

(address removed for privacy)

December 11, 2020

Cain—

### The Hollow Men

This is the way the world ends  
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Not with a bang but with a whimper.

T.S. Eliot

I used to think that William Blake's *Tyger, Tyger, Burning Bright* was the definitive poem about death, but the more I see of it the more I discover Eliot's the one to beat. Blake urges us to "rage, rage against the dying of the light," but the reality of death is there's more whimpering involved than raging.

The period from Thanksgiving to my birthday has been my Season of Death since I was thirteen standing over my great-uncle's grave on my birthday. He was more of a grandfather than a great-uncle: both my grandfathers died before I was born, so my great-uncle decided to stand in the place of his brother-in-law and see to it that we kids had a grandfather figure in our lives. He was great at it. He died shortly after the New Year in 1988, and we buried him on my birthday, January 6. My uncle stood by the grave with me, put his hand on my shoulder, and asked me to not let the funeral mar my day. Yes, it was a day of grieving, but it was a happy one, too: it was my birthday.

That same uncle died sometime during the night of January 5th or 6th, 2017, almost exactly thirty-one years later. The day before he died I received a phone call in the morning advising me I had to come out to Iowa, the end was imminent. I hung up the phone, immediately made a reservation on the next flight out that evening, and about ten seconds later received a call from the United States government telling me to show up for an all-day session of polygraph starting in thirty minutes. So I broke speed records getting down there and asked for a compassionate extension on the polygraph, what with my uncle dying and all, but ... Uncle Sam has his schedule, and you'll keep to it. So I did eight hours in the Box with a polygrapher doing his best to wreck me, and getting increasingly frustrated when he failed.

"Don't you understand how serious this is?" he asked. "I'm about to downcheck you and you don't care. Do you know how that makes you look?"

“My uncle’s dying. All I can think about right now is getting on the next flight to Iowa. And you think I should care more about my job than about whether I’ll get there in time to see him pass. Do you know how that makes *you* look?” I asked him.

“You’re uncooperative,” he said, as if that was supposed to concern me.

“You’re a dick,” I told him, because apparently I was too subtle about it five seconds before.

He was unhappy with that answer. I left polygraph that day with an order to come back immediately after his passing.

January 6, 2017 I woke up on my cousin’s couch. She was sitting on a nearby chair. “Happy birthday,” she said. “Uncle Lou’s gone.”

I sat there for a few seconds making sense of this. It was expected, but it was still a hit to the system. I breathed a few times and said, “I have to get on the next flight to D.C.”

“I know,” she said quietly. “He’d understand, too.”

And that’s how I missed my uncle’s memorial service.

Five years ago Shelel Joseff died quite unexpectedly at Thanksgiving. I got the news literally five minutes before sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner. It cast a pall over things. I know you weren’t fond of her, but she was a good friend to me and I still miss her. She, too, went during my Season of Death.

Anyway. Mom’s cancer diagnosis has turned out to be absolutely terminal. There is no hope of reprieve. Every indicator of medical science says she might make it to the Fourth of July... might.

And then if that wasn’t enough, my Uncle Clark died of CoViD-19 a couple of weeks ago. He was my father’s best friend for sixty-six years and a constant presence in my life growing up. I haven’t talked about him much in recent years because he was one of the first people to jump on the MAGA Express, and that drove a wedge between him and me—and also between himself and Dad. To his credit, Dad took the attitude of “if my son has a problem with the road Clark is going down, I’m not going to join him on it.” At the time Dad thought I was overstating the threat Trumpism presented to America, but... let’s just say he’s now grateful for my intervention.

So, Mom’s dying of cancer, Uncle Clark has died of a disease he swore up and down was a hoax, and my country is marching towards civil war.

This Season of Death has far exceeded whatever grim expectations I had for it.

I’m sorry for not having written recently: I know it’s been a good while. All I can say is that you’re on short-time until release, and as hard as it is to say, I’ve had a lot more urgent things taking up my time. Like getting out of bed in the morning—a routine task up until you open your eyes in the morning and wonder why you bothered.

I'm getting out of bed, never fear. I'm getting work done, I'm being productive, I'm not in a depressive episode. I am in a very melancholy one, though. I've always been melancholy this time of year ever since my great-uncle's death, and 2020 has just sharpened its edge. It will pass by mid-January. It always does.

On some level it's even useful to have a Season of Death. *Memento mori*: remember that you, too, are mortal and will soon pass. Or as Rush sang, "we are only immortal for a limited time."

When I was in sixth grade I read a Mercedes Lackey novel—it was sixth grade, give me a break—where a schoolteacher meets one of the True Fae, a Queen of Underhill. The schoolteacher is impressed by all the riches and pageantry of the Sidhe, but a noblewoman of the Sidhe cautioned her not to be fooled. "We have access to the wisdom of all the ages, and lack the wisdom to hearken to it; we are immortal, and yet die by our own foolishness." Something like that. It was a powerful piece of insight to drop on a sixth-grader.

Anyway. Enough about my Season of Death.

Stay sharp,