a Chinese restaurant in Earl’s Court. Brophy had an unmissable date with Patricia Highsmith. ‘That Pat had flown in from somewhere that morning struck me, in itself, as exciting and odd,’ said Kate, ‘but then the whole occasion was strange. Pat seemed large and rather severe.’ Highsmith, though clearly the subject of her mother’s awe, unnerved the young Kate, especially when she opened the fold of her jacket to reveal a jar of live snails that she’d smuggled into England (fables surround Highsmith and her pet snails, which she purportedly often transported in her bra). Some mild teasing ensued, with suggestions of the chefs getting hold of these snails for the menu. ‘Pat’s pet snails were not as troubling to me as the thought that she’d done something illegal, rigidly righteous child that I was.’ An air of illegality was surely part of what drew the two women to each other, both acutely non-hetero, attuned to perversity, and always worrying at the boundaries of conventional behaviour through their writing and their bodily experiences of the worlds in which they lived.

The proof copy of This Sweet Sickness is not something I look at often. I bought it during a period of time working at a second-hand bookshop on Charing Cross Road, where I witnessed the nerdy fetishism of collecting rare books. The majority of the collectors were male, mostly the sort that revel in a kind of ‘out of society’ existence that is maddeningly the privilege of men, and which expresses itself across a spectrum of behaviour from not washing to blatant sexism, albeit of an often ‘vintage’ kind. This prevalent image was highly influential in my dislike of book collecting, but I admit to sometimes being seduced by the seemingly magical, transmissive properties of first editions and signed copies of books by the authors I love. It was during this time that I picked up the proof, which as the stories above concur, is proof of another kind. There is a line that leads from the flecks of pencil in Brophy’s own hand to an imagining of her body, hunched into the warm back-seat of a well travelled car, or to her pushing open
the door of a busy Chinese restaurant with her child’s sweaty, reluctant paw pressed into her other hand, releasing it as she goes to embrace, with surely some excitement and trepidation, the daunting, unyielding body of Patricia Highsmith.

What is it about, this imagining of Brophy as ‘a real person’? Perhaps it is the sensation one has of reading her novels — and I think it specifically applies to novels for their immersive, long-form — as a young person, that seems so pointedly to have touched the core of what you feel before you have the words or experience to express it, and propels you onto a whole new plateau of experiencing the world. Like a love affair, it has made you think completely differently and broken your heart a little. The writer has helped you, in a profound way, to exist. It feels impossible that it is the work of a stranger.

A dedication from Brigid Brophy, in the First Edition I own of Baroque n’ Roll, reads ‘This copy, belonging to Geoff Naphthene, is inscribed with best wishes to him by Brigid Brophy. London, June 1987’. You could say that the opening essay, A Case-Historical Fragment of Autobiography, about her life with Multiple Sclerosis, has in fact begun in the dedication to Geoff, penned in blue ink. It’s not that the dedication has any connected meaning, rather that her stylish handwriting, lithe characters evoking the typographies of Art Nouveau, do not look quite as they appeared in the margins of my copy of This Sweet Sickness. Words take drunken dips and letters lurch away from each other. ‘O’s compress, and ‘i’s are stranded. Here is proof, of a less romantic kind this time. Proof that Brophy’s body was in decline.

It was recently revealed that Brigid Brophy and Iris Murdoch exchanged thousands of letters over their lifetimes. On strict orders from Brigid, every letter to Iris was burnt, so we shall only ever see the evidence of Murdoch’s hand, and the nature of her responses (often surprisingly subordinate and deferential, as
might befit the dynamic of a relationship that surpassed the plato
tonic) to guess at the content of Brophy’s letters. I wonder if those
letters, like my copy of Baroque n’ Roll, had become depressing
visual clues as to the state of Brophy’s health. One can imagine
her physical decline showing on the page, while – cruel irony –
the parallel decline of her friend’s mind into Alzheimer’s disease
might also have begun to show in their meetings and exchanges.
Iris Murdoch features in A Case-Historical Fragment, having
met Brigid for lunch in the New Year of 1984 at a restaurant that
could only offer them a table up a flight of stairs. ‘Iris robustly
put her hand beneath my elbow and hoisted me up it,’ she simply
notes, with no further elaboration on the more famous writer, or
the old affair that was to become public knowledge years after
their deaths. In retrospect, that sentence in isolation contains an
elegy to something far greater, more physically and emotionally
entwined, than the moment in which a hand held an elbow.

A catalogue of relationships with women emerge in even a brief
consideration of Brophy’s life. She was rarely without a pas-
sonate attachment to a woman, despite her marriage to the art
historian and Director of the National Gallery, Michael Levey.
She accepted his proposal of marriage with the caution that,
‘Until a year or so ago I was at least 50% homosexual, and this
was the half I acted upon.’ Their marriage, however, was strong.
A love absolute, but neither owned each others’ hearts exclu-
sively, nor seemingly wished to. Brophy, a self-professed ‘natu-
ral egalitarian’ and so progressive in her writing and left-wing
thinking, could no more limit her ideas about sex and bodies,
as evidenced in her campaign for Sex Education, than her writ-
ings on the rights of all sentient beings — fish included — which
led to her veganism and anti-vivisectionist stance. Indeed, she
acknowledges that her illness gave her ‘a stake in the matter’ of
vivisection. ‘What is the life of this rat or the freedom from ter-
ror and agony of that monkey worth to us?’ was a question she
thought not-to-the-point. ‘The pertinent question,’ she replies,
‘is what they are worth to that monkey or this rat. His life is the
only one that is open to him. His awareness, which you can so
easily suffuse with torment, is the only one he can experience.’ Shocked into bodily awareness and reckoning with mortality, she continued to live according to logic, and would refuse any treatment that had benefited from the ‘fascist atrocity’ she regarded as vivisection.

It seems that on beginning *A Case-Historical Fragment of Autobiography*, the surprise severing of a particularly important relationship might be regarded as the ‘catastrophic grief’ that triggered her illness. Within the first paragraph we are offered a relay of psychological *ambushes, trembles and tumbles*, by an unnamed ‘assailant’ who resonates deep into the essay as they manifest in Brophy’s flesh. In true equivocal fashion, she simply orchestrates our feeling on the subject, by placing the event in the first section of the essay, of which, as I have mentioned, there are twenty. According to her values, it is with the ‘automated version of a formal logician’ (the computer) that she believes the causes of Multiple Sclerosis will and should be deciphered, with a catalogue of data that involves much questioning of the patients. Nevertheless, frequent mentions of the ‘assailant’ who maims her in her nightmares, are indication of a fallible, angry Brophy, in battle with reason and rationality. One can only speculate if wounds of the heart were salted by the physical wounding of her disease. In the end, there is a kind of amnesty of logic, and of vengeful suggestion. As though in surrender to the surreal nature of her condition, she leaves it until the seventeenth section to concede that ‘the question of what does induce it [multiple sclerosis] may well drop out of the accumulated and sifted replies to a question as seemingly wayward as “Do you like blackcurrents?”’

Following her logical dismissal of mysterious forces, she writes; ‘If it is random bad luck to be struck down by the disease, it is random comparatively good luck to be struck down in a welfare state.’ It is a taught, deftly balanced sentence in which the devastation of being ‘struck down’ is immediately cloaked in a ‘bigger issue’; a neater example of ‘the personal is political’ is
hard to find, and it clearly places Brophy on the Left. It is arguably a sentence with even greater prescience today. Welfare state or not, it is worth considering the privileges Brophy might have experienced as a sick woman of a particular class and ethnicity. Brophy mentions how her husband wrote to the head of the unit at the hospital in which she was being treated when there was a mix up with her appointments. There’s little doubt that a letter from the recently knighted Director of the National Gallery would have carried some clout. Perhaps it is tangential to here cite the case of Afro-German poet, activist and educator, May Ayim, who committed suicide in 1996 at the age of thirty six, but I believe it is in the spirit of Brophy to do so. Though very different writers, who lead very different lives, there are points of comparison between the women, notably their activism, and their contraction of multiple sclerosis. May Ayim had been admitted to the psychiatric ward in Berlin in January 1996, shortly after a strenuous period organising Black History Month. The doctors eventually diagnosed her as having multiple sclerosis. They stopped her medication, which had been based on believing she had severe depression, and discharged her in April. Following subsequent readmission and release from the hospital, on August 9th she jumped from the thirteenth floor of a Berlin building. In the case of any suicide, the question of whether it could have been prevented is always difficult to answer, but on hearing this story I was struck by the apparent failure of care surrounding Ayim’s depression and multiple sclerosis; illnesses that might not have been unrelated. I doubt that Ayim would have come across Brophy’s essay on multiple sclerosis in the few months between her diagnosis and death, but if she had, would she have recognised the ‘obsessive and fearful state of mind’ that Brophy experienced before her diagnosis, interpreted as ‘imitations from my body [that] were alerting my mind to facts it did not know’? It is for another essay to go deeper into the various issues surrounding the death of May Ayim, which are surely located in an endemically racist system, but I am sure that both writers would want us to think about how two people from First
World countries with the same disease, might well have received different ‘treatment’ according to the bodies they inhabited.

Where it could seem quite odd, in an essay that is ostensibly about her reckoning with a slow, surreal illness, to encounter one section given over to the details of the Public Lending Right (the campaign that Brophy and Maureen Duffy spearheaded to ensure writers were paid for their inclusion in public libraries), in Brophy’s hands, this diversion into a relatively unexciting though significant enterprise is integral to the emotional head-spin that we experience by the end of the essay. It is because she enjoyed the ‘mechanical and relaxed delight’ of logic, ‘which served me as, I imagine, knitting serves some of my friends’, that she came to embrace and enjoy her immersion into the rules of British Copyright.

The essay is at times infuriating, because it is so controlled, so seemingly sat bolt-upright in a bath full of murky water. Brophy writes with a kind of pedantry that at times reads like the reporting of a ponderous Police Detective. But it is inclusive, talking us through the ‘intellectual knitting’ she could so enjoyably lose herself in when presented with puzzles in the minutiae. The disease that had so ravished her was, of course, a puzzle that she knew she would fail to solve. The essay often reads like an attempt to exercise control, the twenty sections resembling ‘steps’, like the literal steps she has to take with extreme effort. Before the illness is diagnosed, we hear of how Brophy would scale the six steps of the minor portico that led to the communal front door of her building. After heaving herself up via the railings, ‘I crawled on all fours through the communal hall, wondering whether the occupant of some other flat would at that moment come down the staircase or, having begun to do so, would retreat thinking “There’s that eccentric Lady Levey crawling across the hall”’. 
Never does she let the tragedy of her illness fully erase the humour and sense of the surreal that so colours and defines her writing.

In the twentieth section of the essay, Brophy concludes with a typically equivocal segue into a memory of standing on the ‘wind-racked grass at the top of the site of Troy. To one side were the quasi-terraces cut by the excavation to disclose the layers of the successive cities.’ She is there with two companions, one of which we might assume to be her husband, and the other Maureen Duffy, though she does not say. The important thing is that they are three, and are approached by three local children, ‘seriously beautiful, and without a touch of the urchin, seriously serious’, bearing long-stalked, vermillion poppies. The scene ripples with an earthy, magical atmosphere that one might associate with Fellini. Indeed, it is as though the whole scene might suddenly melt like celluloid and disappear into its own oblivion. At the very last, she reveals a kind of writing that conveys the surreality of her condition, that choruses that experience of a ‘strange, unnatural numbness’, lying in bed at night and not being able to ‘tell whether I have crossed one ankle over the other unless I look to see.’ Brophy does not write about flowers without knowledge of their symbolism, and in the myths of Ancient Greece, poppies were used as offerings to the dead. Recognising this courtesy as an act of ‘high Homeric custom’, Brophy searches for something to offer in response. In her pockets she has a clutch of boiled sweets that she describes as ‘big cellophane-swathed ovals in the deep, not quite transparent colours of jewels’. Having created this upward arc of poetic description, in the next moment we are adroitly brought over the peak and into the decline with a knowing, yet poignant admission of the absurd; ‘I am the ancient Greek ghost, sent down in the ultimate sense, who on meeting Charon proffered a boiled sweet as the price of the ferry passage.’

The children did not accept the sweets, a sign perhaps that at that moment she had not been deemed ‘unfit’ enough to make
the passage. Yet writing in 1986, she knows that ‘all that has happened to me is that I have in part died in advance of the total event.’ Brophy expresses her losses physically, through the body. The knowledge that she will never see Italy again is described as ‘an unbearable medallion that bends my neck’. She describes the past as ‘except through memory and imagination, irrecoverable in any case, whether or not your legs are strong enough to sprint after it.’ Perhaps the recollection of the children of Troy is her way of saying that the future, her present, was ever thus, and she will attempt to accept it.

The coincidence of numbers strike me again. A *Case-Historical Fragment of Autobiography*, written in twenty short sections, is really the whole of everything you need to know about Brophy, though she will challenge you, like the excavators of Troy, to ‘disclose the layers’. It is now twenty one years since Brigid Brophy died. Last year, on the twentieth anniversary of her death, the University of Northampton arranged a conference to celebrate her life, to which I was invited to talk about publishing *The King of a Rainy Country*. When I talk about the novel, I celebrate how it achieves nothing so ill-conceived or presumptuously linear as a point of enlightenment, but rather illustrates what it is to merely glean the shimmer of that which is intangible. We speak of losing someone as ‘an intangible loss’, meaning the grief caused by their absence is too great to quantify. The intangible loss I feel for Brophy is rather more literal, because of course, though having grown close to those who knew her, in particular her daughter Kate, I never did.

Could it be that an ‘intangible loss’ is as intangible as the love that prefigured it?

At the end of *The King of a Rainy Country*, Susan learns of the death of Helena, a friend, though that word falters in its reach, that she has only just made. I have since been told that Helena might well have been named after a girl called Helen, who Brophy knew at Oxford, from which Brophy was ‘sent down’ for
‘unspecified offences’, and who had been killed. Brophy writes as someone who completely understands the way in which trauma does not necessarily erupt immediately, but quakes from the inside. Perhaps this especially applies to the experience of those who have had to live and love as ‘other’, and more often than not, with shame. When Susan learns of the death of her friend, there is no ‘normal response’. She is gripped by the sudden, inexplicable urge to call her dentist.

I asked if I could have an appointment at once.

‘Is it urgent? Are you in actual pain?’

‘No. That’s the trouble.’

‘I don’t quite see what you mean.’

Brophy wrote *The King of a Rainy Country* at the age of twenty seven. Until her diagnosis with multiple sclerosis she had only experienced exceptionally good health. Nevertheless, these lines of Brophy’s, delivered in the voice of her semi-autobiographical, nineteen-year-old Susan, reveal a woman who had always faced the intangible, proffering her sweets.

‘I haven’t been for some time.’ Susan tells the receptionist, a kind of Charon of the Dentist’s chair.

“There’s bound to be something that needs doing, isn’t there?”
Fragment: Memory of structures. Blasted. Cleansed. Crave. 4:48. The writer mimics her markings. Clasps them in comfort. “I asked her again about 4:48 Psychosis and the form she was striving to create. She grabbed a piece of file paper from my desk and drew another diagram. She reiterated the Cleansed diagram - the straight line being the plot and the wavy line the story. Then she drew another diagram for 4:48 Psychosis. The circle is the story and, to the right, entirely separate from it, is the plot: a series of disconnected atomic fragments. The analogy was with the self, experienced in bits, unprotected by any coherent sense of whole personality, opened fatally to the world.” Dan Rebellato, ‘Sarah Kane Interview’, Dan Rebellato (blog), 3 November 1998, http://www.danrebellato.co.uk/sarah-kane-interview/.