

Ground Rights

Rosellen Brown

Photographs by Paul Hester

Each year The Houston Festival Foundation, Inc. commissions an essay about Houston. The following essay was written by Rosellen Brown for the 1985 Houston Festival. The photographs by Paul Hester are from Our Ancestor's Graves by Douglas Milburn and Paul Hester, Houston Public Library, 1980.

You cannot love an invulnerable city. In that, I suppose, cities are only like people. They may dazzle or intrigue us, command or buy our respect with their power, their accumulation of talent, the sheer weight of their money and our acknowledgement of the cunning it takes to amass it, but those are not loveable qualities: they are functional, and spiritually off-putting. They are meant to be so. Every new monolith hoisted against Houston's skyline is only another strong-arm tactic to me - a permanent pitch to my vision that says, A profitable package has been born; air-rights, frontage rights, sewer rights and setbacks.

But even Houston has a humble center, easily glimpsed when the eye accustoms itself to looking down, not up, at ground rights, not air rights. Having quite accidentally found the vulnerable place, the still point of this crazily turning world, I have had a good many hours in which I

There is no jostling for space here: this is not even one of the huge cities of the dead, those enterprises outside of which monument-makers and florists set up their wares like food vendors around a stadium. Those are as intimidating as the cities of the live to me; this is a modest, orderly park whose intimacy makes street signs and row numbers unnecessary. Office workers from the neighborhood skyscrapers stroll through at lunch; occasionally someone jogs past or brings a dog to let him run across the low stones as if he were in a rocky Vermont field.

At the south end are what in Texas must be called, by way of differentiation, Anglo graves. Instantly they take me into their mystery. Which of these is the name of a good man, which of a scoundrel, who was truly beloved of the survivors, whose "Gone but not forgotten" leaves a hundred bitter ironies in its wake? Why did J.H. Fry die in Houston in 1892, having been born in 1861 in Dunville, Ontario? The game is irresistible - perhaps because I'm a fiction writer, perhaps only because I'm human, and it's both a profound and a titillating game. What did J.H. Fry see in 1892 in a city 60 years old, and thriving?

In another cemetery, in a rather grand tomb, I will come upon Araminta M. Noble Wettermark - I have my favorites, whose fates I ponder with all the delicious sentiment of a reader of Dickens's weekly installment concerning Little Nell. Mrs. Wettermark's daughter and son, aged nine and two, born here, died in Sweden two days apart, in 1868. On each side of the tomb is the inscription, "Buried apart, they are now together." Whatever the cause of the tragedy - I imagine them visiting their grandparents in Stockholm and encountering some epidemic we are safely delivered of in our day - I note that their mother, however bereft, survived her grief and separation and outlived them by 17 years. One takes out one's stereotypes to air, given such stingy facts and such an ultimate as a broad stone inscribed with flourished serifs, a dignity implying wealth and ceremony. The Mrs. Wettermark I see is probably too much like Liv Ullman in a Bergman movie, weeping in her high-necked dress, in Texas, in a hot September, 1868: fans would have been moved by hand; she probably had servants to keep her tolerably cool; children dead in a foreign country would have to stay there forever.

Down at this end of Magnolia Cemetery, near my bench, to both sides of the single stylish mausoleum that draws the eye like a centerpiece, are the Hispanic graves, cleaving to each other without a lot of room to spare. They are brilliant concoctions, many of them, of colored tiles inlaid in stone, of wooden crosses and - in other cemeteries these are even more common - hand-made markers, shakily handcarved inscriptions, some with their "n's" reversed. Discernibly unskilled hands chiselled many of these headstones, amateurs at carving but probably all too experienced at the grief of untimely partings. I stare and stare. There is nothing morbid about relishing hints of deep feeling and hidden drama. The numbers on the Mexican-American graves seem to me, though this is unscientific, to chronicle earlier deaths than the Anglo-American. No surprise in that: the families are poorer. I can see, without trying, the chiseler of the stone gouging the name of the 20-year-old girl who died in childbirth, as the Mexican phrase has it, "with a prisoner in her womb"; of the baby who was just learning to walk, the mother "recuerdo de sus hijos y su esposo." There are few family plots among them; these are piecemeal deaths, bitter purchases eked out one by one. Where did the rest of the family go to when their time came?



In another cemetery I will find that the Hispanic names adorn stones interchangeable now with anyone else's, those uniformly polished granite hulks, the graceless contemporary sign of assimilation: a triumph of demographic equality over the charm and harsh economic necessities of folk art. In yet another old cemetery, there is a broad hill, a new section, much of it as expectantly empty as good building land, devoted to those flat markers that look like bronzed calling cards and cast no shadows. A sign on the hillside brusquely and explicitly forbids handmade markers, ornaments, or crosses: if death is a leveller, let it obliterate the celebration of mourning as well. I know there are excesses of imagination here and there - a friend in Tennessee told me he saw a gravestone with a telephone planted beside it, receiver off the hook, with the inscription, "Jesus called." But why uniformity is preferable to the individual gesture I can't imagine. Isn't it enough that the flesh falls from the bone, that no one is getting up from these graves at midnight to dance? Apparently it is not enough. But from the road I can see a brave resistance to the imposition of such anonymity: a field of red and yellow and bright baby-blue plastic flowers, heaped shiny and unchanging against the brownish grass, some of them huge constructions - crosses and floral gushers that fill and bedazzle the eye like Rose Bowl floats.

It is another day and I have just come from a nearly invisible cemetery whose existence I quite literally stumbled on, out walking one morning. It is not a place to sit in comfortably; I find myself looking over my shoulder constantly as I heave myself through the weeds - one could hide or be hidden all too easily in this jungle of neglect. This is the College Park Cemetery, just outside the Fourth Ward on West Dallas, an inadvertent monument to impersonal change and the splintering of community. What was the college celebrated here? Where is the park? There is the plastic lozenge of a Metro stop in front of the wrought-iron gate; from the street this is only an unclaimed lot, an eyesore, a dumping ground.

It is, in fact, an old Black graveyard. The college, long gone, was the Houston Central College for Negroes; it is only one of many Black institutions ploughed under by a city some of whose citizens held more cards than others. Somewhere, I am sure, there are pictures of serious-faced young men and women in stiff clean collars, posing for their graduation picture in front of this or that building whose solid bricks have gone the way of the students' flesh, to nothing.



have forgotten, and then remembered, jolted back astonished, where I was.

I am sitting now, writing this, under an unfriendly sky, color of cold granite, on a black iron bench meant to resemble a bower of ferns. I am in a crook in the elbow of the Allen Parkway and Montrose, where it is perpetually noisy - I imagine that at three in the morning cars still pour by with the distant sound of fast-running water. The American General Building rises on one side and, farther up, the America Tower. Behind me, outside the stone wall that is just high enough to repel curiosity at 50 miles per hour, the long block of rice silos looms, hectored and patrolled by a thousand thousand officious blackbirds as if it were the Galleria. There is nothing remarkable about such a confluence of rivers of traffic overseen by complacent industrial guardians in their glass and fluorescent aeries, except that I sit in an oasis, sweet and calm, whose obliviousness transcends, even mocks, all urgency. From here, Houston is only a small dog barking at my heels. This is Magnolia Cemetery, where live oaks and gray rock and hunched mounds of flowers hold back the ravaging city without ostentation, with only shade and silence.

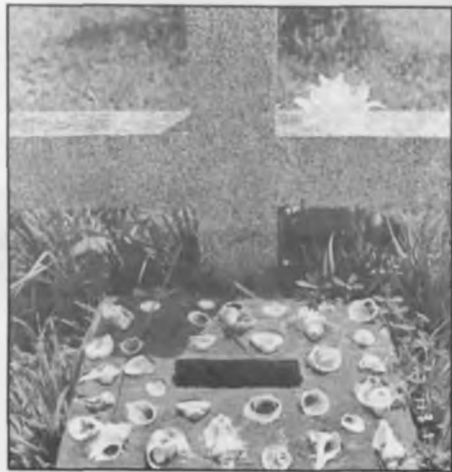


Near the entrance to the cemetery stand three matte and shiny marble stones erected in the late 1960s by optimists who presumably trusted that this yard would provide some dignity in perpetuity. Farther in, though, I am lost in a field whose graves are hidden like mines; they appear in the midst of gnarled and splaying undergrowth, overgrowth far taller than I am, nettles and weeds. It hurts to walk here, assaults both eyes and bare legs. From time to time there comes a clearing, and here and there, blooming in the shade of cedar and high grass, white lilies spring into view, gone wild on thick succulent stems. Out of the insistent groundcover and broken and toppled stones, sudden open gashes in the soil can only be graves falling in. Under a low tree, heaped purposefully as any authorized dump, there lie a *Greensheet* turned a urinous yellow, paint cans rotted to rusty lace, flower pots, a plastic cup with the Astros' logo on its bashed side, an electrician's cap, mud-splattered; then in a tender bald opening, just beyond, pale narcissus blooming for no living eye. "Our Mother Asleep in Jesus, Oh How Sweet. Abraham Thomas, born 1860" when there were slaves, whose 1930 stone is snapped off jaggedly, like something done in anger.

Every time I think I have found the last grave I look farther through yet another species of bramble and there is a small stone or a platform bearing a fine weighty monument, a sign of pride: "The Holtz Family Asleep." "Mother Fry, 1881-1925," the familiar reclining lamb that marks the grave of "our Viola V. Hart, 1899-1900." My father was born in 1899: I cannot therefore fail to see the Hart baby grown into a destiny at least as fortunate as his: she is sitting on her porch, leaning on the rail, smiling at what her life might have held.

This cemetery pits two emotions against each other, fiercely: nostalgia, like an itch that can't be reached to be assuaged, for a glimpse of West Dallas thronged with horses and wagons, when ex-slaves and the children of slaves were put to rest in this modest yard under trees much smaller but undoubtedly more numerous. (Horses make fertilizer, not air pollution.) Against this I lay my anger that such hideous neglect has denied these graves their peace. But families scatter, and the last of some are buried here themselves. I was told that once the old and devoted sexton of the cemetery died sometime in the 1960s, there was no one to gather the upkeep fees that had kept the graveyard presentable. Once upon a time, the keeper of these grounds went knocking on doors, such was the intact community 50 years ago, and with the piecemeal revenues he hired help in the summer to keep the field clear. Growth is virulent in this climate: it takes no time for nature to

reclaim the neatest plot. (Yet, when my egalitarian blood begins to boil on behalf of the distressed Black survivors, I remind myself: I have seen a scrapbook from the '30s that showed Founder's Cemetery, farther toward downtown on Dallas and full of "important" graves of Texas heroes, so badly tended there were scandalized letters to the newspapers, wherein people remembered when the only keepers of the grass were the cows that loped and lounged over the graves. Now, in a sort of backlash of care, the cemetery is patrolled by guard dogs, according to its signs, and inhospitably locked against vandals and benign visitors alike.)



There are plans to make College Park a perpetual-care cemetery. That is an official designation that acknowledges that we no longer can expect grave-clearing parties on spring Sundays, not with the children living in Minneapolis and the grandchildren in Miami. At that point there enter trusts and legal covenants; the Banking Commission regulates the whole, and one more family and village function falls to strangers and the courts. This is not a bad solution, this legal protection of the defenseless dead; it is only sad, a makeshift efficiency, with a hint of profit perhaps attached; a symptom.

Every cemetery I visit forces me into sociology, yet tugs me back to an enjoyment of pathos without analysis. One sunny Saturday I visit a metropolis of graves. Inside the loop, still this one is distinctly suburban in feeling. It is laid out in subdivisions with the names of inviting neighborhoods: Whispering Pines, Lakewood. There is only the occasional reminder of where I really am: Catacombs Terrace would doubtless not appeal to Harold Farb. This cemetery has a Babyland that seems not much used these days, with a giant granite heart in the center. The acres and acres of graves face out, like houses, toward the grid of streets. Nothing random about them, they are oriented to the driver, not the walker.

And there are the efficient communal mausoleums, like apartment houses, in which neighbors sleep side by side in the ultimate anonymity. This is, of course, an old European tradition, the stacking of

name upon silent name, with a little cuff on the sheer front to hold a bouquet; and in New Orleans, whose water table is more disastrous than Houston's, above-ground burial is as necessary and routine as the stacking of shoeboxes in a stockroom. But these are exceedingly neat, these walls of recent ancestors: they are the generic "deceased," as nearly shorn of visible inflection - of public eccentricity and private emotion - as they can be. I think, as I approach them across a vast lawn, that in this kind of giant wall of the dead there is a monumental equalizing implied, as if this were the mass of names of the Vietnam dead in Washington, whose remains are elsewhere. (In recoil I see the poor, pure gestures of affection on the graves of deep country cemeteries across Texas: the designs made of shells, the empty dishes, the chairs and toys and marbles of the children pressed into the dirt right about where their crossed hands must be.)



No one dare criticize the mortuary customs of another, there are too many variations in taste and economics to presume judgment. But differences in practice come whole out of our lives. I assume that the uniformity and neatness of such a resting place is appropriate for the families who have chosen it. Monuments, unique or not, are made out of the style of the survivors.

Still, it may be only the taste borne of economic power that could create and tenderly nurture such gardens as the River Oaks of cemeteries. High bushes along Memorial Drive make it invisible, I have discovered when I've mentioned it to people who drive past it daily. This is Glenwood, which has a large country mailbox at its Washington Avenue entrance, and where I have never been without hearing birds at song. Since Houston likes to call attention to its growing list of world-class attributes - artistic, architectural, culinary - let me call Glenwood a world-class cemetery: not that it contains the owners of half the street names in Houston (which it does), or that they rest at the feet of a downtown horizon many of them helped to create. But it has, among its beautifully landscaped acres, its trees hung with Spanish moss, its various levels and terrains, the only real statuary in the city, in some cases quite genuinely moving: a woman, or perhaps an angel, prostrate on a tomb; bas-relief faces of mother and son; a modern, semi-abstract figure doubled over



itself like a pained animal, or a god not yet awake - these are worthy of the French and Italian cemeteries that encourage artistic flowering alongside the natural.

Glenwood is the only cemetery where I saw visitors, not joggers, not mourners: people out for a Sunday drive, who came looking at Houston's silent history sleeping with its stories out of sight. What a history class could be taught beginning in any of these places - textbooks, every one, to testify to the various and conflicting lives Houstonians have always led.

There is Holy Cross, with its old stones still visited by the faithful who leave bouquets behind 50 years after a death; its Italian and Slavic families nearly side by side, porcelain photographs on so many stones that stop the heart at such ordinariness, such innocence in the face of what was soon to happen. Hollywood Cemetery, where I saw the first of a number of stones inscribed not "FATHER" but "DADDY," and remembered where I was, and in what tone that "DADDY" would be said. Adath Israel, stunningly situated on the crest of the bayou, nearly grassless, pebbled, positively urban in its tight massing of stones, no more quarter given grass and weeds than in the so-called "scraped" graveyards of East Texas, whose owners attack any green excrement as if it might shelter snakes or poison ivy. And there is Glendale, high above the junction of Brays and Buffalo bayous, a tiny clenched fist of fenced land, first in the city, where the *dominion of death and silence seems in danger of extinction* by the extraordinary clamor of train, barge, smokestack, garbage scow, that hem it on all sides; where scummy water bleeds beneath sheer cliffs of tangled vine. These banks are rumored to have been lush and green in another century, and this as lovely a scene as anyone could have found putting up any river looking for a likely place to gamble on a future and start a settlement. On a barge below me someone has scrawled "ALAMO" in white paint on a steel bulkhead door. When John Harris in 1828, before the Allen brothers, discovered this spot where he is commemorated, the Alamo was long years from its moment of glorious ignominy.



There are stories I can't begin to dream of in these places and stories I have been told, in turn, by friends, many of them political in nature: There was a woman who could not get into such and such cemetery, as if it were a sorority, but never you fear, her ashes are sprinkled across it; she is laughing last. There is a cemetery stubbornly holding on inside a picket fence in the middle of a Safeway parking lot, and a set of family graves under this famous building or that. Howard Hughes is buried so modestly you will walk right past him. And Indians, Indians lie very possibly everywhere.

I have achieved no greater concentration in this city than I have as I've tiptoed around the curbing of these plots, imagining, being amused, doing calculations. No psychiatrist or religious pleader can dispense the existential perspective lying at our feet. But lest I sound too Pollyannaish about the distilled and distant sorrow I am suggesting everyone come close and touch, let me finish with this footnote.

I was walking, satisfied with a few hours' dramatic and historical reconstruction of the graves in Magnolia Cemetery - it is like surfacing from deep water, coming back to the world of passing time - when, walking toward my car, I saw, startled, what I thought was a rat lying on the grass near the path. It was gray and rumpled, rained-upon, a thick animal hunched on its side with its head out of sight from where I stood. I took myself close enough to see, by tail and ears, that it was no rat, it was only a cat, but by then the distinction barely mattered. What stunned me - knocked the breath out of me, literally - was its simple stillness. It was unmoving with the immobility, the

mineral stationaryness, of a thing - a stone, a wall, a building, something that had never moved. Its stillness nearly made a sound, I imagined, feeling myself shrieked at. It was a different element, in short, from anything it resembled.

I thought, watching it hard, finally acknowledging that it would not suddenly rise the way sleeping cats do, and streak away: *This is what you are seeing here. You the living fix on life, you see the young mothers moving between their children, the old men whose gravestones say "FATHER" or "HUSBAND" as if that is all they ever were, and the babies on the day before they sickened, and in your imagination they are always on your side of the divide. But they are not, and that is the only thing you see here that is not your fiction.*

This was the only moment in all this cemetery-gathering when I did not feel welcome, when I felt as if I presumed to know things which I could not know. The train on the far side of Memorial came clamoring through then, bleating out its high note that we always call sad, and I felt the windy volume of cars and trucks turn up again. And then, to defend myself against the fear that I was being ousted from this place I had thought peaceful, whose eternal stillness I had tried to sip and swallow, I reminded myself that dying is the least of what living's for, the only incidental, the part that every family tries to put aside when it remembers whom it's lost. These are still the inhabitants of Houston and I have reason to want to visit them. Having lived here, many in unimaginable times - summer of 1827, September of 1900 when news of the hurricane at Galveston swept in, spring of 1912, the year of the end of the great war to end all wars, the year the St. Louis Browns won the pennant, two years ago Christmas - they are still here in the city's daily changing shadow. There would be no Houston on this day, 21 March 1985, without them. ■