

UNDERSTAIRS CUPBOARD

Walking sticks: 2.

Spectacles: 6 pairs.

Clogs: 5; 2 pairs, one odd.

Velvet bag containing funeral urn containing ashes (Kevin McGuinness): 1.

Christmas decorations: many, in a box marked *Noël*, lying on a sharp sand of broken baubles.

Nativity Scene with missing pieces; all animals, no people: 1.

Carved elephant tusk depicting the corkscrewing hierarchy of a Congolese village, starting with assembled warriors and finishing with the chief: 1.

Ivory figurines, mounted on ebony bases: 3.

Various tins with old coins, thimbles, bobbins of thread.

Playmobil, in a box marked 'Klickys' (they are named onomatopoeically here).

Cast-iron waffle-maker (*gaufrier*).

Lead soldiers with chipped paint and plaster cowboys and Indians.

Vintage diabetes kit, missing finger pricker.

School reports for Patrick and Sarah McGuinness from the early 1980s. In one of these, Patrick's physics teacher, Mr Pellereau, writes: 'he is such a nice boy that it is sometimes difficult to get angry with him'. 'Not a difficulty I've encountered much,' said my father when he read it. To have his ashes share a cupboard with those school reports he spent so long analysing is like burying a king with his favourite possessions.

RIMBAUD AND VERLAINE

Verlaine on Bouillon:

'The Semois, lying dark on its bed of chattering stones,
its trout (really I'd call them supernatural, and only my
piety stops me calling them Divine), its castle, well . . .
its *burg*, hewn out of granite among the endless woods
. . . And did I mention the trout?'

Croquis de Belgique, 1895

Two famous *Ardennais*, Rimbaud and Verlaine, ripped their soles in Bouillon and its environs, and would have been knocking around town when my great-grandmother Julia was a child. In fact, Julia and her mother worked as chambermaids in the Hôtel des Ardennes, one of the places where Rimbaud and Verlaine lodged when they visited town, and I can be reasonably sure that my great-great-grandmother changed their sheets.

Rimbaud and Verlaine's story is a picaresque tale, not just of drink, poetry, bohemianism and sexual dissidence, but of a strange, elastic, attachment to place: a picaresque of eternal return. We think of Rimbaud as the archetypal goer-away. But he always came back – 'on ne part pas,' he said: we never leave. So I imagine Julia with her parents, Lucie's grandparents, the Bourlands and the Nicolas, catching sight of them: Verlaine with his Mongol dome ('we instantly remark

the great asymmetry of the head, which Lombroso has pointed out among degenerates, and the Mongolian physiognomy indicated by the projecting cheek-bones, obliquely placed eyes, and thin beard . . . – Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, 1891, pp. 119–20), and beside him a slut-faced adolescent boy he sometimes called his wife, walking without lifting his feet off the ground. They'd have smoked Semois tobacco in clay pipes, sampled the rain, inhaled the smell of still-to-stagnant water on a shallow bank, the heatwave bouquet of slowly poaching algae. Or, in the winter, the Semois lacquering the air, polishing it to a brassy, ringing cold.

Rimbaud was from Charleville, about thirty km over the border: 'Charlestown', he called it. Verlaine's father was from Paliseul, eight km from Bouillon, and his sister, Verlaine's aunt, helped bring up the boy. It was to her that he and Rimbaud often came to escape the police, or their creditors, or Verlaine's other wife, or just to hole up. Verlaine's aunt's house is still there, and a plaque marks it with touchingly feeble wording: 'Ici joua Paul Verlaine'. There's another important plaque, in Brussels, commemorating the occasion on which Verlaine shot Rimbaud in a hotel just off the Grand-Place on 10 July 1873. It is headed 'Il faut être absolument moderne', a quotation from Rimbaud's 'Une Saison en Enfer', and an ironic choice since the hotel 'A la Ville de Courtrai' where the shooting took place* was knocked down in the

* Just look at that: *Take* place. 'Take' place . . . It says it all, but only because place can't be *taken*. I cross-check it in French: 'avoir lieu', they say, as if a place could be had or held or owned. Even worse is the reflexive verb 'se passer': as if the passing was internal, as if time was inside the event rather than the event inside 'Time.

WALLOON PARTY SONGS

Walloon is a variety of French dialect, and was until recently one of the few minority languages still spoken in the cities and industrial heartlands. This can be inferred by the preponderance of aprons and overalls on the record sleeve of this old family favourite. Walloon is concentrated around the big cities of Liège, or Lidje, and Charleroi, or Tchârlerwé, where the legendary Bob Deschamps came from. Although Walloon has declined as a community language, its riches still seep into Belgian French and, notably, into the various *patois* of towns like Bouillon. In fact, Bouillon *patois* sounds so much like Walloon that you have to know Walloon in order to know that it isn't. The only other country where Walloon was spoken in any concentration for the duration of more than one immigrant generation is Wisconsin, where thousands of Walloon industrial workers went to live in the mid-1800s. Recordings from the Wisconsin Oral History Network show that a surprising number of people still spoke Walloon into the 1980s.

The number is surprising not because it is large, but because it is any sort of number at all.

CRIME WAVE

In sitcoms, when someone takes an unnecessary precaution, they are challenged: 'where d'you think this is – the Bronx?' Here in Bouillon, 'the Bronx' is replaced by 'Virton', a town of 11,000 inhabitants forty-two km away. Try it: 'Where d'you think this is? Virton?'

In the early nineties my grandmother read in the local paper that an old lady in Virton was robbed by an intruder while she sat dozing in her living-room. This crime captured Lucie's imagination. With all the dozing she did in her own living-room, that old lady could easily have been her. One day when I returned to Bouillon for a holiday I found the front door locked. This was a first. I was in my twenties, and I saw this as another broken link on the chain of my childhood. Christ, I didn't even know that door *had* a key. (I have it now, use it quite often, and know its reluctant grincing sound as it turns.) I went round the back, through the alleyway, and in through the kitchen, which was open. There was Lucie in

her Voltaire armchair watching TV. But something had changed.

For Lucie, who had been through many bereavements and privations, this remained the worst thing that could happen: to be burgled in your own home. And it hadn't happened halfway across the world, but in Virton. After that, for years to come, or for the few that remained, she would invoke the Virton story: she began locking the doors when she went out, or went to bed. If she was in the front room,

her old workshop, she'd lock the back door; if she was in the back watching TV, she'd lock the front. 'You know what happened in Virton don't you.'

The coda to the Virton story is that the old lady who was the victim of the burglary was a little confused, mid-doze, and had forgotten that the intruder was in fact her grandson, who had popped in, as he regularly did, to get some money to do her shopping. Afraid to wake her, the only stealing he did was in and out of the house. In the throes of a senior moment, the *Virtonnaise* saw what she took to be a stranger in the penumbra of her living-room, and called the police, who responded with Walloon urgency eighty minutes later. One of the officers was able to establish the nature of her confusion when the boy returned with two shopping bags and her change.

My grandmother read this story in *La Meuse* (Province of Luxembourg edition) and knew how it ended. But she focused entirely on the intrusion and ignored the happy conclusion. After that, Virton, the name alone, was enough: a shudder, a quick tour of the doors and windows, double-checking she had double-locked them.