

THE EAST EDGE

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ALSO BY CHRIS MCCABE

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

*In the Catacombs: A Summer Among the Dead Poets of West
Norwood Cemetery* (Penned in the Margins, 2014)

Real South Bank (Seren, 2016)

Cenotaph South: Mapping the Lost Poets of Nunhead Cemetery
(Penned in the Margins, 2016)

FICTION

Dedalus (Henningham Family Press, 2018)

Mud (Henningham Family Press, 2019)

POETRY

The Hutton Inquiry (Salt Publishing, 2005)

Zeppelins (Salt Publishing, 2008)

THE RESTRUCTURE (Salt Publishing, 2012)

Speculatrix (Penned in the Margins, 2014)

The Triumph of Cancer (Penned in the Margins, 2018)

AS EDITOR

The New Concrete: Visual Poetry in the 21st Century,
with Victoria Bean (Hayward Publishing, 2015)

*Poems from the Edge of Extinction: An Anthology of Poetry in Endangered
Languages* (Chambers, 2019)

The East Edge
Nightwalks with the Dead Poets
of Tower Hamlets



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with photographs by Harpreet Kalsi

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The East Edge

*Nightwalks
with the Dead
Poets of Tower
Hamlets*



*The City is of Night; perchance of Death
But certainly of Night.*

B.V. THOMSON, *THE CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT* (1874)

The Terrors of the Night

— ENTERING THE CEMETERY

And since he cannot spend and use aright

The little time here given him in trust,

But wasteth it in weary undelight

Of foolish toil and trouble, strife and lust,

He naturally claimeth to inherit

The everlasting Future, that his merit

May have full scope; as surely is most just.

B.V. THOMSON, *THE CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT*

I HAVE CROSSED THE RIVER and arrive in east London at night. I am trawling the Magnificent Seven to find a great lost poet and have entered the eastern fringe of the city, the realm of the Roman Necropolis. If I'd have arrived at any of the other seven cemeteries at this hour, I'd be too late — a bellman or groundsman would have locked the gates. Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park is the only one to remain open after dark.

Night starts early in the East End. In November, darkness starts to fall at 4pm. A momentary twilight takes place when the lights in the high-rise blocks glister with the last of the sun. The

Southern Grove entrance is closed so I walk around the outside walls of the Cemetery to find an entrance. Where the surrounding wall of the cemetery ends, the boundary is continued with terraced houses. Inside one is an active green light — the colour of a bluebottle’s eye — blinking behind thick glass. I hear a train running nearby. Then a woman’s high heels. The wind is pushing dead leaves through the gutter. A siren. A man flies past me on a bicycle, the red light flashing behind him like the eye of a Cyclops. This is London, even this. The commute takes place above the dead.

From the medieval period until the 19th century, various institutions of power have imposed restrictions on the citizens of London after dark. The walled City of London would close its gates, leaving malcontents locked out on the other side. These days the grounds of the Cemetery Park are open to all through the night. This land belongs to the community. I follow the dogleg of Ropery Street, past a BUILDERS merchants. The old east London trades still echo on here. Building. Plumbing. Ironmongery. Ropery Street is named after the rope-making industry that was here before the cemetery.

In *Nightwalking: A Nocturnal History of London*, Matthew Beaumont argues for a distinction between the Noctambulant, the one who is out walking with a purpose, and the Noctavigant,

the one who walks with criminal intent. For a long period of London's history, just to be outdoors at night was to be considered criminal. This was particularly the case for the working class, for whom there is always another set of rules. Who in authority believes that the poor just pop out for a stroll, or take a walk to look at the moon?

Who am I then: Noctambulant or Noctavigant? Two years before the cemetery was opened, the Metropolitan Police Act of 1839 was passed, effectively criminalising those out in the city after dark. But the cemetery I'm walking towards has become a space impossible to control with light or truncheon. No Peelers on patrol. 'The Annoyance of the Inhabitants or Passengers' doesn't count here, and the dead don't care.

The frosted glass windows of the Victorian terraces are lit from within; illuminated images project like a Symbolist poem. A deep red flower. Green swans. Signs sent out from the living on the other side. One house has attached a candle holder to the left of the door as if anticipating a shroud of Whitechapel fog. Marigolds are curling in hanging baskets like parsnip crisps. Then the past disappears as the road forks into a vista of high-rises, each lit with a spine of orange bulbs, and beyond them a crane — neon red — semaphoring to low-flying helicopters.

A creaking green gate opens towards the field at the back of the grounds on Bow Common Lane. Powered lights make the walk as safe as anywhere in central London — but only if you're at peace with being so close to a quarter of a million burials. The lit path comes to an end. A footway retained through common use, into the land of the dead. My shadow stretches ahead towards my destination. I reach the kissing gate into the cemetery grounds and enter; I am inside. I hear the sound of a pig squealing. Then a woman hissing. An owl flutters overhead. Except it's none of these things — unlikely anyway — only the amplification of imagination that happens in graveyards. In *The Terrors of the Night* (1594), a book that I've carried about with me for years, Thomas Nashe wrote:

'If in the dead of the night there be any rumbling, knocking or disturbance near us, we straight dream of wars or of thunder. If a dog howl, we suppose we are transported into hell, where we hear the complaint of damned ghosts. If our heads lie double or uneasy, we imagine all heaven with our shoulders, like Atlas. If we be troubled with too many clothes, then we suppose the night mare rides us.'

I keep walking, glancing at the time on my phone. It's only just gone 5pm. Millions of Londoners are finishing work and boarding

the Tube, and here I am, sweating in the cold — reaching for a tree to stay on my feet in a tangle of branches and long grass.

Then I'm lost. I ask two people who are sitting on a bench if I'm in the cemetery. They stare at me. "Graveyard?" I ask. They come alive, the tip-ends of their cigarettes bobbing like lights on a ship. "Straight ahead," one of them says. "Follow the path; put your light on so you can see." 'In the dead of night,' writes Matthew Beaumont, 'the underside of London might be found, and a secret self silently fostered.'

Three teenagers run in from the gates behind me, giggling. A minute later they're running back out. One says: "I want to do this but I'm too scared." This is one of the few central London locations without streetlights. The cemetery exists in an equilibrium between the citizens that frequent it, the law and the dead. Beaumont again: 'Nightwalking, it might be said, takes place in the realm of the unnight, a liminal zone between the waking and sleeping city, and between the waking and sleeping state of mind — even between the living and the dead.' If my mind is reeling so early in the evening, what will the cemetery reveal at 10pm, at midnight, in the early hours of morning? I feel like a swimmer who is about to complete their first length of a pool but is already thinking ahead to the Hellespont.

A train flies past overhead, like a horizontal version of one

of the many tower blocks that colonnade the east London skyline. Someone is walking behind me with urgency, rattling keys. I speed up. Headstones begin to appear like the skyline of a far-off city. At this stage in my journey through the Magnificent Seven — the name given to the seven cemeteries built around London and opened between 1833 and 1841 — there's something homely about the graves, a familiarity that's come about through spending so many hours with the dead. The descent into the underworld plays tricks with the mind, but the underworld itself might just be a safe haven.

I've entered the necropolis, The City of Dreadful Night, to quote the title of B.V. Thomson's long poem. A light from the Hamlets Way side of the cemetery seems to twist and transforms into the shadow of an obelisk. If at night the dead were to reappear above ground, by dawn there would be no room for the living to leave their houses; so said Charles Dickens in 'Night Walks', written after experiencing a period of insomnia. With the population of London exploding from 865,000 in 1801 to almost nine million in 2019, the dead would win in a tug-of-war. I'm not even half-way through the Magnificent Seven and my own midlife is fluttering like a moth around an oil lamp. Roberto Bolano, documenter of Chile and Mexico after dark, writes in his epic *2666* that there

are only two kinds of person out at night: those who are running out of time, and those with time to burn. I'm becoming familiar to the dead, a stranger to the living. I am moving through life with an ever-growing assembly line of overlooked poets, figures so marginal they curl up like the cuttings in the tray of a guillotine.

I stop beneath the bowing figure of a stone angel. Its wings momentarily appear like an overpacked rucksack. Harbinger of the eternal commute. As I walk forward it is dwarfed by the shadow of the Celtic cross next to it. Apartment windows flicker through branches. I wonder, perhaps, if electricity is sourced from the dead, an inversion of Galvinism (the biological contraction of muscle matter by an electric source used to activate Frankenstein's monster). Memorials race up to the sky. I'm lost in this ocean of night, enveloping folds of darkness that pull me further into the grounds. Somewhere inside a woman has lost her dog: "Abraham," she shouts. "Abrahaaaam!" A man passes, following the promise of his phone screen. Purpose. Plans. Appointments. When I walk out of the cemetery in a few hours, I'll join him on that mission, jump on a Tube, and become part of the tireless trade-off of lived hours for wage labour. I prefer it here, within touching distance of dead poets.

According to Meller and Parsons, by the start of the 20th century Tower Hamlets was distinct amongst London cemeteries:

‘No other... had been allowed to grow wild for so long.’ I think of Nunhead with its empire of vegetation and forests. I was so lost inside that landscape that only writing *Cenotaph South* could get me out of it. It’s not so much the vegetation in Tower Hamlets that confuses as the criss-crossing paths which ask for decisions to be made on the hoof. There’s nature here in abundance, with over 100 species of birds and, in spring and summer, butterflies. I can sense the creatures of winter tonight: urban foxes foraging for slugs, snaffling a bone.

A series of oddly shaped graves appears before me like a coven of hooded monks. As I move, they seem to move too. The Charterhouse graves are one of the strangest sights here and are distinct for their serrated, pointed designs. These graves house 200 brothers of Sutton’s Hospital in the Charterhouse. Each grave contains the remains of six brothers. Dormitories extend into death, House Rules abolished. The memorials stand as a community, cut in the same uniform, united in their pilgrimage, marching into death together.

I scan my torch across the headstones and note the prevalence of nautical imagery. The mile or so walk down to the docks, across the Ratcliffe Highway, was one that many sailors did in reverse, after death; their bodies were carried across land, in coffins, on a tidal wave of living shoulders. Of the Magnificent

Seven, Brompton Cemetery might be closer to the river, but it is Tower Hamlets that is most *of* the river. I close my eyes and smell, through loamy earth, the water of the Thames. The cemetery holds the 23 people drowned in the paddle steamer *The Princess Alice*, which sunk in the Thames in 1871. Meller and Parsons list others claimed by river and sea, though not always as a result of the water itself. Captain Lusby was accidentally shot on board a ship in 1874. Peter Slader fell into the West India Dock in 1848. Death was never far away for the Victorian Londoner, but then neither was poetry, and the memorials of many of the dead are lined with text that appear like haikus. My torch flashes across the memorial of Emma Simpkins.

She died at sea
of dysentery
on her passage to India 1854.

If she had died a year earlier this would have been in perfect end-rhyme. But death is never in end-rhyme; it's always resisted, on some level, by someone — either the afflicted themselves or their family. Poetry itself has formed a major part of the memorialisation of death here. In *Design for Death*, Barbara Jones describes how a bereaved family made a piano from chrysanthemums for their

loved one, with a keyboard of scarlet carnations. A purple ribbon read 'Good Night Pop'. A eulogy was written on a sheet of paper.

Around a piano we have
Gathered through the years
A legacy of happiness and
Laughter that shines
Through the tears

I've lost track of time. I check my phone but the battery has died. A far-off bell is ringing. Last orders? I've taken my first swim in the night cemetery. I make for a drink before the city locks me out.

The Disembodied Essay

WILLIAM SPEAKS —————

‘To seek to lay the ghost by wrapping it,’ Henry James wrote of the death of his American cousin Minny, who died from tuberculosis when she was 24. The artist feeds on the loss until it transforms: *The Wings of the Dove*. ‘By wrapping it... in the beauty and dignity of art.’ James defined her death as the end of his youth and in this novel his mature style emerged: the pupa’s little force explodes the case. To wrap the ghost and thereby to seek it. What solace for the artist in the loss of the flesh? Did James find a fair exchange in readership? All was not lost in his loss; a creation was born that was not there before.

To seek. To wrap. To prove. To ghost.