

LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

Want to Lead a Better Life? The Secret Is in the Cemetery.

There's comfort and wisdom to be found in the eerie poetry of gravestones.

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For most of my life, I've found cemeteries to be foreboding places, best left to funeral processions and gravediggers. But seven years ago I met a man named Steve Baldwin who changed my thinking on the matter. Then about 60, Baldwin was known to some around New York City as the Parrot Guy, because for almost two decades he has kept unofficial watch over the city's South American green monk parakeets. I first contacted Baldwin while working on a story about the history of the parrots in New York: According to legend, in the 1960s, they had escaped from a shipping crate at J.F.K. and then later began nesting atop utility poles and beneath overpasses, playing a cat-and-mouse game with city authorities bent on eliminating them from public land. When I asked him if he'd be willing to meet, he replied, "I'd suggest Green-Wood Cemetery." I had little choice. The graveyard, being a protected space, was one of the few places in the city the birds could live.

On our initial walks along the banks of the cemetery's turtle ponds and through its fields, where flycatchers search for dinner, we talked about the parrots: about the peace they'd made with the hawks who hunt on the hills, their competition with the gang of pigeons who hang around the Con Ed substation across the street. Over time, however, Baldwin spoke more about the graves around us. A favorite of his was a white marble mausoleum flanked by statues of two angels, built for Charlotte Canda, the daughter of a former officer in Napoleon's army who perished in a fatal accident on her 17th birthday. The mostly eroded inscription reported: "Died Suddenly by Falling From a Carriage." Her fiancé killed himself out of grief and was buried nearby on unconsecrated ground. "A Romeo and Juliet story," Baldwin said.

The word "story" struck me. The epitaph on Canda's grave, once one of Green-Wood's most visited, was the last line of a romance that thousands of 19th-century travelers had crossed the river just to read. Canda's epitaph was most likely written by her father, but sometimes the departed compose their own endings. This was true of a brushmaker named James Noe, who, before succumbing to wounds incurred during a robbery, penned a final statement apologizing to his wife and children for his early death. "I Could No Longer Stay," his gravestone announced.

Though my story about the parrots never materialized, I kept in touch with Baldwin and continued to visit cemeteries and imagine people's lives from the epitaphs left behind. Sometimes these inscriptions included a photo, a cause of death ("Killed at Gettysburg") or a joke ("Here Lies an Atheist, All Dressed Up With No Place to Go"). Other times, epitaphs comprised only a name and a date; maybe its owner chose to go quietly, or maybe they had planned to purchase a message but never got around to it.

These etchings aren't always the final words of someone's story. No grave will survive the centuries of acidic rain, wind and pigeon feces that lie before it. And many lives, once over, are never given any marker to begin with. One needs only to travel about 17 miles north of Green-Wood to Hart Island, the site of a potter's field alongside the East River where more than a million people are buried in common, unmarked graves.

Years passed before I reflected on my interest in the stories of Green-Wood's permanent residents. Then one afternoon last summer, while Baldwin was telling me about a group of parrots he suspected of trying to construct a second nest at the Con Ed substation, we came across the grave of a woman named Eleonora Duse. Her epitaph read: "Fortunate. Desperate. Trustful." Baldwin mulled over its implications: Was her life fortunate, then desperate, then trustful? Or was it all three at once? He inspected the back of the slab, on which he found names and dates carved seemingly by another hand, at another time. Where does Duse fit into all this? he wondered. As I later learned, she was an Italian actress whom one of the residents of the plot had met as a young child with his grandmother. He etched her into his family stone as a tribute to the memory. Duse had died decades earlier, and was buried in Asolo, Italy. I told Baldwin what I found, but he wasn't particularly interested. He wanted to think about the mystery of her life.

Most days, it's difficult for me to consider my course through the world. But walking in a cemetery, I'm humbled to read the incomplete markers left for those who've already made the trip. There is the recipe for Naomi Odessa Miller-Dawson's "Spritz Cookies," which is etched on her stone in Green-Wood. I will most likely never follow it, but seeing a mother's baking instructions carved into granite reminds me that keeping alive an old family dish is worth the drive to the store for one or another spice, even if I can't tell myself exactly why. Another message engraved on a small century-and-a-half-old stone, "Our Christmas Gift," suggests that even the tenderest sentiments can conceal grief.

Decades ago, I remember coming across an epitaph at a hilltop cemetery in Ohio that read: "Take a Seat on Old Bob and His Good Wife Sally." I saw countless other graves that day, and for a long while, that was the only one I could recollect. Now when I think of it, I also recall all of the gravestones bearing warnings from Proverbs, such as, "The Wicked Is Banished in His Wickedness," and I am reminded that I can take myself deadly seriously, but I don't have to. As of late, I've found so much comfort in the graveyard. Baldwin once told me that, after years of visiting the parrots, he has come to see Green-Wood not as a necropolis, but as a library of "completed lives." I think I'm beginning to see what he means: a place to take stock of all the books on out-of-reach shelves and imagine the adventures they contain, before going off to have your own.