

## EMILY RICHES

### Resting Places

Mullumbimby town cemetery lies between the hospital and the retirement home on a rolling, hilly piece of land close to the reservoir. It is often empty and always quiet. At the entrance, the newer grave markers are made of polished granite and sit flush with the ground; as you walk by, reflections waver in the shiny surfaces, making it difficult to read the names. Further up, the historic graves are set in uneven rows with religious denominations marked by quaint street signs. The hill then runs down to a tributary of the Brunswick River, where a handful of the oldest graves are scattered: tomblike monuments, cracked and falling in on themselves.

As a teenager, I came here often. I never found it a particularly frightening place, although it did generate its own legends and myths. During Halloween, people from school would venture into the cemetery and dare one another to touch the white angel on the top of the hill. On this night and no other, she radiated a strange occult power. I was never sure whether this was just a story or if people really did perform this annual pilgrimage, but what mattered most was the sense of ritual: the thrill of coming into contact with something profound and paranormal, like speaking to spirits through a Ouija board.

In the light of day however, the angel looks like a normal girl. With her ghoulish aura stripped away, you're reminded that she stands above the grave of a child who once lived, like us, yet died too soon.

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I was superstitious, like most children, but not about ghosts or spirits. I believed myself to be in alliance with larger natural forms like trees, mountains, and especially the weather. I longed for rainy days and one of my favourite things to do was watch storms from my veranda. I waited as the light became lurid and the birds quietened. The far-off gum trees thrashed soundlessly as darker clouds advanced over the mountains like a soft grey army. You could hear the rain settling over the house until it suddenly consumed you, a great roar of water. If you yelled, no one would hear you. Violet branches of lightning lanced the sky in the distance and I tried to guess what parts of town they were striking.

I liked the cemetery because it offered this same sense of aloneness, of grandeur and enormity: you could get swallowed up in it, insulated from the rest of the world. It was easy to feel that you might almost disappear.

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One of the first graves I ever saw was close to home: quite literally in my next door neighbour's backyard. This was when my family lived outside town, in Lot 13 of Palmwoods Village. Our house backed onto a banana plantation that filled the valley all the way up to the escarpment of Mt Boogarem. Sometimes I explored the plantation—cutting through the tall palms into people's backyards—but there was an unspoken understanding that our neighbour's land was off limits. At the border of our properties was an anemometer: a bizarre device rumoured to have been set up by the Bureau of Meteorology, although we never saw

anyone coming to monitor it. Normally, I stopped here but that day I kept going, cresting the hill that led to his backyard.

In it were three headstones behind a cast iron fence. I stopped and glanced towards his curtained windows, feeling as though I'd stumbled onto something obscene, like a murder. I should have turned around, but curiosity propelled me forward. I unlatched the gate and beheld the graves of three members of the Gugins family.

Later, I confessed this trespass to my parents, the shock of the discovery quelling my fear of getting into trouble. I needed an explanation. "They were probably some of the first people to settle in the area," they guessed. "Maybe they even started the plantation." While I wasn't frightened of the graves, simply knowing they were there shifted my mental map of the area: they became the new centre, a dark magnet around which everything else revolved.

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Now, whenever I am in a new place I always seek out the local cemetery. It helps me orient myself there. I find them welcoming and tranquil, almost like a library. There is room to meander and drift, to quietly reflect. Sometimes, acknowledging the amount of loss the cemetery represents can be overwhelming, yet in it there is also a recognition of collective grief, even community and belonging. Carol Lefevre describes this quality of time and stillness in her book *Quiet City*: "For a place where so much grief has gathered, the cemetery has a palpable calm, and I wonder if perhaps this is its true function ... as a site where grief can culminate and quietly disperse."

I'm interested in this idea of palpable calm, or the sense that time really does change in a graveyard: as though the very atmosphere itself is somehow different. Robert Pogue Harrison writes beautifully of this in *The Dominion of the Dead*: "For what is a place if not its memory of itself—a site or locale where time turns back on itself? The grave marks a site in the landscape where time cannot merely pass through, or pass over. Time must now gather around the *sema* and mortalise itself." He uses the Greek word *sema* here, which as well as referring to the sign by which a grave is known, can also mean an omen from the gods, a signal to begin something, a token by which one's identity is certified, or a constellation. It has a cognate with the Sanskrit word *dhyāyati*, which means to think, imagine or meditate.

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People are quick to describe my fascination with cemeteries as "morbid." Graveyards still carry a certain taboo, infused with ideas of uncleanness, death, bodies. It is possible to feel out of place or uncomfortable if you are visiting with no one to mourn, a tourist of other people's grief. Yet cemeteries are also stamped with the history and culture of a place and can tell us much about the people who lived there, traditions associated with death and mourning, as well as changing styles of art and architecture. It is one place where layers of time and history visibly coalesce.

Sometimes, however, this history can be hidden from plain view. Not many people know that Sydney Town Hall is built on top of one of the city's oldest cemeteries. It is commemorated only by a discreet memorial tablet in the paving outside the Drutt Street entrance. While the Old Sydney Burial Ground was closed in 1820 and most of the headstones removed, the bodies themselves were badly and perfunctorily exhumed. Up until

2007, headstone fragments, coffins and skeletal remains were still being unearthed as building works dug deeper into the foundations. Some original graves survive under Town Hall, carefully preserved but hidden beneath the pavement. Even during peak hour, when the railway station groans at capacity with hundreds and thousands of pressing bodies, further underground, there is complete stillness.

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When I first moved to Sydney to study at university, I came to the eastern suburbs to live with my grandmother. I was the second grandchild she'd hosted since my grandfather died. They had escaped Hungary during the 1956 Revolution and settled in Coogee by the beach. Close by is Waverley Cemetery, one of the city's most famous and beautiful graveyards, although I first spotted it by accident, from a distance: by some trick of perspective it seemed to hang, illuminated, above the shopfronts and houses on Clovelly Road. The headstones were white and grey, pitted like moonrock. They all faced the sea: a lost colony of extraterrestrials looking towards their homeland. When I questioned my grandma about it, she told me that she used to walk through the cemetery on her way to work: "One evening, I came home and said to Rocky, 'We came to a fantastic country. Nobody here died under the age of sixty-five!'"

When I get the chance to explore Waverley Cemetery properly, I find it full of angels. I marvel at the skill of a sculptor who can pull such a figure out of a block of marble, fully-formed. It isn't the wings (spectacular as they are) that draw the eye, but the smaller, more human details: the careful gesture of a hand, the tension in a bare foot. They are so lifelike it's easy to imagine that at night they climb down from their pedestals and walk around. Indeed, the whole cemetery is full of remarkable pieces of monumental masonry. There are obelisks, veiled urns, Celtic crosses. Open books: either the Bible or the book of life. Intricate roses and lilies. Bible verses or sentiments expressing triumph over death, the virtues of innocence, renewal and resurrection. A broken flower represents a life cut short too soon. An inverted torch: a life extinguished. Winged hourglasses or skulls are memento mori, reminding us that time is fleeting: one day we too "will go the way of all the earth" (Joshua 23.14).

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I was eight when my grandfather died. He was sixty-nine. He was cremated but it wasn't until a few years later that we scattered his ashes from the cliffs in Coogee. He swam every day at Wylie's Baths—the ocean pool where my mother learnt how to swim, so it was a fitting place. We watched as my grandma knelt at the edge of the rock and opened the urn. The wind caught the ashes—*poof!*—and a long plume of white smoke erupted unceremoniously from grandma's hands like a magic trick. We moved further down the cliff face where it wasn't so gusty and tipped the remaining ashes into the ocean. Afterwards, we went to Wylie's for a swim and ate ice cream. I remember being surprised to see my mother crying and giving her a stiff embarrassed hug.

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Cemeteries and memorials remind us that we all want to leave our mark, to be remembered once we pass away. No one wants to be forgotten. Yet in an era of climate change,

overpopulation and mass extinctions, humankind has already left a substantial and devastating mark: our presence weighs heavily on the earth. While cremation has less of an environmental impact than traditional burial, there is a growing movement towards green or natural burials. For those who want to leave the world lightly, there is no traditional coffin. The body is prepared and interred using only non-toxic and biodegradable materials. The caskets can be willow, wicker, or even cardboard. The shrouds, silk or linen. Sydney's first natural burial park at Kemps Creek does not allow headstones but instead offers the GPS coordinates of your final resting place for loved ones to visit and pay their respects.

The Gugins's graves in my old neighbour's yard were lonely and untended. When I hear from my mother that the house has been sold, I wonder what the conditions are around the graves. Will they be allowed to remain where they are, undisturbed? Or will the new owner—disgusted, superstitious, or even indifferent—want them removed?

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When I eventually leave my grandma's house I move around the city, hugging the west: Redfern, Campsie, Ashfield. In Ashfield, I'm happy to discover I can cut through a historic cemetery on my walk to and from the station. After rain, red lichen blooms across the headstones like rust and water collects in still clear pools on the grass. I get a job at St Vincent's Hospital and leave for work in the early morning when it's still dark. It's drizzling. The streets are empty and the yellow lights in the churchyard lend a diffuse, underwater quality to the air. Across the footpaths are sprawling chalk drawings, left over from the children who meet for playgroup in the church. There are rainbows and hearts and hopscotch games, but the most common image is of a smiling person enclosed in a rectangular outline, their body bisected by a cross.

It is still raining when I walk back through the cemetery in the late evening, and nearly all the chalk drawings have washed away.

#### WORKS CITED

Harrison, Robert Pogue. *The Dominion of the Dead*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003.

Lefevre, Carol. *Quiet City: Walking in West Terrace Cemetery*. Adelaide: Wakefield P, 2016.