With Ridiculous Caution

On southeast Georgia farmland, on a road that runs
to mire in March rains, near no thing
human, abrupts 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 “rubbings.”
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