

## With Ridiculous Caution

On southeast Georgia farmland, on a road that runs  
to mire in March rains, near no thing  
human, abruptly a stranded graveyard. There is no church  
for miles. This is a cemetery for travellers,  
where manifest destiny brought some of them to lie down  
and sleep out the rest of their crossing.

Once I found this hushed community I returned often, walking  
the ground so many times I memorized their names. Diphtheria moved  
through their young like gossip among tattlers,  
like fatal slander. Wives outlived their men by ten years,  
at least; husbands followed wives within only two.

The crude stones, some blank, featured names and dates  
imprecisely scrawled by makeshift tool: Bennett, Thornburgh,  
Strom, Taylor, Booker, Sims, Johnson, Albright. But some stones  
only seemed blank; their indented surfaces could be revealed  
by a process known to the art's cognoscenti as "rubblings."  
People have travelled cemeteries all over a country, gathering  
anthropological scraps from the process.

My presence in this burial place is the old maid's foolish  
anticipation: Those lying about are at a loss for words, and getting  
to know them is like listening for the cat with no bell.  
Al, the savvy southern boy, has dared me to find  
the Parkerville Cemetery; I have spent the day to win  
this dare. Since then, the dead ones and I have exchanged  
theories on meaning. This small wood has escaped  
the insidious secret of Spanish moss: the decadent drape  
on trees holding "chiggers" in swarms, loathsome charm for the unwary.

Absurdly careful, I begin to gentle the letters on stones onto rice paper with a charcoal stick, remembering those back at the office worrying, "It's funny that she's so keen on finding that cemetery." It *is* funny, that finding some of the dates on stones, I had to find them all, since *not knowing* means I would have to lie down here forever to unriddle these truncated lives.

How do we call death? – "passing," as these souls were when their bodies became as useless as destinations: *motus animi continuus*.

Sun slants through trees, layering my face;  
the wind rubs across it, yielding nothing,  
nothing but texture. I struggle to lift a toppled  
half-stone of graveness: infant mortality.  
Some children's graves are diagonal bricks in circles  
of leaves, nothing more.

I must write a book on those buried here,  
because they will be dead for a long time;  
because there is a texture here beyond mere indentations  
in stone. Because all of what inheres in this place  
steals loveliness from every living thing  
and flies like a mynah in the face of caution.

– Susan Stevens