

BURIED GARDEN

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ALSO BY CHRIS MCCABE

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Buried Garden

*Lockdown with the Lost Poets
of Abney Park Cemetery*



CHRIS MCCABE

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For my son, Pavel

Buried Garden

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*Lockdown with
the Lost Poets
of Abney Park
Cemetery*



My cousin said it was an amazing place. Not a bit like the ordinary London parks ... You go in through a gateway, and he said it was like finding yourself in another country. Such trees, that must have been brought from the end of the world: there were none like them in England ... deep hollows with streams running from the rocks; lawns all purple and gold with flowers, and golden lilies too, towering up into the trees, and mixing with the crimson of the flowers that hung from the boughs...

Harliss did not fail with his response, 'I tell you there's no such place.'

ARTHUR MACHEN, 'N'

The Garden of the Egyptian Dead, 3150 BC

I am the poet of these grounds I am the only one
I am the overseer of my garden I am the only one
At my birth the four pillars were yet to rise the city made them so
The seven gates of London are the protectors of lost poets travelling
The portal to the underworld gives access to the northwest passage
Anubis weighs your heart in the scales he is Abney's
What was it that was here yesterday and is here still?
My body of work
Who was it who was not defeated by mundane lethargy the daily
cull of grain?
I was not defeated
Who is the keeper of the book of things which were or could be?
It is you my reader
Now enter

Entering the Abode of the Mortal Part of Man

TO STAND AT THE GATES of Abney Park Cemetery is to stare through a portal into the afterlife. Hundreds of people walk past here every day, missing the gateway. Four white columns rise from the high street, their capitals blackening where the stone meets the sky. This is Egyptian symbology: there are none of the Gothic touches you find at the entrances to the other Magnificent Seven, the great Victorian cemeteries encircling London. The Egyptian text, written on the inside lodges, translates as: ABODE OF THE MORTAL PART OF MAN.

Continuing my search for a great, lost poet in London's Magnificent Cemeteries, this is the fourth abode of the mortal part of man I have entered. South London brought me close, with the discovery of Menella Bute Smedley in West Norwood, and Walter Thornbury in the labyrinth of Nunhead. Frustrated by this proximity to success, I then crossed the Thames; what Tower Hamlets lacked in genius was filled with the unmissable life story of William 'Spring' Onions. That was a journey under the cover

of nighttime, in a cemetery that never closes, but now I'm being led towards the dead by a different force: nature itself. Abney Park Cemetery is an unlikely London space, a former arboretum that still thrives amidst the smoke and thunder of Stoke Newington High Street. I've entered London's buried garden.

I am here today at the end of a lockdown winter, the weather yet to turn. I want to feel my way into this space, heading towards a spring spent walking above dead poets, with maps turning to roses in the hand, reading forgotten poems back to those who wrote them. After a landlocked year at home in Liverpool, a rip of possibility appeared in the shroud of the pandemic; I booked a train to be in this space that I've been thinking about so much. For the past decade, Liverpool has been my home city and London my city of work and imagination. Abney Park Cemetery is 31 acres in size, shaped like a distended liver, and is enclosed in a densely populated enclave of north-east London, on the path of the culverted Hackney Brook. Nestled between Dalston to the south and Tottenham to the north, the cemetery edges the path of Ermine Street, the Roman road from London to York.

For a long time, I've been obsessed with Arthur Machen's story 'N', in which three friends discuss the existence of a beautiful, transient landscape garden in Stoke Newington. The garden only appears to the few. It is a garden of both joy and terror, which

quickly transitions from paradise to post-developed wasteland. As I continue my journey – or ‘London Adventure’, to use Machen’s phrase – towards unearthing the dead poets of Abney Park, I am also starting to believe that the cemetery itself is the sublime lost garden of Stoke Newington.

Then one afternoon I fell asleep and had a dream about a visionary garden, made of liquid light. I wrote the dream down. That night I dreamt of another. I notice a pattern in the dreams as the characters – some real, others imagined – travail towards their own garden spaces.

The search for this garden might lead me to the poet I am looking for. This is a burial ground filled with visionaries, who died believing that a transformation – a Second Coming or a Resurrection – was imminent. In 1840, the minister overseeing the opening ceremony of the cemetery said: ‘we know that when the figure of the Archangel shall loom on the distant sky, and the fiat shall be uttered, Arise ye dead! – it shall fall with startling – with vivifying energy on the dull cold ear of death’. Locked at home, I have been looking through the archives and discover that some of these visionaries were poets. The fact of Abney Park Cemetery being a garden open to everyone was written into its original constitution, a manifesto which distinguishes it from the

rest of the Magnificent Seven:

The object of the company is the establishment of a General Cemetery for the City of London and its north-eastern suburbs, which shall be open to all classes of the community, and to all denominations of Christians without restraint in forms.

When Abney Park Cemetery opened it contained over 2,500 varieties of trees and plants, with four acres laid aside as a rosarium – a pink sea of 1,000 specimens of rose. Visitors could also see quince trees, olive trees and laburnum. George Loddiges was commissioned as the landscape gardener and he included all the hardy plants from the pages of his journal, *The Botanical Cabinet* (1817-33), the drawings for which were taken from specimens grown in Hackney. This was a garden cemetery on a scale that had never been seen in London before. The earth itself was unique for its fertile sub-soils. George Collison, Abney's first secretary and registrar, documented the different kinds of earth found in the cemetery, from the 'fine sand' in the northern parts – that run for 20 feet below ground – to areas of 'fine vegetable mould' and London clay. 'This is blue of colour', he wrote, 'stiff in working, very plastic in nature, and almost free from stone'.

I'm walking over this hidden, blue earth, led by Machen's story into a garden landscape where poetry can be found: it appears in cryptic snatches on headstones everywhere I look. I return to Machen's description of Stoke Newington's lost garden, the one that is all around me:

Before me, in place of the familial structures, there was disclosed a panorama of unearthly, of astounding beauty. In deep bells, bowered by overhanging trees, there bloomed flowers such as only dreams can show; such deep purples that yet seemed to glow like precious stones with a hidden but ever-present radiance.

Regeneration work is about to begin here. A sour cherry tree leans with limber fronds over a scaffold gate. Contracts are drawn and artist designs completed. The right lodge will extend into a Visitor Centre, with a Café and a reception for weddings. At one time, it was a maverick move to shoehorn married couples into a cemetery for samizdat photographs; now the death/desire paradigm is going viral.

Lockdown all around me: I made it here today against the odds. I have had so much more time to think over the past year, identifying the underlying pattern in my own life. A question has continued to occur to me, a tendril to the light: what will I choose

to do with my body after death? As Reverend Barker wrote in his 1869 book *Abney Park*: ‘nay, it is possible, if not probable, that thou thyself mayest ere long be separated from among the living, and thy narrow bed be found here’. I have been reading about how the body doesn’t simply end with death; it too has its own afterlife, one that is related to the environment. The corporeal matter of the body is also a buried garden – one that can feed life in the earth – surviving in the remaining atoms.

Spring hangs on a precipice; new energy is on the verge of breaking through. I think of Machen’s other great book, *The London Adventure* (1924), and am filled with the same optimism with which he sets about writing his work: ‘I was to write a book about London ... But ... I was not going to begin writing it till the leaves were out on the trees, since the green leakage of the boughs made such a marvellous contrast with the grim greyness of the streets.’ I walk past litter bins, a framed map of the grounds, appeals for volunteering. The rain of the past weeks has turned the boundary paths to gruel; the winter’s gales have collapsed several trees. Fox dens have softened patches of earth so I watch my steps as I walk. This garden retains the darker side of Machen too; the oasis quickly shifts to eerie. Mushrooms can’t be eaten here as they may be infused with arsenic – from the bodies of the Victorian dead – or lead from the coffins. A woman walks towards me, eyes

foggy with lockdown fatigue, repeating the same words: ‘horrible this is, horrible this is’. Stoke Newington High Street behind me: I’ve crossed the threshold.

One thing I have learned in my search for London’s buried poets is that I will need to be quick, because summer foliage conceals headstones. Abney Park has grown wild since the description given by Barker in 1869:

Its field of graves and intersecting paths are in that state of neat and decent order which should ever mark the resting-place of the dead. The visitor will be at once impressed by the evidences of the great care and attention which have been bestowed upon the general arrangement, and the daily efforts of the Company to keep church and tree, flower and shrub and monumental stone, in a state of perfection of beauty.

A decade later, the *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette* ran the following notice, indicating that the beginnings of the garden’s dilapidation was under way:

ABNEY PARK CEMETERY

Notice to Freeholders

Many gravestones, Tombs and Railings having fallen into decay and requiring immediate reparation, owners of Graves are requested to inspect their property in the Cemetery, and give directions as to necessary repairs. By Order.

Wm. BROWN, Secretary.

My search in the disintegrating garden has begun, a journey – in Machen’s words – that deliberately ‘shun[s] the familiar’. I’ve walked a circuit around the cemetery and am back at the gates. The Millennium has passed; the Second Coming did not happen: the portal remains open.

§

I receive a letter from my brother, handwritten on green paper. A tarot card falls out, the VIII Wands, the artwork showing hands falling from the sky – orchestrating a searing sun – and beneath them green hills, crosses wedged along a path:

This card REALLY wanted you ... first it fell out of the deck while I was shuffling, and it appeared as the card I picked. It’s the EIGHT OF WANDS – a speedy, strong, determined little bolt of creativity!

Have you had an idea about a little (or not so little) nature-based project recently? Perhaps something that uses your creative talent to connect you with nature?

The wands fly towards their target. The sun shines on their path. The hills are sharp and inviting. Holy crosses stand by the side of the path. Do any of the prompts in this card speak to you?

The paths are beginning to converge. I ask around people I know, those who might have an angle on Stoke Newington, to see if Machen's lost garden has appeared to them. The thing about Machen's story is that the garden appears to different people, in different spaces, and at different times. Poet Richard Price tells me about Alexandra Palace with its 'soft owl call – with the ghosts of its monkeys and deer'. Closer to Abney are his frequent walks through Ducketts Common, which – he says – 'is almost invisible because it just seems a scrap on the High Road between Harringay's Green Lanes and Wood Green High Road proper'. Could this be Machen's garden?

'A more likely Brig a' Doon garden', Richard says, 'is Russell Park, almost completely hidden in the heart of Noel Park estate. Like Ducketts Common, it has mature trees though much more bird life – it is alive with birdsong every time you

visit. There are mini-allotment spaces on it.’ He describes how a large tree, somehow weakened in the hot weather, fell across the path narrowly missing his son Rory, and Rory’s mother, the poet Hannah Lowe. Richard’s description of the landscape is compellingly Machenesque: ‘As the New River winds about it also creates little patches of greenery that no-one can easily see – one near my place I incorporate into a morning walk. When I came to the block first to see if I wanted a flat there, I looked out the window of an unoccupied room high up and saw the blue green spark of a kingfisher shoot past below. It was one of the reasons, a kind of charm or sign, that I decided to move in’.

In Machen’s ‘N’, the garden appears through windows – nature framed by a manmade portal. One day Glanville asks the Reverend to look out of the window; the Reverend does so, seeing only ‘that which I had expected to see: a row or terrace of neatly designed residences’. It is then that Glanville says to him ‘Look again’, and the hidden garden appears: ‘I might also say that my soul was ravished by the spectacle displayed before me. I was possessed by a degree of rapture and delight such as I had never experienced. A sense of beatitude pervaded my whole being’. This feeling of joy is quickly replaced with ‘a swift revulsion of terror’, and the Reverend runs from the house without saying a word. It might be that the garden is just too beautiful to behold for

long, or that its association with madness makes it too dangerous to retain in the mind for any length of time. The key phrase in Machen's story is 'Look again', for without the volition to see – to look beyond the eyes – the garden will never appear in the first place.

I look again at my brother's letter: 'The sun shines on their path. The hills are sharp and inviting. Holy crosses stand by the side of the path.'

The garden exists for those who are ready to see it.