

## Poems of Cemetery Places

Here's a telling question for all of us postmodern poets—or anyone living in an urbanized, digitalized, and populous society such as our own: Where, that is in what *place*, do we expect to be buried? The answer carries some importance in terms of how we think of place and our relation to it, and our response has much to do with how we write about place.

According to Robert Pogue Harrison in his book *The Dominion of the Dead*:

For the first time in millennia, most of us don't know where we will be buried, assuming we will be buried at all. The likelihood that it will be alongside any of our progenitors becomes increasingly remote. From a historical or sociological point of view this is astounding. Uncertainty as to one's posthumous abode would have been unthinkable to the vast majority of people a few generations ago. Nothing speaks quite so eloquently of the loss of place in the post-Neolithic era as this indeterminacy. (31)

For Harrison "the loss of place" has a specific connotation. In his way of thinking, "places are located in nature, yet they always have human foundations. They do not occur naturally but are created by human beings through some mark or sign of human presence" (18). This is a narrower idea of place than we editors and most of the poets in *Windfall* have assumed, but if we grant Harrison his precondition of human presence in a conception of "place," we may find new ways of thinking about how we relate to place here and now. Harrison goes on to say that place is where "time, in its human modes, takes place." Human life is finite, and when we build something in a place, such as a grave, we are giving a sign of our "mortal sojourn on earth."

Harrison goes on to say something startling: that humans built houses for their dead before they built houses for themselves. That is, our nomadic Paleolithic hunter-gatherer ancestors would first have

interred their dead in places that could be revisited at least yearly in their migrations, while their own dwellings were temporary at best. Ten thousand years ago the Neolithic farming era led to settled communities and a more formalized interment of the dead, sometimes on the outskirts of town, later within the houses of their living descendants, later still in churches and churchyards, and more recently in the cemeteries of Europe and America that still serve a contemporary function.

These cemeteries range from the stone necropolises (“cities of the dead”) in the Old World to the “nature parks” that Phillipe Ariès says originated in America, where the space was available and nature retained an emotional power that had been lost in Europe. Whereas European cemeteries such as those in France replace nature with stone monuments and statuary, American cemeteries resemble parks of greensward with headstones, and more recently the most minimal of grave markers (even flat ones to facilitate mowing). The occasional cypress tree (symbol of mourning) may appear in French cemeteries, but American cemeteries feature a variety of trees, placed for their ornamental or symbolic value, because the cemetery has become a “garden of meditation.” Evergreens (especially pines and yews) suggest eternal life, while trees whose leaves turn color and fall (notably the elm) suggest mortality.

Perhaps the most famous poem that reflects this meditative quality is Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” published in 1751:

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew tree’s shade,  
Where heaves the turf in many a moldering heap,  
Each in his narrow cell forever laid,  
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

This poem touches on a number of the themes mentioned so far: the grave as a place marked by human presence, the cemetery as a city (or hamlet) of the ancestral dead, and the assertion of the limits of human life upon the cycles of nature. The constructed grave then is the foundation of architecture, and at the same time, a sign of the limits of individual life, as well as human continuity through time, as the



he remains vitally alive who is ready to *die with life*. For in the secret hour of life's midday the parabola is reversed, death is born. The second half of life does not signify ascent, unfolding, increase, exuberance, but death, since the end is its goal. The negation of life's fulfillment is synonymous with the refusal to accept its ending. Both mean not wanting to live, and not wanting to live is identical with not wanting to die. Waxing and waning make one curve. (407)

Jung suggests that the refusal to accept life's ending is more common in our Western culture than in Eastern culture. He says that nothing in our culture prepares us for life's second half, like child-raising and college do for the first half, so after forty or so, life goes on vainly repeating the first half. This situation seems ripe for exploration by poets. It seems clear that the acceptance of death could motivate poetry, such as Mandelstam's calm and elegant stanzas about life's transition in mythological terms:

When Psyche, who is life, steps down into the shadows,  
the translucent wood, following Persephone,  
a blind swallow casts itself at her feet,  
with Stygian tenderness and a green branch.

The shades swarm to welcome the refugee,  
their new little companion, and greet her with eager wailing,  
wringing their frail arms before her  
in awe and trouble and shy hope.

—Translated by Clarence Brown and W. S. Merwin

As Jung suggests, an even broader acceptance of death can be found in Eastern cultures, especially those influenced by Buddhism, such as the ancient Chinese. In the late Tang Dynasty, the poet Chia Tao (779-843) left his Buddhist monastery in order to wander, visiting hermits and fellow monks in mountain retreats:

MOURNING THE DEATH OF CH'AN MASTER PO-YEN

Fresh moss covers  
the stone bed;

how many springtimes  
was it the Master's?

His profile in meditation  
has been sketched;  
but the body of the meditator  
has been burned.

Snow in the pines  
has closed the pagoda courtyard;  
dust settles in the lock  
on the sutra library.

I chide myself  
for these two tears—  
a man who hasn't grasped  
the empty nature of all things.

—translated by Mike O'Connor

Chia Tao's speaker chides himself for his tears of grief, which show that he has not fully accepted the emptiness of things (*shunyata*)—a powerful theme in ancient Chinese poetry. Here we have the poem of lament, or the elegy, of which there are a vast number of well-known examples in the Western canon, many taking place imaginatively at graveside, in cemeteries, as in these last stanzas from Theodore Roethke's "Elegy for Jane, My Student, Thrown by a Horse":

My sparrow, you are not here,  
Waiting like a fern, making a spiny shadow.  
The sides of the wet stones cannot console me,  
Nor the moss, wound with the last light.

If only I could nudge you from this sleep,  
My maimed darling, my skittery pigeon.  
Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love:  
I, with no rights in this matter,  
Neither father nor lover.

The elegy constitutes, as Robert Pogue Harrison would imply, part of the formal process of mourning:

Funeral rites serve to effect a ritual separation between the living and the dead, to be sure, yet first and foremost they serve to separate the *image* of the deceased from the corpse to which it remains bound up at the moment of demise. Before the living can detach themselves from them, the dead must be detached from their remains so that their images may find their place in the afterlife of the imagination. (147-48)

Through his elegy, Roethke makes of his student Jane a series of images ("my sparrow," "waiting like a fern," "a spiny shadow," "my skittery pigeon") for the afterlife of the imagination. We find a more subtle version of this process of image-making (a transformation of the dead into camellia buds and songbirds) in Portland poet Dennis Bleything's brief elegiac lyric for his father:

THIS DYING

*for SHB*

The deer come  
to your grave each night  
and if we have left flowers  
they taste them.

This dying as buds  
swell on the tall camellia,  
songbirds returning  
to wet shrubs in the field.

I brought you a Psalm  
a song, a poem. We sing  
our voices following you  
for all of our lives.

Sometimes we visit a cemetery because someone long dead and famous is buried there, and this is often the occasions for an elegiac poem. One example of many is Allen Ginsberg's "At Apollinaire's Grave"; the opening lines of the third part are a direct description of the

grave itself in Père Lachaise cemetery. The details reflect the surrealist aesthetic and persona of the poet Apollinaire:

Came back sat on a tomb and stared at your rough menhir  
a piece of thin granite like an unfinished phallus  
a cross fading into the rock 2 poems on the stone one Coeur  
Renversée  
other Habitez-vous comme moi A ces prodiges que j'annonce  
Guillaume Apollinaire Kostrowitsky  
someone placed a jam bottle filled with daisies and a 5&10c  
surrealist typist ceramic rose  
happy little tomb with flowers and overturned heart

An entire cemetery may be the subject of a poem, such as Dorotheenstadt Cemetery in Berlin, where artists, writers, architects, and philosophers are buried, including Hegel, Fichte, Bonhöffer, and most famously, Bertolt Brecht. Brecht lived in an apartment overlooking this cemetery, and, befitting his aesthetic of the ordinary, his grave marker is an oblong stone with "Brecht" in plain white paint. Brecht is most widely known as a playwright, but in Germany he was also famous as a poet, and one of the poets of the next generation most influenced by him was Günter Kunert, who wrote this poem:

DOROTHEENSTADT CEMETERY  
In the graveyards of dead poets  
power triumphs  
over the powerlessness of words  
  
Even heavy stones  
are thoughtless lies  
towering above defenseless bones  
barricades against the living  
that they may stop here  
to think and know  
that sooner or later they will fall victim  
to continued usefulness  
  
Visitors like you

in dark suits and proper expression  
will never hear the warning  
the pitiful screams of withered leaves  
under their soles on the path  
to their appointed place.

—Translated by Jutta Donath

Here again the poem serves as meditation on the mortality of the visitors to the cemetery. Since Dorotheenstadt was located in the former East Berlin (under communism), power triumphs over words—as death also triumphs—contradicting the usual trope of the immortality of art. The visitors meanwhile seem oblivious (leaves underfoot), another kind of death.

Though we might visit a famous tomb or cemetery somewhere in the Pacific Northwest, more commonly we will find ourselves in local graveyards attending plots of family or friends. Shannon Applegate has written a prose memoir called *Living among Headstones: Life in a Country Cemetery*, which tells of her experience after inheriting the Applegate Pioneer Cemetery in Yoncalla, Oregon. While the cemetery was the private resting place for the descendants of the Applegate family, it also served as the cemetery of Yoncalla in general. In the course of her memoir, Applegate covers the myriad aspects of cemeteries, some mentioned already in this essay: attitudes toward death, trees, iconography of headstones, burial practices, funerals, and grave goods (i.e., the things left on graves by the living, such as the two poems, surrealist rose, flowers and overturned heart in Ginsberg's poem—or, in the case of contemporary graves overseen by Applegate, plastic flowers, ceramic Scooby-Doo figurines, and mylar pin wheels). Applegate's book holds a wealth of information and ideas for further writing—all in the context of stories about her diverse and complex family and the place that is Yoncalla.

Applegate notes that in Oregon, with a population of less than four million, "there are at least three thousand cemeteries." Some of them are small pioneer cemeteries such as the one she manages, others are located today next to (or, Applegate notes, under) malls and other commercial



enterprises, and some are big city cemeteries of many acres. Probably the same number of cemeteries can be found in Washington. A recent article in the magazine of the Nez Perce County Historical Society claims that there are thirty cemeteries in the vicinity of Lewiston, Idaho (population 30,000)—including one with only one grave. In brief, wherever we live, we live among the dead, and the cemetery near us is waiting for us to visit and meditate. Each cemetery is a special place indeed, as unique as the poet who passes through. Harrison gives this positive summary of the intimate relation between the living and the dead:

The dead depend on the living to preserve their authority, heed their concerns, and keep them going in their afterlives. In return, they help us to know ourselves, give form to our lives, organize our social relations, and restrain our destructive impulses. They provide us with the counsel needed to maintain the institutional order, of which they remain the authors, and prevent it from degenerating into a bestial barbarism. The dead are our guardians. We give them a future so that they may give us a past. We help them live on so that they may help us go forward. (158)

Here are themes for ten thousand poems in three thousand cemeteries. Send yours to *Windfall!* (We also note that the Oregon State Poetry Association has opened a category for the elegy in its annual spring poetry contest; see the OSPA web site: <<http://www.oregonpoets.org/Contest.html>>).

As to our original question, maybe we will choose not to be buried at all. Given the popularity of cremation in recent years, the scattering of ashes has become more common. Applegate writes, "In Oregon and other states, it is illegal to scatter human remains at sea unless the three-mile limit has been passed" (204). Some national parks also prohibit such scattering, just where many find it most attractive to do so. However, if we choose scattering, it could lead to a poem of place, for the scattering must happen *somewhere*, as in Mary Lou Sanelli's poem "Scattering Pappy's Ashes" in the very first issue of *Windfall*. It shows also our conflicted relations toward death:

Now, we walk into the trees, arm in arm,  
or singular, the path muddy under our feet.  
The ashes are spread, and for a moment  
the tough, scarred trunks of fir give voice  
to the rooted man we knew, a man so engaged  
nothing *but* death could stop him. Here is where  
we hold on, balanced against the resolve of the other.  
I notice how our lips curve into smiles  
somewhat detached like the way we grin on airplanes.  
When tension finally breaks, we hug joyously,  
as if Pappy has just been born.

The rest of the afternoon we return  
to ourselves, try to get there in body, determined  
to put the finishing touches on our own lives.  
Not one of us sure of ourselves,  
how we'll let go in the end.

Bill Siverly  
Michael McDowell

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