

# Shepherd Watch

AS SOON AS I STEP DOWN from the bus, out of the plastic yellow light, darkness and silence descend like heavy curtains. The street where I grew up is blanketed in night: the houses hide their faces behind their wings, and only the thin voices of crickets and cicadas keep me company.

This isn't how I remember our street. When I was little it seemed noisy and alive at night—parties down the block, dogs and sirens and the tidal rush of D.C. traffic down 16th Street. Shepherd Park in those days was feral suburbia, an enclave of apple trees and drug deals, lilacs and car thefts. It was shady in both senses of the word.

Now the fences are higher, and the cops finally scared off the dealer across the street. D.C. is marginally more competent—winters are no longer bring-your-own-snowplow—and shockingly more expensive. Our little street is hushed, held in suspense like a rocking cradle. Even the azaleas seem more tasteful now: no more camp clashing purple next to orange next to pink. The elementary school got new playground equipment after the year when the slide had no slide, turning it into a diving platform with mulch instead of water. I remember hiding in the old equipment, with sun baking the battered metal, burning my knees when I wasn't careful.

The school was Afrocentric, with an almost entirely black student population. To this day I can't name a single white boy I went to school with. We learned the seven Kwanzaa virtues; I am relieved that parents prefer to name their girls after *imani* (faith) and *nia* (purpose), rather than, say, "cooperative economics." I don't remember much

racial tension, but then, I was a deeply self-centered child and weird enough that my skin color was not one of the obvious targets of teasing. I do recall one teacher asking me, essentially, "Does 'bumpin' mean 'good'?" (Yes.) When I was very young, I thought most people in America were black, like all the authority figures in my world except for my parents and President Reagan. I got the good parts of black childhood culture—handclap rhymes and "Honey, I Love," double-dutch and the dozens, all my candied memories—without the burden. I didn't hear about having to be excruciatingly careful with the cops, about "good hair" and the paper-bag test until much later.

In the fall, the Japanese maples flared red, heat lightning shook the sky, and I started thinking about my Halloween costume. I was a melodramatic child, with a mossy tendency toward deliberate obscurity. One year I trick-or-treated as "the ghost of a wolf." No matter how bizarre my disguise, I always hoped someone would recognize me, open the door and know instantly who I was supposed to be. Of course, this never happened. Still, I loved Halloween: loved wandering in the acrid night, my costume like a secret shouted in a private language. A mask is above all an attempt to communicate, to create and reshape meaning over the silence of skin.

Shepherd Park is crowded between Rock Creek Park on the west and Maryland to the east and north. On a spring night, as my father nosed the car down into a fog-hung valley west of home, we might see a deer cropping grass by the roadside in a flurry of cherry blossoms. Go in the other direction and the night finally makes noise, amid Georgia

Avenue's beauty salons, Caribbean take-outs, and liquor stores. ("Last Liquor in D.C." is a geographical rather than apocalyptic advertisement.) To the north, the signs are now in Amharic, and the Sunday buses fill with light-skinned, high-cheekboned women in white dresses and headscarves, on their way to the Orthodox churches.

Home's southern border was less well-defined. I'm never sure how far south you have to follow Georgia before you're in somebody else's neighborhood. Once you get past the caesura of Walter Reed Army Medical Center, every syllable of the street comes to vivid and variable life. Partiers spill over the boundary of their stoop, with a red plastic cup of beer in one hand and the stroller handle in the other. A dreadlocked boy, in a black T-shirt with white print reading GIRL, ducks into a fish shop with his friends.

A knot of older black men sits on the yellow curb at the edge of a parking lot. They watch me go by, and we attempt to exchange the casual, don't-mind-me glances of city dwellers, but I calibrate the length of my glance or the quirk of my lips incorrectly and convey something I don't feel. One of the men says dryly, fightless and unhumbled, "Don't be scared, ma'am. We ain't gonna hurt you." I don't remember what I said in return, something quick and clumsy.

The night is a map of different kinds of silence—from the settled hush of leafy streets to the blank defeat of miscommunication. I wish I had a mask to speak the words my skin can't say. ■

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# The Elusive Oakeshott

The great British philosopher defined conservatism less as a political program than as a way of life.

By Kenneth Minogue

AS A STUDENT, I felt at a disadvantage when facing radicals because they had a universal theory of what made societies tick. Indeed, the dominant Marxist version—about capitalism and its contradictions—claimed to be scientific. Hogwash, of course, but who was I to swim against the tides of history?

Michael Oakeshott destroyed such gullibility, which is one of the reasons he is such an indispensable figure. He was both a philosopher and a conservative. Many people want to put these things together and say that he was conservative philosopher, but Oakeshott would not have identified himself in that way. Understanding why is the beginning of wisdom in grasping his thought.

Those with a conservative temperament, he suggested, have a strong sense of their identity and are suspicious of innovation because change always means something lost as well as, perhaps, something gained. Put another way, the conservative enjoys the resources of his culture and is not forever fidgeting about big changes promising a better life.

That radicals are bold and adventurous and conservatives timorous is a claim that has confused many distinguished figures. F.A. Hayek, the great libertarian theorist, wrote one marvellously silly article on this theme. It appeared as an appendix to his *Constitution of Liberty* (1960) and was called “Why I Am Not a Conservative.” Hayek argued that conservatism was essentially a “timid”

refusal to take risks. Hayek was the theorist of a system in which prosperity depends on people taking risks—and facing up to the consequences. Successful risk-taking leads to fortune, unsuccessful to bankruptcy, and both are necessary in a free world. The essential feature of this economic adventure, of course, is that the risk-taker must be venturing his own life and capital. Hayek, of course, appreciated the horrors that result when politicians are able to gamble with other peoples’ lives and fortunes. On this, Hayek and Oakeshott, who were quite good friends, agreed.

Are conservatives merely timid sticks-in-the-mud? Let us push this question a little further. If timidity—which is to say, caution—is a fault, then boldness must be good. Hayek admired the excitement of a risk-taking capitalist system that created unprecedented prosperity for Europeans. But if it’s excitement you are seeking, there’s no doubt that is best supplied by radical doctrines such as socialism, communism, and fascism. Imagine the exhilaration of being a Bolshevik in 1917 and having the power to create a society, without rich and poor, in which everyone shared in prosperity. The same fervor moved those who believed in purifying the German race or overcoming social divisions through fascist totalitarianism in the Italy of 1922. Even the project of creating a welfare state in Britain after 1945 had a certain glamour. But these projects turned out to be

among the nastier passages of human history. Obviously some forms of radicalism are better than others, but all of these bids to radically transform society ended, at best, in reactionary boredom—and often in prodigious ugliness.

Such radical adventures, if they lasted long enough, brought about several generations of geriatric tedium. As we saw with Bolshevism, the old revolutionaries and their toadies clung to power, and radicalism resulted in a set of oligarchs with no higher ambition than to remain top dogs. Fortunately in our Western parts, democratic elections have provided happy relief from governmental folly, for the basic reason that we in the modern West are too restless to tolerate a supposedly perfect world. New generations have aspirations of their own.

Yet there is another reason why radical measures disappoint: they always promise improvement beyond the constant political adjustments that make up the politics of our lives. But perfection, by its nature, destroys the possibility of progress. And this helps to explain the necessity of conservatism as the basis of freedom. Our world is full of enthusiasts struggling to make the world a better place. Sometimes, poor devils, they succeed. There’s no disappointment like that of overblown expectations, even if not all are as dramatic as the collapse of the Bolshevik dream into the repressive backwardness of the Soviet Union. Constitutional government in democracies respects the ever-changing processes of