

IN THE CATACOMBS

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ALSO BY CHRIS MCCABE

POETRY

The Hutton Inquiry (Salt Publishing, 2005)

Zeppelins (Salt Publishing, 2008)

THE RESTRUCTURE (Salt Publishing, 2012)

Whitehall Jackals with Jeremy Reed (Nine Arches Press, 2013)

Pharmapoetica: a dispensary of poetry with Maria Vlotides
(Pedestrian Publishing, 2013)

PLAYS

Shad Thames, Broken Wharf (Penned in the Margins, 2010)

In the Catacombs

*A Summer Among the Dead Poets of
West Norwood Cemetery*



Chris McCabe

Penned in the Margins

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CONTENTS

PART 1: HOW TO BE MAGNIFICENT	
The Living Dead	17
Getting Curious	29
PART 2: THE MILLIONAIRE'S CEMETERY	
Bones Built in Me: Measuring the Dead Against Hopkins and Dickinson	39
White Addition Black Total: The Poets of West Norwood	59
PART 3: MEETING THE DEAD	
Fragile Egos: Returning Poems to 12 Dead Poets In the Catacombs	83 151
PART 4: SPILLWAYS: JOURNEYS OUT FROM THE CEMETERY	
At the Pines: Visiting Swinburne and Watts-Dunton	189
Following the Effra from the Graves to the New World	203
Whiston Wood	219
ENDNOTES	225
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	235
INDEX	241

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In the Catacombs

A Summer Among the Dead Poets of

West Norwood Cemetery



*Dedicated to my dad, for bringing poetry home.
Your books on my shelf.*

DOCUMENT A : INITIAL STATEMENT

My body, my work. My body of work. Its complete dissemblance is a universe of anti-matter. I write & it adds molecules to my presence : water & acids in all of my written pages. What's left of my blood, my cells, my tissue. I'm a quantity man. I start each day holding an iPad to the sun.

The phone rings after midnight. It's sat there for months in its plastic torso, limbless & cold, curled up in the recovery position.

Hello, is that The Poet?

The voice sounds like it hasn't spoken for some time, as if it's forgotten how to inflect, to make its emotion known. Lack of ictus. The line crackles like an old analogue recording.

Who is this? How did you get my number? How do you know I'm a poet?

This is your poet. I just wanted to say that I'm glad you're coming to find me.

Part 1

How to be Magnificent

Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?

Emily Dickinson, letter to T.W. Higginson, April 1860

The Living Dead

When I spoke of fame I was not thinking of the harm it does to men as artists: it may do them harm, as you say, but so, I think, may the want of it.

G.M. Hopkins, letter to R.W. Dixon, June 13th 1878

I WENT INTO THE CEMETERY because I wanted to find a great lost poet. I wanted to find an original voice: unknown and overlooked for centuries. I wanted to give my ear to their music, to listen for its hiss and cadence in the still-smouldering remains of their white ashes.

I have always enjoyed setting myself a question within set parameters and the parameters here are clearly defined: London's Magnificent Seven cemeteries. In order of creation they are: Kensal Green (1832), West Norwood (opened as the South Metropolitan Cemetery in 1837), Highgate (1839), Abney Park (1840), Nunhead (1840), Brompton (1840) and Tower Hamlets (1841). *In the Catacombs* is the first stage in the journey to search the remains — skeletal and textual — of the poets buried in these isolated parts of London. That search begins here with the 40 acres of West Norwood Cemetery, positioned in a straight southerly line between London Bridge and Crystal Palace: themselves both structures born of the same Victorian industry.

Is the survival and celebration of dead poets' work always to do with their innate, natural talent? And are the rewards always doled out fairly, with the most gifted receiving fame and fortune? The playing field shifts across the sediment of years, the goal-lines slide into cobblestones. It is a recognised fact that women poets were

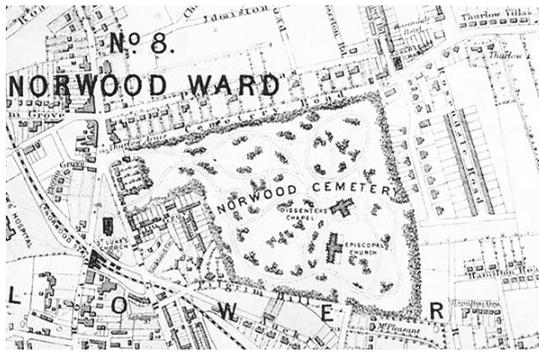
not published because they were women, working class poets were deprived of opportunity and time, but will this be proved with the dead poets I find across these seven London cemeteries?

There are two kinds of maps I'm interested in; two distinct but related architectures. The first is that of the cemeteries themselves, built between 1832 and 1841. In 1832 Parliament passed a bill encouraging private cemeteries to be built on the outskirts of London. This was in response to the explosion of the London populace and the increasing epidemics contaminating the water supply. The population of London doubled between 1801 and 1841, and wherever life thrives so does the death count. In 1852 the small churchyards were closed to new deposits. Dickens wrote a paper called 'City of London Churches' (published in *The Uncommercial Traveller* in 1860) in which he talked of these churchyards as relics, out-dated burial grounds for past generations:

No one can be sure of the coming time; but it is not too much to say of it that it has no sign in its outsetting tides, of the reflux to these churches of their congregation and uses. They remain like the tombs of the old citizens who lie beneath them and around them, Monuments of another age.

Having been pallbearer for Douglas Jerrold at his funeral at West Norwood, Dickens knew painfully well that the new age of burial had arrived in London. In fact, he had been an advocate of the General Cemetery Company, a group of businessmen who had come together to address the problem of burial space in London through entrepreneurial action. This problem became critical, especially after the outbreak of cholera in 1832, yet the business venture also

offered an opportunity to those who saw profit in death. One facet of Dickens' genius was that he lived through this age of mass change and development whilst also being able to handle and understand what this change meant: a rare kind of mind which I'll be looking for in the dead poets of West Norwood Cemetery.



Stanford's map of West Norwood Cemetery, 1876.

Sanitation for the living was not distinct from the dispatching of the dead. London's new cemeteries created a whole new way for the living to experience death. West Norwood itself was inspired by the Gothic splendour of the Père Lachaise in Paris; the lavish architecture of the headstones and mausoleums — as well as the Doric columns and underground apartments of the catacombs — invited a leisurely voyeurism within these suburban spaces. All of the Magnificent Seven became playgrounds for the middle and upper classes, particularly at weekends when they were one of the few places where it was socially acceptable for women to visit alone.

The privilege of being buried in West Norwood did not come for free. The first of the seven cemeteries was built near Kensal Green

in 1832. What followed was a virtual monopoly on burial in London run by joint-stock companies who maintained and devised the new rates of costs until the Metropolitan Internment Act of 1850 put the onus back into Government hands. There was no straightforward erasure of social classification under this new management of death; the democratic properties of the earthworm was something for nature to enforce later. At West Norwood the rich could secure extravagant family catacombs: vast underground libraries in which bodies were placed inside lead-lined editions for future browsers. In contrast, graves could be bought cheaply in the common ground of the cemetery.

Not all of the seven cemeteries were laid out in such a way as to confirm the social status quo; Abney Park in Stoke Newington was created as a burial ground for dissenters, taking over the role of Bunhill Fields (closed to burials in 1854) where that great defier of parameters, William Blake, was at last laid squarely in the ground. Blake, and the dissenters that followed, made a declaration against the rules of Christian burial: you never got my mind and you won't get my body. Although the work of a poet can be created long before the world is ready for it, the body itself can never be anachronistic: the earth receives it shortly after its function has ceased.

The unknown poets I hope to uncover will always be shadowed by the celebrated dead poets who have made the 'canon' of English Literature. I call these The Living Dead, poets not only with flora-strewn monuments in London graveyards but also blue plaques across the city. There are dozens of these celebrated writers, though my chosen ones — the ones by which I'll measure the work of the poets I find in West Norwood — are drawn from the inspiration and excitement their work has given me over the years. This is Poets'

London, the London in which the names of the still-read poets have been hewn into the physical city: Blake at Peckham, Apollinaire in Stockwell, Rimbaud in Camden. Their names are plated into stone. It is impossible to walk the course of the Magnificent Seven — ‘like a jet-black necklace around the throat of Victorian London’ (Lucinda Lambton) — without keeping an openness to the synchronicities between the physical location of these cemeteries and the legendary lifetime activity of the poets beyond their walls.

The underground river Effra provides a strong metaphorical connection for my journey. One branch of the river once rose in Upper Norwood and flowed beneath the ground that became West Norwood cemetery, before being diverted in the 1830s. Joseph Bazalgette constructed his London sewerage system in the mid-19th century and incorporated flows from the Effra into new drainage pipes (made by Doulton). Myths, like culverts in the landscape, gather underground force: they become fact. There is one story of a coffin floating down the Thames which was then traced back to an undisturbed grave at West Norwood. The ground beneath the coffin, it was argued, had collapsed and the coffin had fallen into the subterranean Effra and floated away. In death nothing remains still: atoms disperse, flesh disappears, the ecosystem thrives on decay. All of the dead poets of the Magnificent Seven might be static in their armadillo-poses, huddled for eternal silence, but their coffins have the capacity to move at force into the free-flow of the Thames. This is called readership.

Sweete Themmes! runne softly, till I end my Song. Edmund Spencer’s conceit uniting the Thames and the idea of his poetic immortality into one stream is a powerful one for my story. His poem, he suggests, will flow for as long as the river flows; his words

will be as lasting as the landscape of London. Is it possible to re-enact the myth of the dead body floating underground down the Effra to the Thames, replacing the real body with the poet's body of work?

We read Victorian poetry through the backward-facing lens of Modernism – what is it that keeps certain poet's work alive in our consciousness while others die off, like unwatered creepers around the frame of the 'canon'? Like the miles of houses built upon the ever-sliding foundations of London clay, the canon of poetry is never secure: found voices resurface, their physical construction often brought to light through recovered texts. There is also the significance of time: poets whose writing was out-of-synch with their period wait quietly for the faculties of their readership to catch up. They have gone forwards, as Henry Vaughan puts it, into a world of light. We follow after them with dim torches.

I picture the bodies of the poets across the acres of London's cemeteries: some cremulated to white bone, others long furrowed into the caverns made by the scavenging fox. I see their skulls like hollowed-out music boxes, once patterned with the stress-patterns of their poetry – the urgency of their poetics – now set into the sediment-layers of brown. What separates them from their neighbouring cadavers is that they tried to play the intricate musical keys of poetry; to attempt to connect their minds-at-play with the work of other poets and offer it to readers as something pleasurable or meaningful that could be taken into their lives. They wanted to be known for the clarity and power of their thoughts captured in the wired mesh of metrical language. My search will take me forward into the cemetery towards the specifics of their burial locations and back into collections and online to find their extant work.

I am also aware that I should be hesitant about the likelihood

of finding great work – I’ve come across enough poor poetry in my time. At worst, the dead speak in a language that was not their own; their words are subsumed by the idea of what poetry at their time of writing was *supposed* to be. Many failed poets make the mistake of seeing the history – and the present condition – of poetry as in stasis, though the poets I admire most have pushed against their present and by doing so have opened up new technical possibilities for later generations. I am not looking for a great Victorian poet: I am looking for a great poet who lived through the Victorian period.

So much of 19th century poetry never woke up to the rapid pace of the century and the necessity to address this in new artistic forms. To find a language to complement the urgency of social change. Bernard Richards in *English Poetry of the Victorian Period 1830-1890* talks of how there were ‘a variety of strategies adopted by the poets faced with the challenging and alarming modern world, ranging from acceptance and acquiescence on the one hand to hostility, protest and evasion on the other’. I’m thinking about this when Ted Hughes – now vaulted in stone at Westminster Abbey – speaks out from the radio, a voice trapped in analogue now flowing digitally, and describes the work of Hungarian poet János Pilinszky: “he has produced no such thing as an ‘occasional poem’... He writes, as he says, only what he cannot not write, like a chess player he moves only when he must and as he is forced. ‘I would like to write’, he has said, ‘as if I had remained silent’”. It is this kind of urgent silence I hear in the work of the West Norwood dead: I am their audience and the pre-event tension has a kind of electric hush.

Gerard Manley Hopkins captured his struggle with God in his invented technique of Sprung Rhythm; Lord Tennyson contained his wrestling with new scientific knowledge in the compact meta-poetic

lyrics of *In Memoriam*; Robert Browning compressed his allegory of Darwinism into the colloquial syntax of 'Caliban Upon Setebos'; Emily Dickinson condensed awareness of her own mortality into oblique lyric poetry. These are not poets who had a Fairy Land idea of the place of poetry in the crashingly modern world they lived in; instead, they created new forms in which to capture the modernity of their crises.

These poets faced the phantoms of convention head-on and their poetry still reaches us with their crises alive and mutating inside its glass case. They never tried to make the complexity of the world heel to the false ringmaster of bombastic language. These are poets who were aware that art doesn't have a need to draw *conclusions*. They understood that a poem is a live place to push around a dilemma: the liveness of the thought and the capturing of emotion is more significant than any outcomes that can be foil-wrapped for the reader. Style is of primary significance. There is the double-fold delight of viewing something *living* through the glass of a plinth, unexpected amidst the dried-out husks of Victoriana, but the viewer notices that the plinth-glass is not clear: the artist has treated it with their own unique handling of language. We look at their concerns through these flourishes and unexpected technical decisions. The dilemma and the language became the same thing; condensed into the poetry that only that poet could make in that way. The dancer and the dance are one, to paraphrase Yeats.

We live in good times for discovering dead poets. The internet has turned poetry into widely-available data, making the possibilities of hearing these dead poets' work possible again. Whole books, forgotten by the culture and shelved in one or two libraries across the country, have been digitised and made available online.

The skulls of these poets — once filled with their decisions and preoccupations — are seen to spring new roots from the soil packed into them or else to be a playground for idle crustaceans. The page of their work traps the synapses of their mind and their metrical gifts; we can hold up the skull for inspection or toss it back into the earth. What drives me towards all of these hours spent in the cemetery, approaching the mid-point of my life, scratching around headstones and committing to the likely reading of whole swathes of doggerel? To risk all this time following maps of burial plots into overgrown corners and reading epics that thump out in monotonous iambic singsong? The straightforward answer is this: I want to discover a poet who deserves a whole new readership. I feel most alive when reading incredible poetry.

Before I start to walk it is important to set out the criteria by which I'll know when I've found a poet worth shouting about. The poets I've mentioned above establish the kind of relationship with society and stylistic originality that I'm looking for; a poet who's an innovator, who creates new forms or adapts pre-existing ones in such a way as to allow their urgent need for expression to manifest in a style that is honed for their distinct purpose. Urgency is important. Although this is something everyone feels and often drives people to create appalling poetry, when it's captured in unique metrical rhythm it becomes the monosodium glutamate for which we will return again and again. If the poet is a Victorian — and as burials take place at West Norwood each week for those who have rights to the plot my poet might even be contemporary — then I'm looking for a Victorian whose work could bridge between their period and the later advancements of Modernism. A poet who scores their page with a future DNA. The work needs to contain *something which I can't*

get anywhere else.

The poet should be a cipher of their zeitgeist: the complexities of their once-present world should play through them. It takes an incredible mind to allow an often factitious, changing and unresolved social fabric to manifest whilst resisting the temptation to pick a side or make a judgement. Shakespeare is the prime example. He existed in a hinge between a feudal and early modern world with the old strictures of place and social position eroding to present new possibilities and unforeseen crises of existence. He allowed his characters to dress outside their birth-rank, to redress and cross-dress. Bastards prospered and princes fell. Yet Shakespeare so often refused to make a point about any of this. He showed the possibilities within the prism of language in which all various viewpoints could be accepted at the same time. He didn't use language to complete our thinking for us.

This is not to say I'm not interested in the personal crisis of my lost poet. In a sense all personal crises are bound with the politics of the time. Hopkins's dilemma can be read as the closeting of a gay man who would never have found personal fulfilment in a repressive Victorian society. Tennyson's *In Memoriam* is a very personal attempt to deal with the new knowledge brought forth from Charles Lyle (and others) that the comfort of the afterlife is based upon a fallacy for which religion no longer offers solace. Ted Hughes' account of Emily Dickinson's concerns captures her relationship with the society that engulfed her: 'The Civil War was melting down the whole nation in an ideological gamble of total suicide or renewal in unity. The Indian tribes and the great sea of buffalo waited on the virgin plains, while Darwin wrote his chapters. The powers that struggled for reconciliation in Emily Dickinson were no less than those which

were unmaking and remaking America'. Rimbaud undid himself from society in order to see the limits of civilisation. He had to create the prose poem to do this.

The great poet is bound to their time but compelled to invent the poetry of the future. The fractious paradigms of society creates few individuals who write literature that contains the old and new worlds at the same time; that captures the real complexity of existence as it is lived in its historical moment. As T.S. Eliot has put it: 'Not only every great poet, but every genuine [poet], fulfils once for all some possibility of the language, and so leaves one possibility less for his successors'. My journey begins with the assumption that there is a real possibility of finding a forgotten poet's work that, on reading, will become something I can't imagine having lived without. I remind myself, while preparing my rucksack for my first visit to the cemetery, that Hopkins wasn't published until 29 years after his death and that Emily Dickinson's first book came out four years after she'd expired. In both cases the survival of the work was determined by those who happened to have copies of the poems and a personal belief they should be published. But what about those who died without these posthumous editors?

It is this possibility that takes me to the cemetery.