

I. The Question of a Name

The first year I didn't set foot inside the cemetery. The still smoking hole across the water held my attention, a smell curling inside the minds of the *million-headed city*, even in sleep.

a weather breath resurrects

The second summer I thought of taking an old boyfriend from L.A. for a tour: *First Public Opening of Green-Wood's Catacombs*. We crossed the street, joined a flock of Manhattanites looking around at nowhere Brooklyn.

The catacombs turn out to be American, a filing system. The long whitewashed tunnel built into a hill exhales its blank air. We shuffle past dark little niches, each topped by a soil clogged skylight. Our flashlights find stack after stack of sealed drawers with plaques. No bodies. No bones.

Among the crowd I see Micah Garen, who will be kidnapped in Iraq while shooting a documentary about looted artifacts. Fact means not "true" but "to make." *The fact of art a trace*.

My guest also is named Micah, who prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem. This one made an anti-Bush book out of World War II propaganda posters. Later *The Washington Post* will reveal as a lie his detailed description of jumping into Panama as an Army Ranger. A fact I wore like jewelry.

On TV we will watch Micah Garen's tearful fiancé and West Village neighbors. This one will convince his captors he seeks to expose the truth about the war and they will let him go.

Lucky, "a word of mysterious origin." *Lucky*, we all said, that we came up from the subway after the planes hit but before the buildings weakened enough to collapse. And then—

Fall I walk into the cemetery almost daily, between trips home to New Mexico for rounds of what is called my mother's chemotherapy, a Frankenstein of "healing" + "alchemy"

to "chemical" transmuted
from the ancient name
for Egypt, *Black Earth*
or Greek for *sap*
(a quick
ness) the place

I get lost in it. Acres: 478. Interred: approximately 600,000. Plus full fall trees, among the oldest left in Brooklyn, a road enclosed in oak light. Every turn makes me take a breath. *I dilate and conspire*, so I am more like trees,
a net of breathing.

My footsteps sound outside my head and in. At first I am afraid a little. Not of ghosts or seeing bodies. Maybe just of staying lost. Or of coming across someone live, a cemetery worker, who might ask me what I'm doing here.

Soon I understand, which means "to lift." The cemetery maintains its own quotidian, a rhythm. See the army of guys in green uniforms, "the greens" I think, engines strapped to backs, blowing leaves off paths. Don't fall fall. Plus constant funerals.

the foreign birds

Custom held that people be buried only in the sanctified ground of churches. But epidemics of yellow fever and cholera swept the city, and the dead overflowed the churchyards. In his 1823 *Remarks on the Dangers and Duties of Sepulture*, Francis Allen describes the graveyard of downtown Manhattan's Trinity Church as *saturated with ... flesh.*

Bones had to be dug up to make room for new bodies, and New York sometimes had to ship its dead to Boston or Philadelphia as it now does its trash: a word decayed from the sound of cut down woods. See "twig," "splinter," and "sprig."

what language did this blood once speak

I meant it
to be hardly words

not trees

Allison Cobb

Green-Wood

In spring the great egret appears. I first see it one day as I'm rounding the corner toward Valley Water. It starts a little leap in me, unfolding into flight.

a look back, a lake

I begin to watch for it in each of the cemetery's four glacial ponds. It hunts most often in Crescent Water, a little scum-covered lake by the Gothic tomb of William Niblo, owner of Broadway's most fashionable nineteenth-century theater. He stocked the pond with goldfish, filled the grounds with *shrubbery, vines, and flowers*, and hosted parties here before he died. A discrete metal seal near the iron gate says PERPETUAL CARE. Red geraniums pool at the feet of his lion sentinels.

I sit on a wooden bench in front of Niblo. DUCTILE IRON LIBERTY BENCH NEW JERSEY reads the curved metal arm. The decorative iron scroll is stamped CHINA. The egret stands perfectly still, tilted out over the water. It has hardly a head, just eyes and beak—honed across seven million years into a living point.

Hunters nearly wiped out the egret during the nineteenth century to fulfill demand for its cascading breeding plumage on women's hats. *At her feet animals pile their fur and feathers*. In 1892, a merchant in Florida shipped 130,000 egret skins to New York.

I also want to possess this creature. *A kind of appetite, a trace*. I sit looking at it for a long time, sun buzzing down on the crown of my head, in my ears the drone of an engine pumping air into the water. This is the sound of the war against algae, ancient one-celled creature somewhere between plant and animal that feeds off light and can live almost anywhere. It spreads across tree trunks and tombstones also, giving the place on cloudy days a green sheen.

The self in this place is always late for work. I rise to go, but a cormorant pops up through the scum and flips a bright descendant of Niblo's goldfish down its gullet. Suddenly, the little pond seems fabulous, an opera. The egret stilts up toward a tree, releasing a smooth spray of shit as white as it. I see it snatch a fat dragonfly, wings sticking like a bow out of its beak.

applause, the graveyard

Not graveyard. They called them cemeteries, “a place to sleep,” in imitation of the Greeks, at least until the Resurrection.

I slept

I slept. Walking for a year. *A confined slice*. I wrote nothing, read nothing about the place. I meant to disappear, but it kept offering its face to read, a text with blanks and bits floating free, death

itself a fact the cemetery,

which is time and also weather,

resurrects: the HAPPY BIRTHDAY

IN HEAVEN balloon wrecked

on a branch, ABRAHAM

COTREL 1846 ALL FLESH

IS GRASS, the berry-clotted

clump of shit by the shore

of Sylvan Water, trace

of some wild animal

the crowd itself says yes

April 1834. Ralph Waldo Emerson sits in a sunny clearing in Mt. Auburn Cemetery and experiences an ecstatic vision. His life seems *flying to pieces*. His wife has died at age nineteen. He has left the ministry, the calling of his father and his father before, unable to reconcile himself to the old beliefs. He notes how the pines glitter in the light *with their innumerable green needles* and thinks of the *great star* in its ancient passage. He sees the clouds above him and senses the Earth beneath him and feels the harmony of all things, himself among them.

Allison Cobb

Green-Wood

The New York Public Library creaks. It breathes, sucking call slips through brass tubes to an invisible vault below our feet. The ancient book comes forth, encased in a cardboard envelope THIS FLAP FIRST. Book veiled for its resurrection like carved urns on tombs half draped in cloth, a sexual peeking out.

I peel back leaf after leaf. Rural cemeteries grew out of England's picturesque landscape tradition, but the Transcendentalists gave them a distinctly American character. They called on citizens to leave the *blighted city* and immerse themselves in the continent's untouched nature: *space, the air, the river, the leaf*.

The Transcendentalists fetishized the wilderness as it vanished before their eyes. The population grew ten-fold during Emerson's lifetime. Railroads stitched the frontier closed; factories bled smoke across New England. Here's globalization for you: A businessman in Boston shipped ice cut from Walden Pond to Calcutta.

By the time Emerson published *Nature* in 1836, much of the primeval New England forest was gone, the vast pine stands of the Ohio Valley about to fall to the saw. He watched mountain lions, grey wolves, bison, and elk disappear from the land.

Against this backdrop, rural cemeteries offered oases of permanence and tranquility. *O soil silence and leaf light*. They provided a sanitized version of the natural world and obscured among the *glancing foliage* the decaying human body, itself a wilderness.

they eat

As institutions, rural cemeteries reduced Transcendentalism to a prescription for breathing clean air and experiencing Romantic sentiments—loneliness, melancholy, hope. But Emerson cleaved to the wilds of the mind, *glad to the brink of fear*.

I want to go there.

In summer the news reports dead cormorants washing up on beaches from California to Washington. *A dark punctuation*. Scientists say the plankton has disappeared from warmer waters, killing off fish and leaving the birds with nothing to eat. So the Great Chain breaks upward link from link.

Following Coleridge, the poet Susan Howe calls herself a “library cormorant.” Voracious. As a high school student, Howe sought books from the Widener Library at Harvard, but her father, a professor, said it would be trespassing for her to go there. *I could come with him only as far as the second-floor entrance. There I waited while he entered the guarded territory to hunt for books.*

Cormorants will live anywhere water meets land. The first summer I often see two of them fishing in Sylvan Water. The next summer, only one appears and only occasionally. It swims low in the water with its head tipped up, looking expectant, gregarious. People call them “crow-ducks,” “sea turkeys,” and “lawyers.”

In New York, government officials oil eggs, smash nests, and shoot cormorants. The birds are flourishing because vast catfish farms off the Southeast provide a captive winter food source. They have taken over entire islands, killing everything around them with their acidic droppings. The article about the killings is titled *Balancing Act*. The story repeats itself. In the nineteenth century, hunters nearly exterminated cormorants because they competed for fish. In 2004, the government authorized shooting near fish farms. Hunters killed more than twenty thousand.

In *The Birth-Mark*, Howe reports that cormorants can be trained to fish for a keeper. Bird owners in China put a ring around the cormorant’s throat to keep it from swallowing its catch. In Japan the birds are believed to bring an easy delivery—a woman should grasp a cormorant feather just as she is giving birth.

One morning, I see a lone bird standing on the shore, drying its dark wings in the sun. Howe notes that in *Paradise Lost*, Milton describes Satan perched in the Tree of Life like a cormorant. *The darkness animate.*

History makes me absurd, a poet in a cemetery, from the Sanskrit for “to sound,” as in off-harmony. I walk (literally) in the footsteps of Whitman, who liked to stroll here.

a dead tree loves the fire

But every age has its ghosts, a kind of rage. The language.

Dream delivers us from dream, and there is no end to illusion wrote Emerson.

The word comes from Latin *ludere* “to play.” In the 1840s, as industrialism wrenched the culture, a wave of exuberance broke across the nation. Spiritualism swept entire towns. People heard table rappings, saw phantoms, fell down possessed by the Holy Spirit. Communes coalesced against the forces of atomization, the family withdrawing into its padded parlor.

Too late. Emerson decided not to relinquish his self-reliance, to him the ultimate frontier. He declined to join the Brook Farm commune with its intricate social structure. Instead, he made his own attempt to reorder society by inviting his servants to dinner. Maybe his voice betrayed him. They refused, and the matter slipped into silence. The silence of *Experience*.

a self is a kind of privilege, plumaged with grief

Green-Wood’s founders aimed to create an Eden, and they did not fuck around with security. They promised to prohibit the entrance of all *improper persons* and to protect the rich from resurrection men, who dug up and sold bodies for medical research. Quaint. As if the mind did

“circle
a country or a place,” which
= time, the body
breathing (a weather).

Think, akin to magic, “to
cause to appear.” Think
thirsty constant weed
whackers, the rising

tide of grass, the force that
through the stupid
lilies drives the bone
glow from below. Think shined-
up tendon straps.
600,000 sets of teeth lamps.

The sleepers awake, I am enclosed by iron spikes, some places razorwire.
Patrolled by security guards in cars that say K-9. I feel watched constantly.
Alive among the dead for no purpose. No grief or leaf blowing.

a lifelike picture, dear

Allison Cobb

Green-Wood

