

The Persistence of Yellow

By Lucienne S. Bloch

Some years ago my husband and I went plot shopping, a sensible project for people our age, one then nearing senior citizenship and the other already there. We wanted to explore our options, make an informed decision about buying our last shared bed. We did not think our shopping was morbid, laced as it was with a jigger of strong *eau de vie*. Nor did we believe we were tempting fate, as genuinely superstitious people believe they are doing if they speak the name of a disease or mention an event they dread. Buying our plot was another sort of retirement plan to make, one for the uncharted future. Over the years we talked about looking for a burial site, but kept putting it off. We had lawyer-written wills, signed durable powers of attorney, designated health-care proxies, and a notarized statement of our final wishes, all the legal planning that people are advised to do for the possible decline of competence and the predictable end of life. Still, those formal documents were merely intentional: abstract preparations. It was time to ground one of our plans in the concrete. We had to find a cemetery we liked.

Cremation is unacceptable to us. We are abidingly mindful of the furnaces in the death camps. My husband's family, the survivors in it, is buried in northeastern France in an old Jewish cemetery that used to have towering old pines lining its gravel paths. All of those venerable trees were uprooted by the powerful freak windstorm that ripped a corridor of destruction through England and Western Europe in December of 1999. A rogue storm savaging that part of the world is highly suggestive but I'll leave it at that, refrain from

looking at the monstrous figure in history's carpet. I am squinting at a much smaller area rug, skimpy and finite.

My family, all but a lone twig of it, lies in a cemetery in suburban New Jersey, in a section reserved for people who belong to an Orthodox burial society. That cemetery is a flat grassy place, largely treeless and blatantly functional. It is surrounded by visible and audible strip malls, office plazas, housing developments, parking lots, and busy highways, the landscape of actual and aspirational mobility in America, a dynamic that was permanently foreign to my clan of refugees, to its elders anyhow, whose mutual seclusiveness was masked as self-sufficiency. At a stone's throw, from across Montefiore Avenue that runs by it, that one section of the cemetery resembles my notional picture of a *shtetl* before the populations of those villages perished: plain neat narrow houses shoulder to shoulder on narrow dirt paths. Up close, the impression is reinforced, many of the names on the tombstones are Polish, the texts in Hebrew, the birth and death dates in accordance with the Jewish calendar. Only recently did that burial society partially acknowledge the 21st century by allowing men and women to be laid to rest in adjoining graves; women are still not permitted to stand next to men during a burial's ritual graveside prayers. Once a year I like to visit my gender-gapped relatives in that little gray village, but I wouldn't want to live in it, so to speak. When I see their graves, I often imagine missing the company of my parents and extended family, and they missing mine, dust whispering to nearby dust, asking where on earth I was, why I chose to distance myself from them. Invariably, I wonder if any future visitors would recall me and my place in that familial scheme of things without my name on a tombstone there to see and to mark with pebbles. Even so, my husband and I positively agreed on our need for a different cemetery.

We headed for the hills of Westchester. Pioneering, we called it, though we scouted the region many years earlier and settled a bit of it with a house in the northern reaches of that county. Westchester's proximity to Manhattan is a plus for us on the weekends we drive to our house, additionally enhanced by the features of the area's glacially-formed terrain. We like the look of rolling ridges, now-wooded drumlins, kames and eskers, the numerous ponds created by stranded blocks of ancient ice melting in place, the occasional erratic boulder perched where it doesn't appear to belong, the overall green of it bordered by the Hudson River on one side and the Long Island Sound on the other.

Most of the cemeteries are in lower Westchester, closer to the city whose dead and mourners they serve. On several Sunday winter afternoons, driving back to Manhattan, we detoured to a handful of them. If they looked okay in raw weather, they would be fine in time. We called ahead for appointments with their custodians who could steer us to available plots. We checked out the plantings, the styles of the monuments and markers, the neighbors, the views, the space between graves, the slope of a site for natural drainage, the light and potential shade, selling price and upkeep costs --- comparison shopping, as though and in fact for a downsized new home, and in a gated community to boot. Kensico, the largest and most picturesque garden cemetery of those we saw, seemed wrong for us, too country-clubby, too squarely located in Valhalla, a hamlet named for the heavenly home of mythic heroes slain in battles that were not ours, not our myths either. Ferncliff, Mount Hope and Mount Pleasant were among the others we visited, none of them quite filling the bill, vague as it was. We knew what we didn't like, but what precisely we wanted was unclear, an inkling at best.

One bleak February afternoon we went to Mount Eden Cemetery. The caretaker wasn't busy, no burials were scheduled, we were the only folks he'd seen all day, he reported. He offered to walk around with us, he wanted to stretch his legs. We preferred to wander privately but it was hard to refuse his offer, especially after he sweetened it by volunteering to make us a cup of tea. That we did turn down. We walked the grounds for what felt like hours, time dilated by his tortoise-like pace. We had plodded to the top of what can be called a mount only in generous hyperbole when he pointed out an available grave site that seemed to already have our name on it. It has the same western exposure as our house up-county, about the same elevation providing a big open view of a hilly horizon, a similar quietness accented by the frequent and plaintive tooting of a Metro North commuter train. The caretaker said we shouldn't delay a decision because "plots are going like hotcakes." Those were his very words, and they did the job.

In the office there, we wrote and signed a request for adjoining double plots on that site, room for growth. We have three children, two have young children of their own. None of them live near New York. Making final arrangements for them would be definitely be unwelcome micromanagement, and certifiably premature. However, on the chance that our still-single son might someday think about being buried beside us, extra space would come in handy. He became an observant Jew several years ago, a factor influencing our choice that we recognized only midway through our subtractive process of plot shopping. Mount Eden respects the laws of the Sabbath, is closed to burials and visitors on Saturdays.

The following day we phoned the administrative director of Mount Eden and firmed up our request with a credit-card deposit. A week later, our deposit became a cash purchase, no installment plans allowed. Three weeks after that, we received a deed of ownership, a

map detailing our site's lot-lines, a two-page statement of the cemetery corporation's rules and regulations pertaining to the acceptable burial procedures of plot owners, the conduct of visitors, and the planting of property. Also enclosed was a schedule of yearly charges for maintenance and perpetual-care fees, expenses deferrable until a plot is occupied. This packet of information is still in its original manila envelope, stowed in a cardboard box in a storage closet in our apartment, out of sight but not out of mind, mine for one, at present.

I opened that box last week to look for my husband's and my own Social Security cards and our birth certificates, mine issued in Belgium, his in France. These are two of the many documents required when applying for a so-called Real ID, part of enhanced New York State driver's licenses. I found what I needed, then passed a couple of hours rambling through the past, reading a variety of old and newer documents: diplomas, my husband's Air Force discharge papers, a copy of our marriage license and the *ketubah* my parents insisted on, a few recently expired desk calendars kept for no useful reason but my mild discomfort at the thought of junking people's names and the festive events recorded on their pages, the passenger list of the ocean liner on which I emigrated to America, some evaluations of our children's behavioral and academic qualities as observed by their elementary-school teachers, handwritten genealogies of our two families going back five generations, those kinds of personal papers, another scheme of things in which I have a place. I had a good time, those hours in bygone years. Memories whirled around me, some spontaneous and some rehearsed, stomping a vigorous polka to the beat of systole, diastole. It felt as though I had crashed a costume party being held in a clearing in a forest of papery trees of life; come as you were. I was sorry about having to shelve the box and

get back to my here-and-now self and doings, but knowing I could revisit those papers whenever I want to subdue the hounds of regret. And then, just before I closed the box, I spotted the manila envelope sent by Mount Eden at the bottom of it. Good night, goodbye, farewell, the party was over with a bang: the prospect of death pounding on my door.

I haven't been able to shake that thought since I saw that envelope last week. I tried to loosen its grip by dwelling on the pragmatic stuff of arrangements, family, place, weather, geology, property, documentation. I failed.

It is not surprising that death is on my mind these days, even without a push from a cemetery's mailing. Two people I cherish are in the jaws of illnesses from which they are not likely to be yanked. If only sickness could be beaten with a loud authoritative No!

What I should say is "Nuts!" if a serious illness attacks me. That was Brigadier General McAuliffe's terse defiant reply to German emissaries demanding that American forces surrender the besieged town of Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge. The encircled Americans held the town, won that fight, and subsequent battles. Nuts! to giving in, giving up, getting beaten. I hope to be brave enough to believe that and act accordingly if the need arises.

For the time being, I am a visitor to hospital rooms, doctors' waiting rooms, home sickbeds, or I visit by phone, make chatty calls, do what I can, not much, to momentarily distract the minds of people with one thing looming large in their thinking.

There is no way to tenderize the thought of dying for easier chewing and digestion.

Inevitable as death is, we don't have a secular handle on its unreportable aftermath. I don't

anyhow. I can't sort or construe baffling nonbeing. If its meaning could be found in books on a reading list for the mother of all courses—Mastering Death—I would study those books, cram for the final, though I'd never find out how I did on that exam. If I could posit a theory of everything that accounted for the mysteries of death's universe, I would. If I were a reader of the Talmud, I could turn to Maimonides to deliver me from perplexity. If I were a doctor as my husband is, I would be accustomed to confronting mortality, know how to grapple with it, where to outflank it, when to surrender, strategies that don't figure in von Clausewitz's military treatise. If I is wishful on a low-fat diet. Alternatively, if is life reduced to its bare chanciness.

So far, so lucky is my personal watchword now. Should my luck run out, "Nuts!" would be the best response.

It would also be deeply uncharacteristic. The mere thought of death and its vast dark uncertainties makes my naturally yellow bones clatter like maracas, I can feel them clacking an alert: Back off, stay safe, stick with the familiar dazzle and blur of life. Again, once again on these pages, I am refraining from looking at something I probably should tackle, even fearfully. This is shaping up as an agenda of items I don't dare to put on the table for consideration.

Sometimes, this moment, it feels as though I write on a fault zone. There are fractures on my narrative crust, evidence of continental plates moving and shearing below the surface, of seismic events waiting to happen, maybe the big one, as Californians call it. I record the observable impacts of small quakes that rattle or uplift me, but I avoid, too often, the underlying trouble areas. I think about firing myself from a job I don't always do through and through, from the inside out. My second thought regularly is *I do what I can*,

how and when I want, I am on my own here, shaky and whistling in the dark, alone with the say-so.

So: to something else that rattles me, the slippage of memory. This concern is as age-appropriate as shopping for a plot, the process as subtractive as our search was, but that's it for similarities. There's no choice in the matter of memory loss, no fixed lot-lines or schedule of human costs, no contractual guarantees between a mind and the brain that runs it, no escape clause either. Confusion is too flimsy a word for what happens to people with severe cognitive impairments. This is knowledge I acquired empirically and would rather forget, but can't. I can't gag the nagging memory of my father and the punches that decked him in his unfair fight with a dementing disease. Affection and the passage of time haven't softened that shrill remembrance for me, I live with it "as is," the brusque caveat on labels attached to used or damaged goods in yard sales and at auctions.

I remember many things I would rather forget, and vice versa, but it's the new and random blank moments that concern me. Thankfully, they are still only pesky, impish enough to play with me. I am the "it" searching for names, words, previous events, plans, addresses, and mostly finding what I seek, tagging the hidens before they sprint to home base in my gray matter, free to elude me again. As of today, I can shrug off my transient lapses.

Today may diminish to never when and if mild forgetfulness advances to firm, and firm in time to tyrannical. I am afraid that will happen to me. Along with being a medalist in the Olympics of avoidance, I am a born catastrophist; the two habits of mind are related, raised together, sibs in trepidation. My sense of vulnerability may be ancestral, a trait encoded in

my genes, or it might be circumstantial, the result of being born in a particular place in a specific year, or it could just be me, always conscious of the tiny *r* turning scared into scarred. A lowercase *r* looks like an upside-down fishhook. I try to keep clear of the baited barb but at times I feel compelled or obligated to bite, and then I am snagged for hours, thrashing on the business end of a strong taut line that unreels from the historic past and my childhood terror about the blue numbers I saw on forearms.

My chronic wariness is another choiceless matter, or I would have opted for daring in place of cold feet a long time ago. "If your *oma* had wheels she'd be a tram," my mother used to say, a Mitteleuropean version of pigs sprouting wings to fly with, as impossible as choosing to be fearless, as unreal.

One reality is that I can still spell backwards without hesitating. Spelling backwards is a standard part of tests given to people whose mental acuity is in question. How can the ability to spell in reverse on demand measure anything but a person's knack for speedy U-turns? Able was I ere I saw Elba. A man, a plan, a canal, Panama. Dlrow. Elpoep. Efil. Daerd. Htaed. Gnihton. Easy, duck soup, a game, for now.

Now is this bright October afternoon, this golden hour that has the allure of a scenic pullout on a road that leads more or less directly to an airless dark destination. Even passingly, interruptively, blank-mindedly, the panoramic vista rates a look. The sky is blue, the day is seasonably warm, the view is grand, my luck is holding, and I am stopping here, now, because I can, I want to, I say so, taking in the scenery, basking in this sunny moment before darkness falls.