

## **I grew up with the Dead**

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**I wrote this piece some years after my father's death, when I was reflecting on the significance of the Warracknabeal Cemetery in our family story. As long as I can remember I have found it a place of mystery and fascination. Four generations of my family lie there. I have visited that place since childhood, seeking the stories of those whose lives have influenced my own. This piece was not written for publication, but for me to remember that quiet place where a part of my heart will always lie.**

I grew up with the dead. In a life firmly based in the here and now, I was reared by a mother who frequently talked about those whose lives had once touched her own.

Both my parents would tell tales of their relatives whose twilight years I could faintly remember; of old people – and some young – who had lived in the district and who now only existed in memory.

This was no morbid preoccupation. My mother often said that the dead never really died as long as they were remembered. It was part of the way she understood mortality, a perception inherited from her mother and, in turn, her long-dead Irish grandmother. For my mother there was a natural cycle of life and death: “In the midst of life we are in death” her Celtic grandmother would murmur – and both fitted into a divinely-conceived plan where the end of life, no less than the beginning of it, formed a necessary and comforting sequence.

As a result, visits to the local cemetery were an accepted and natural part of our family routines. I frequently accompanied my mother to the cemetery, as she had accompanied her mother 30 years before (after my brother died, it was both parents who went). We had certain obligations to fulfil there, renewals no less powerful than those of the church, and afterwards we would wander among the tombstones.

I would be excited by the romance of ancient names and dates, of sightless Italianate angels staring serenely over an alien landscape. Even the sight of broken marble, and rusting cast iron lying distractedly in the grass, would not seem unnatural. My mother and I would read the headstones, like a shared roll call from the dead, and I would wait anxiously for her to refresh the bones by commenting on those now stilled lives. Frequently a faded inscription would provoke a quiet response: “She was a good friend of mother's”, and a daughter's eyes would soften in the harsh sunlight.

We walked among the religious and the profane, the once powerful and the once poor, those about whose indiscretions townsfolk still laughed, those whose old griefs or compassion were only remembered in a quiet moment. A cemetery, like death itself, is a great leveller. All are reduced to the same status, those with lifetime enmities lying side by side as if in familial and eternal embrace. But even here, some seem more equal than others! I was always saddened by the humble mounds marking the pauper graves at the gate, and the handful of Chinese headstones, both outside the main denominational divisions of the cemetery, where the powerless, and the different, gained solidarity in death.

As I grew older I would sometimes make excursions to the cemetery with friends, or alone, leaning my bicycle by the old ornamental gate for it seemed irreverent to take it inside. In the early years these visits were tinged with a degree of fear for a sextant was still stationed at the cemetery. This ancient man worked from a tiny one-roomed cottage built inside the gate, beneath the whispering of two enormous Aleppo pines. We were afraid of him not so much because of what he did or said, but because of his job which associated him with the silent inhabitants of his workplace. One day I arrived to find the cottage closed, and I later discovered that he, too, had passed to sleep within the shadow of the pines. I never felt fear there again, for the fragile barrier between life and death had been breached once and for all.

The cemetery contained the last resting place of many members of my family: some, like my mother's grandmother and infant sister, lay in unmarked graves; while others, my father's

brother and sister-in-law, a number of my mother's aunts and uncles, and a handful of her cousins, were well known to us. Our ritual, however, took us first to the Methodist section where our flowers were mainly destined. I never failed to be moved by this tribute to my mother's long-dead sister, the memory of whose sweet and gentle nature still evoked affection in the handful of old ladies who could remember her, 60 years later. Ravished by tuberculosis at the age of 17, the stories of her illness are legion: of the young minister gaining inspiration for his sermons from her courage, of the wild birds feeding from her fading hand, of her futile attempts to hide the blood she coughed from her grief-stricken mother. When she quietly slipped away in 1928 her last word, echoing her first, was an anxious call to that mother.

For years the object of that final need kept a silent vigil by this place, staying until the shadows of late afternoon drove her home to the more immediate demands of the living. No, she was not afraid to be there by herself, she once told a concerned inquirer: "I have more to fear from the living than the dead!"

Adjoining her grave (for the plots were bought at the same time), lay my grandparents, a couple whose lives stretched back to the pioneer settlement of the district, and whose personal fortunes reflected the rise and fall of local and international events this century. Their deaths, within three weeks of each other in 1953, united them once more, but cruelly stripped my mother of all her antecedents in one fell swoop.

My brother was buried further along the same row when, at the age of 13, he died in 1965. Snapped from my mother's grasp by a brain tumour, his death, more than any other she was to experience, left her a changed woman. His funeral, on a late autumn afternoon, remains forever in my mind for the images it evoked: images of our fellow students from the high school standing guard of honour either side of the street as the cortege passed through; and the awesome sight of a polished cross on the other side of the cemetery, shining brilliantly in the rays of the sinking sun.

It was February when my father died suddenly, 20 years later. Once again we assembled in that silent place, now dried and brown with the harshness of a north Wimmera summer. Once more we went that way through guards of honour, this time formed by the organisations with which he had worked; and witnessed the line of old diggers dropping poppies into the open grave, hearing beyond misted eyes the Last Post, drifting on the still air. He was buried beside my brother (for the plots were bought at the same time), and the auburn hair, now grey, which once grieved for sister, parents and son, grieved privately for husband.

No, there is nothing to fear from that place, or places like it. My journey with the dead has not been anxious, nor perverse or stifling. Nor has it stripped me of the pleasures of living. Rather, it has opened my eyes to a twilight world which exists on the borders of our own. It has enriched my life by directing it along paths well worn by the comforting footprints of those walking just ahead.

John Schubert, 1990 – 1991

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**After my mother's sister died, my grandparents purchased a glass dome containing artificial metal flowers, fashionable at the time, to place on her grave. Despite its fragility it survived the extremes of the northern Wimmera climate for 40 years, until it suddenly disappeared. My parents later learned that these old flower domes were being stolen from many country cemeteries for reasons about which we could only surmise. It was an anguished violation.**