

AMONG THE STONES

Hal Pratt

The dead move unexpectedly. Earth settles and shifts around them. It sinks and heaves. I imagine the dead cradled in their caskets, tossed like ships upon a tumultuous sea.

And the tombstones move as well. They tilt left or right. They lean forward, they fall backward, moving with the patience of time itself, until they can topple with silent suddenness on the graveyard grass which surrounds them.

For years now I have walked through the cemetery near my home. It offers a somehow crowded solitude, as if the stones are themselves the people they are intended to memorialize. You can feel far more alone in a crowd than you will ever feel in a cemetery.

This cemetery—my cemetery—is divided in two, a new section and an old section. In the new section, I visit the graves of people I knew when they were alive. I tip my cap to old Harry, resting beside his wife Thelma. Harry died in 1985. Thelma died twelve years later, after fearing God had forgotten her.

In the old section, you find graves from the nineteenth century. Revolutionary War veterans, Civil War veterans. The names on these stones reflect their age: Arwilda, Mathias, Zerbin, Hudson. These graves receive few visitors. No flowers on Easter. No wreaths at Christmas. Many stones here were leaning sharply, seemingly defying gravity.

And many stones here had fallen. Too many.

So it was that last year, after finding a stone that had broken in two after a fall, I decided to do something about these forgotten folks. I would learn their names. I would straighten their stones.

You might expect someone to grow suspicious about an old man in a cemetery with a shovel, digging among the stones. You might expect at least one young smart aleck to call from his car, “Hey, old man, in a hurry to join them?”

No one did. No one ever spoke to me once as for nearly six months I walked up the dirt road to the cemetery, shovel in one hand, orange five gallon bucket in the other. If anyone noticed me or my work, they never said so. Not one word. Ever.

At the back of the cemetery, surrounded by weeds, is a pile of rocky dirt. No life-supporting top soil here. It is filler for graves, hard clay and rock. I chopped at it to break loose enough to fill my bucket for resetting the stones. A bucketful of this dirt probably weighs thirty-five to forty pounds. The weight made the metal bucket handle cut in to my palm as I carried it. I got into the habit of resting at the same location each time, and that is how I started talking to the cemetery residents.

Elias Hess, 1867 to 1951, Spanish American War veteran, occupies a spot at the end of a row. I stopped to rest with him each time I gathered a bucket, and soon I got to speaking to him, telling

him how many stones I had straightened, how many rows I had completed. We were quickly on a first name basis.

It seemed only right to speak the name on each stone I straightened. Gravestones are an intimate object, the last truly personal item ever given to the people buried below with them and only them in mind. As I handled each stone, I felt as if I was handling someone's property without first gaining permission.

I asked for permission.

"Well, Sarah, looks like your stone is next. How about I clean it up a bit, straighten it out? Sound okay? Good."

I dug out an area in front of the stone or in back of the stone, just enough to make it possible to straighten it up. Some stones seemed to want to tilt, and I let them. Perhaps the person below liked to wear their hats at a rakish tilt, and the stone now was their hat. Style counts, even for the dead. When the stone felt right, I was finished. I filled in any spaces from my bucket of rocky dirt.

"There you go, Joseph. Good as new."

Veterans I saluted. Children I mourned. Everyone I respected.

I uncovered several hidden stones during the work. Doris V., 1930-1931, was completely hidden by the grass over her flat stone. Now she has a flower on her grave. Another stone had somehow sunk into the ground, so only its rounded top showed, the rest buried vertically two foot in the ground. Death is a mystery, and so, too, can be cemeteries.

I worked a few mornings each week throughout the summer into the fall. In the end, I straightened nearly 100 stones. Some were simply too heavy for me to move. Those people received my apologies.

Visiting the cemetery now is like visiting with old friends. I still speak their names, still rest for a spell with Elias. There is a connection, an intimacy.

To the extent we forget our ancestors we minimize our own lives. We did not appear out of nowhere. We are here because they were here. Our country would benefit from a Day of the Dead to remember all who have gone before. It would help us understand our place in life, and maybe, just maybe, help us overcome our foolish belief in our own significance.