

Eavesdropping on the Dead

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I did not spend my last day in Paris shopping for couture. I did not try to see more of what I inevitably missed at the Louvre. I did not float along the Seine while “La Vie en Rose” drifted from a quayside café. I did not take a second elevator ride up La Tour Eiffel to marvel at the City of Light sprawling into the horizon. I did not wander the gilded halls of Versailles.

I cast aside those *Ile de Cite* temptations to wander *la cite des morts*. While searching Père-Lachaise Cemetery for Jim Morrison’s grave, I discovered some of my historic heroes: Chopin, Collette, Oscar Wilde. Months later, when a friend mentioned a news story featuring women who weep at Elvis’ Graceland grave, I ridiculed their behavior. My friend laughed and said, “Now, wait a minute . . . who spent her last day in Paris looking for Jim Morrison’s grave?!”

She had a point. What, I wondered, am I searching for as I tiptoe among the tombstones from Paris to Scotland and points in between? I'm not just paying my respects to the departed; I'm trying to understand their stories. Walls may not talk, but tombstones surely do. Scanning those epitaphs, it's as if I'm eavesdropping on the dead, searching for meaning, yearning to know what their lives were like. Lacking a time machine, I can't beseech Chopin to look after his health and leave us more nocturnes. I can't ask Collette and Oscar how they embrace unconventionality; consequences be damned. I can't swoon as Jim Morrison bellows "Break on Through". That last day in Paris, all I could do was stand in Père-Lachaise thinking, "This is as close as I'll ever get to these geniuses."

On humbler but no less hallowed ground, I have wandered among my ancestors in a Southern Indiana cemetery wishing I could inherit their wisdom and resilience along with their last name. If only they could tell me how they survived crop failures, floods, and families of 13 children, maybe I could gather enough strength to survive the 21st century. I once stumbled upon the grave of my great-great aunt, a woman whose shared my first and last name and middle initial, but who died a century before I was born. I remember thinking, "I live a life far removed from these rural farmers, but I'm closer than I realize."

My roots run deep in Indiana, deeper still in Scotland. There, my cemetery tourism was no less determined. I discovered my ancestral graveyard while speeding along the busy A84 in a tour bus. The gruff driver had a schedule to keep, and we were behind, thanks to a queasy tourist who kept getting off the bus to heave into the heather. For the record, it wasn't me, though the thought crossed my mind as I watched my fellow passenger hurl his way through the Highlands. I was pregnant at the time so no one except that bus driver would have blamed me.

Back on the bus, the pale tourist had barely reached his seat when the driver stepped on the gas. Careening around a sharp curve, he calmed his fury long enough to toss out a tourism tidbit:

“There, to your left, is the gravesite of President McKinley’s ancestor.” There was no point in asking the angsty driver to stop but branded in my brain was the resting place of my Scottish forebear. A decade later, I returned to contemplate James McKinlay’s (the Scottish spelling) weathered English and Gaelic epitaph. I wandered among the graves and the ruins of Saint Bride’s chapel memorialized in “The Lady of the Lake” by Sir Walter Scott. James had died on a February 4th, the same day my brother and son were born. Where some might see coincidence, I saw continuity. I had come full circle.

I knew where my people came from, but a year later, I didn’t know where I was going. I was working for a Georgia arts council housed in a decommissioned church. I ate my lunch in the churchyard, preferring the company of the departed to that of my maniacal boss. Swatting yellow jackets between bites of sandwich and sips of Coke, I pondered a family plot surrounded by a sagging fence. I was newly divorced, grossly underpaid, and attempting to parent two angry teenagers. Before me lay a woman who had lost five children during a yellow fever epidemic. I wanted to ask that pioneer how she endured losing not one, but five children, how she went on living to old age when the loss of one child would ruin me.

But the dead are always silent; they leave me to my own conclusions. Seeking answers among them makes little sense, considering how I often seek advice from the living only to follow my own counsel. And yet, as I read between the lines of their lives, I find strength in those who have gone before. Somehow, that pioneer woman endured, and somehow, I, too, endured one of the most difficult seasons of my life. Standing there before the graves of strangers and ancestors, among people I have never known, I pay homage to their history in the hope that their resilience will inspire my own.