

*Amerikanisches Geisterfest*  
(an Auto-Archaeology)

Ruth Halaj Reitan \*\*

This being human is a guest house.

...

The dark thought, the shame, the malaise,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

--Rumi

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My mind holds a great hall for feasting. It is teeming with ghosts. Some known some scarcely imagined. I'll introduce you to the ones I know best.

Here come the Stewarts and Minnerlys from my mother's side, with their greasy blue collars and ruddy red noses. They climb up and out from elevator shafts, stumble home after from after-work bars to their large family tables.

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I can't say for certain why I opened and closed this piece in German, except that I wrote it in South Tyrol, Italy, after living there for a few years, surrounded by Tyrolean German. Not being very adept at the dialect, I would usually bookend my conversations with the appropriate greeting or parting, and in between just go with my mother tongue or Italian (!), with great forbearance on the part of my multi-lingual interlocutors. It seems this odd speaking-ritual seeped into my writing at the place and time as well. 'Amerikanisches Geisterfest' translates as 'an American party for ghosts', and *Mahlzeit* means, locally, 'bon appétit'.

\*\* Ruth Halaj Reitan (Ph.D, International Relations, American University) is a scholar of international political economy and sociology, left- and right-wing movements, critical and poststructural theory, and participatory and reflectivist research methods. She is author of three books on transnational social movements (Global Movement, Global Activism, and The Rise and Decline of an Alliance: Cuba and African American Leaders in the 1960s) and several articles. In recent years her interests have turned toward critical media studies and production, including screenwriting, film-making, blogging, drama, narrative, and poetry, as increasingly salient methods of socio-political research, communication, and presentation of her work. In this vein she has written four feature-length, historical screenplays, two of which have won writing awards, and has completed her first short film (Hard Corn, 2014) and is working on a second. Since 2005 she has taught in the University of Miami's International Studies Department in Coral Gables, Florida, and is pursuing an MFA in Motion Pictures at the University of Miami, while continuing to lecture in International Studies. She can be contacted at [ruthhalajreitan@gmail.com](mailto:ruthhalajreitan@gmail.com) or [r.reitan@miami.edu](mailto:r.reitan@miami.edu)

They all crowd around though they don't get along. They talk in loud curses, howled laughter; hurl bottles, hold grudges, then sob and storm out.

In the corner broods a squat Slovak immigrant: My grandfather Jon. Never knew the man living. His father before him changed 'Halaj' to 'Haley' to slip by as white. Jon worked the rug factories of Yonkers as a boy. Bet on dogs at the track as a man (he lost). Bribed two blacks to kill his boss (they didn't). He went to jail for a time. It made all the papers. He terrorized his wife and his child (my mother) with dark moods and loud screams. Grandma broke his hand on a door-jam that once when he tried to hit her.

Jon died at the Midtown Y. Maids found his body, bloated, days later. 'Hurray!' the *echten* Scotch-Irish ghosts cry, 'Serves that Slav bastard right!' And they drink a toast to the ghost of Jon Halaj.

Along my dad's wall of the mind's room for dining sit the Reitans, Taylors and Coxes. Great gaps fill the space between stools. The holy trinity of Cs – craziness, cancer, and Christ – stalk silently. They don't talk about it. Once in awhile one pulls out an instrument, picks a lonesome tune or a faint tender waltz. The corner of a thin lip or dry eye softens imperceptibly.

O'r yonder lies my grandma Luemma Reitan. She was always, infinitely, old. Stick-straight, straw-grey hair, dark hound-dog eyes speak of a hunger from the great dust and blow of the Dirty 30s: That cruel *drouth* (as they say it) killed crops and cows. Dirt clawed through walls, into tractor gears, down throats. It hardened rock-still, 'til none could utter a sound; save for a song to remind them they were still alive yet.

The Reitans blew north to a Chippewa rez', searching for *water*. They found some, and drank; though the silence — and hunger — never left them. But neither did the song.

Behind Luemma, at a distance, stands Louis, my father's lone brother. He was born on my and the Lord's birthday, Christmas Eve. He died in 1943. (As a child I would wonder – is he *me*?). After fighting with grandpa, Louie left the farm in Minnesota for flight school in Texas. He was shot down by Nazis over Romania. Peasants hid the body in the barn and, with great trouble, sent it on home. The US government kept quiet – bad for morale with the war at its end. Sometimes we go stand quiet by his grave, or Dad plays him trumpet on Veteran's Day.

And that slacker over there is Jeff Sabin: Dad's nephew and my favorite, cool cousin. Came home from 'Nam, bought a bike and a bottle — and, well, you know the rest. Left a Mexican wife and a son somewhere in Texas. We met them once. I haven't seen or thought of them since the funeral.

And wait – what is that stench? Chimney smoke, Schmidt beer, dried piss, fear... In scurries that fat little fucker Jackie Doll, the neighborhood drunk and molester. Which accounts for my sister – and maybe the others – but what has it done to me? What the kids can't account for is how come the grown-ups couldn't figure what else to do – except yell at and spank the children (thanks Dad).

Then way in the back are the Brown brothers. Full-blooded friends of my dad. As kids they'd ride horses, play barn dances, build wigwams for wild-ricing on our lakeshore. Now older, the brothers dropped by with butterfly radios, bead jewelry, and guitars to peddle. Dad never bought, but that one time when Sonny Boy stayed for supper, my aunt Lizzie visiting from out east boomed brightly, 'We're so honored to have a real live Indian dine at our table!' I nearly crawled into the lake.

The white eagle feather in his cowboy hat, the piece of electric-yellow corn stuck to his pocked-mark brown jaw, were seared in my mind like a brand of humiliation. He said nothing, just kept right on eating.

His brother Ernie once pissed in the van when we gave him a lift. They both died young and from the bottle. Ernie froze in the field very close to their trailer. As a kid I thought the news funny, and normal somehow, for brothers like them.

And then there's the gang of monkey-wrenching imps who've hollowed out coves just off the dining hall. Of uncertain patrimony, these bastards spring up to raise hell when least expected or wanted: In the cave called Cruelty dwell jokesters with hooked noses to taunt Jewish friends. In Domination lurk 'niggers' to launch upon people of color I oughtta respect. In Self-Loathing, a witch mutters 'weak sister' at some of my gender. In Envy green goblins sharpen knives to slay gay men in competition for lovers.

In Greed lie the two years I took from my girlfriend, Kasi (sister, Jew, of color, lover). With patience, she convinced me I was worthy of love. In thanks I threw her over for a beautiful loser with a surfboard and a dick to match (karmic justice was, he wasn't very good with either). In Cowardice are the two years I didn't give to that old lion named Eldridge when he gave me the chance. I learned of his death from a radio broadcast the morning of my wedding.

And maybe you, too, will carve a cave in my mind-wall. There's room enough for you. I invite you; I have no choice. You're here always anyway and look: You are already eating.

You feast on me and I, on you, like this. Yet, you *feed* me, and I, you, like this. *Mahlzeit*.