

“I remembered you”: Mourning at New York City’s Potter’s Field

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Paper for Loss: A symposium
McGill University, May 9-10, 2019
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Prologue

Whatever you think happens after death, there's a materiality to it that all of us have to confront sometime. Death leaves behind the body and the bereaved. For many, what we do with the body and how we remember our dead is as much a marker of power (or the lack thereof) as it is of tradition or culture. For 150 years, New York City has been burying the poorest among us on Hart Island, a remote spot that is our city's potter's field. It's a place New Yorkers should know about, but mostly don't. To my shame, I didn't either until recently.

Soon after learning of Hart Island, I started an oral history MA program. Loss has been my companion since my father died when I was a kid – how *do* other families grieve and keep going? – and social justice has in a way been my response to a world turned upside down. Understanding something about Hart Island – what happens there, what it means to the people with family and friends buried there, how remembrance plays itself out on the ground, and what the expression of loss can mean – speak to my most personal and public of concerns.

So I looked for Hart Island and found it on my very own street, in a mother and daughter who lived at the other end of the block, and in a community of homeless activists taking a stand for the basic right to mourn their friends on the land where they're buried. People know their place in every sense of the word. Oral history interviews help people share what they know and thereby creates what the historian Raphael Samuel calls “a different class or record” that reveals the “moral topography” of that place.¹

This paper is a small part of what I found. It's easy to think that the people pushed to the social margins, in life and in death, are strangers. But we're all of a part, crossing paths all the time, leaving traces in the landscape, and hoping no one will doubt we each mattered.



New York City, Division of Operations Planning, *Alternative Uses for Hart Island*, 1966.

Hidden in Plain Sight

X.

“Grief is a country that looks different to each person entering it, to be sure. How does one find fellowship or shelter in loss?”²

X.

If you die broke in New York City and no one around you has money, you’re bound for Hart Island.

Hart Island is the city’s potter’s field. It’s been that way since 1869, so while no one has an exact count, by now about one million New Yorkers have been buried there. In 2018, there were more than 1,200 new burials on the island. It’s a little thing – about 110 acres – in the Long Island Sound on the northeast periphery of the city. It’s on the map; potter’s field is even indicated on the “Hagstrom 5 Borough Pocket Atlas” I have at home. But it’s one of those places you just don’t see. To get there, you take the #6 subway to the last stop in the Bronx and then the BX 29 bus to City Island, across a causeway to the last stop. That’s not a route anyone ever takes by accident or on the way someplace else.

Hart Island is a place for the stuff that gets tucked away. It has been used as a prison camp for Confederate soldiers and for Germans captured offshore during World War II, an asylum for women, a workhouse, a boys’ reformatory, a place to isolate people sick with yellow fever and TB, a Nike missile facility, a jail for men, and a residential drug rehab facility. In the 1920s, a developer considered turning it into an amusement district, like Brooklyn’s Coney Island, but for Black people.

X.

Hart Island has been under the jurisdiction of the New York City Department of Correction (the agency that runs the city’s jail system) since the city bought it in 1868 to make it potter’s field.

And ever since, inmates from Rikers, the city's primary jail, have been burying bodies the same way: in mass graves, 150 adults to a trench and 1,000 babies to another. A van brings inmates and correction officers from Rikers and a morgue truck brings the dead.

Twice a month, if you are eligible and have signed up with the DOC in advance and there's room in the allotted spaces, if you bring government-issued ID, sign a release form, and leave the same stuff behind that you have to when you visit an inmate at Rikers itself – “No contraband,” a friendly voice says on the phone, “because of the prisoners” – you can visit Hart Island. Anyone who follows the rules can get onto the island on the third Thursday of the month and DOC officers will bring you to a gazebo that's nowhere near the burial sites. One weekend day a month, family members can go directly to their loved one's burial site.

X.

Potter's field comes from the New Testament. It's the land the priests buy, with Judas's blood money, to bury strangers, or foreigners, in. It's the place for those with nowhere else to go.

X.

C.S. Lewis says, “Sorrow...needs not a map but a history.”³ But loss is as much physical as it is anything else. When a person dies, it's their goneness that is so awful. Hart Island puts a big X on that absence. It's that little island it's nearly impossible to get to, the dot on the map most people never notice, the spot that sears your heart once you have reason to know it's there.

X.

No place is just one thing.

X.

The oral historian Sean Field says that a sense of place is an “imaginative act”⁴ and Hart Island definitely captures the imagination. An episode of the MTV thriller series, “Eye Candy,” opens

with inmates burying the dead on Hart Island.⁵ A trashy murder and revenge novel, replete with undercover operations and Muslim sleeper cells, is called “Hart Island.”⁶ The centerpiece in poet Ned Balbo’s book “The Trials of Edgar Poe and Other Poems” is a 12-page poem called “Hart Island.”⁷ An “outpost,” Balbo calls it, “history’s last checkpoint for the lost or disappeared.”⁸ My friend Dave wrote a song about Hart Island for his punk rock band, Hiretsukan,⁹ and named it “Michael Cosgrove” after the ferry to the island.

X.

To some, the burials on Hart Island are a cautionary tale. In 1992, a handful of inmates on the burial detail were asked to write about working there. The fact that inmates do the burials is often a thing in the press. The implication: unworthy people handle the dead.

But the notes are solemn, reverential even. As one inmate wrote:

When approaching Harts Island you get, well I get a feeling of being cold, not a temperature cold, but an inner cold like someone on the island or something was calling or asking me something, but to sit back and think of the bodies that I’d be burying was nothing compared to thinking of myself becoming a Harts Island resident. Once I heard an older person tell a younger person he had one foot in the grave and the other in a jail cell and here I am an inmate working in a graveyard. But one thing I’ve learned on Harts Island is that I don’t want to die nobody with nothing or no one to care about me. Harts Island is the best rehabilitation I’ve ever had and is something I’ll never forget. I guess it’s the loneliest place in the world and I pray and will always pray for the lonely and lost souls of Harts Island.¹⁰

The writer does not know the circumstances that brought the people he buries to Hart Island.

And yet, he knows. He understands the politics of space and a social order that puts prisoners and certain of the dead in the same peripheral place. The first photos Jacob Riis, the nineteenth century social reformer of “How the Other Half Lives”¹¹ fame, took were on Hart Island. He used them under the heading “how the other half dies in New York”¹² in the illustrated lectures he gave about poverty.



The burial method on Hart Island is the same today as it has been since 1869. (“The Potter’s Field, the Common Trench,” ca. 1890. Jacob A. Riis (1849-1914) / Museum of the City of New York.)

X.

To some, Hart Island is a quiet place to rest. “I believe,” wrote another inmate, “that this place has all the characteristics for the eternal rest, in company of God, nature and the singing of birds – anyway a place to rest the eternal dream.”¹³

X.

Places aren’t “empty container[s] where the ‘stuff’ of history happens,” says oral historian Steven High,¹⁴ we make them in our own messy image. Michel Foucault calls spaces like Hart

Island heterotopias because they reflect our priorities and mirror our values back at us. Their separateness exposes us to ourselves. What's frightening about burial on Hart Island is the same thing that's frightening about life at the edge: who remembers the poorest among us?

This is what William Burnett¹⁵ – a long-time member of the activist organization, Picture the Homeless, which successfully pressured the city to open access to the island – tells me about when we meet.

Like I say, it's a sense that people are forgotten. People going through their daily lives, nobody is thinking about the poor people buried on potter's field. I think that's what scares people, too, homeless people, is that they're gonna be buried on potter's field and nobody's going to be thinking about them. Everybody wants to be remembered somehow. There's that human side to the homeless person that gets missed in the conversation.

X.

It was April,
and my love asked me:
Is this the last snow?
One never knows such things
until later. But I said yes
so I could miss the snow
as it was falling.¹⁶

– Excerpt from “Postcards from the Labyrinth” by Johnny Lorenz

X.

I met Rosalee Grable at Amsterdam Tavern. I'd seen her in an MSNBC piece about Hart Island.¹⁷ She was at the ferry dock on City Island distraught that she couldn't board the boat. She hadn't called DOC in advance and without her name on the list, even though it was the third Thursday of the month, they wouldn't let her on.

Am Tav, as regulars called the bar, was around the corner from my apartment in Manhattan. I recognized it in the MSNBC story and had gone looking for the young woman in the story. Rosalee was trying to get to Hart Island for her mother, Gladys Van Aelst – everyone

called her Karaoke Gladys – who died in March 2014 and is buried there. As it happens, I showed up on karaoke night and found Kiki O’Grady right away. She was glad, she said, to meet someone who came to talk about Gladys and texted Rosalee to come over. Kiki and her boyfriend at the time had lived with Rosalee for a few months in Gladys’s old room after Gladys died.

When she arrives, Rosalee has a stylin’ haircut (shorter on one side than on the other, a pook, she’ll tell me later), but she’s what you’d call weathered. The karaoke is in full swing and it’s loud. We don’t talk much. We’re small smiles and glad to meet you. She’s sorry it took her so long to get to the bar but she dumpster dives, she explains, and wasn’t done with her route. Rosalee pulls out her Samsung and asks for my number, texts me hers. We make a date for an interview (she lives on my block!) later in the week – and she checks Facebook.

X.



Rosalee in her apartment. (Photo by Dave Sanders)

The apartment is long and narrow, the hallway lined with foot after foot of bookshelves jam-packed with everything you can imagine putting on shelves. A couple of doors are closed, but I see a room that’s jam-packed, too. As a thank you, I’ve brought a crystal, a big pink piece, which, it’s immediately apparent,

is ridiculous. Rosalee takes me into her room and sits on the bed. It’s pretty with a colorful spread. The bed takes up most of the room. Two walls are full of electronic equipment, books, clothes, every kind of stuff. Rosalee has just had her third hip-replacement surgery, and she’s

waiting for a PT to call about setting up home visits, so we talk about that as I set up my recorder. She seems glad for the company. When we get to Hart Island:

It's always been my plan since I came to New York and discovered the place that I was going to be buried on Hart Island. I never intended that my mother was going to be buried at Hart Island. But it suits my sensibilities as far as the notion of a simple cotton shroud and a plain pine box is my idea of a really decent burial. I can't see putting money and stuff into a grave. And it's not like I had that much close family anyway and I'm not that social of a person so it would have suited me fine. So, I knew its existence. It's a beautiful place out there. So, I have just got to maintain myself here in New York City so that I can successfully get there.¹⁸

Rosalee draws a line across her chest, "I might get it tattooed: Deliver to Hart Island."

X.

There was no knowing then that Rosalee would be buried on Hart Island the next year.

X.

That day what I hear is Rosalee's sadness and anger. Finding that there's a stigma to being buried on Hart Island, and that visitation is limited and difficult, hurts. "I was really ashamed at first once I discovered the horrendousness of the stigma of a Hart Island burial, like it means nobody loves you," she cries and pauses, "and that's so not true."

Rosalee wants to try visiting the island again and asks if I will make the plans. That's when I learn about the contraband.

X.

I met William through the memorial service that Picture the Homeless holds every December 21st, the longest night of the year, for all homeless New Yorkers who died that year. We meet again a couple of months later for an interview at the PTH storefront in East Harlem. William is in his 40s, rail thin, with a quiet, serious air. He's a veteran and a college grad, went to Catholic school his whole life, right through seminary, and came to New York after being kicked out for



William at Picture the Homeless (Photo by Leyla Vural)

being gay and then being fired and kicked out of the room he was renting for the same reason. Over the years, he has gone “back and forth between homeless and housing.” When I ask why, he looks taken aback that I’d ask about something so self-evident: “Well the rent’s too damn high.” It was the fight for genuinely affordable housing that

got him involved with PTH. “Originally when folks were talking to me about potter’s field, I wasn’t interested in that conversation because my thinking was, we have homeless people who are still living and I want to be focused on housing for the living.”

X.

And then Lewis Haggins, one of the founders of Picture the Homeless, died. He was missing for many months before his family in New Jersey and friends at PTH learned what had happened. He had died on the subway, at age 48, just before Christmas in 2003, was buried on Hart Island, and only identified months after that.¹⁹ Lewis’s burial on Hart Island was a bitter irony. William recalls:

Folks from Picture the Homeless obviously wanted to go to Hart Island and have closure. And they found what Charlie [another activist at PTH who had been talking about access to Hart Island] was saying was true, you can’t go. And so they became interested because they wanted to know, why can’t we have closure? This is somebody that we were fighting in the trenches with.²⁰

X.

We speak of death in euphemisms. We tell people we’re sorry for their loss, that so-and-so has passed, that a patient is gone. It’s the physicality of death, its finality, no matter what you think

comes next, that we dance around. When the heart stops, when the spirit leaves, however you think about life's end, when it ends, it's time for the body to go, too. Where the body goes is a question of religion, perhaps, or personal choice, but it's also a question of resources. "If one has chosen to live mindfully," says bell hooks, "then choosing a place to die is as vital as choosing where and how to live."²¹ hooks has returned to Kentucky, where she grew up, to live, work, and eventually die because it's where she feels she belongs. Such choices are the stuff of privilege.

Poor people have different options. When you're living on the margin, is there a way to belong, a place to feel welcome? Hart Island mirrors in death what poor and homeless people know in life: they are not welcome in polite company. William chokes up when he describes what Hart Island feels like to him:

I don't care how many times you go onto the island. You say you're not going to get emotional but when you get to the island, it seems like the further away from the water you are, the further inland on the island you are, I don't know, something happens. You almost feel the presence of the people that are buried there.

Wow, it's overwhelming just talking about it.

Part of me begins to think, we were talking about Hegel before we started recording, part of me begins to think that maybe that collective human spirit is relevant in that case. Here you have thousands of people who were effectively separated from society, many of them on the outskirts of society while they were living because they were poor. And then they are hidden away on Hart Island and it almost seems like they're forgotten. And if you were superstitious you might think they're calling out, "Remember me." I mean it feels like that.

"Geographical hierarchies,"²² as bell hooks calls them, aren't ambiguous. It's easy to tell which places, which people, matter. Perhaps we each make a "narrative map"²³ of our lives and mark it with the places that locate our story. If your map includes a place like Hart Island, is there a "language of belonging"²⁴ that applies to you, or are you, as Balbo's poem says, the "unbefriended dead'...erased at last"?²⁵

The thing about places, just like all social constructions, is that their meaning isn't a given. If Hart Island is the last stop for the erased, then perhaps what happens there doesn't matter much. But another story about Hart Island is not only possible, it's already there. William cries when he describes what it feels like to be on the island. To him, it's not a land of the forgotten; it's a land of the forsaken. That's a very different story. Karaoke Gladys's story is different, too.

Karaoke Gladys

Estragon: All the dead voices.
Vladimir: They all speak at once.
Estragon: Each one to itself.
...
Vladimir: What do they say?
Estragon: They talk about their lives.
Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.
Estragon: They have to talk about it.²⁶

– “Waiting for Godot” by Samuel Beckett

X.

Karaoke Gladys died on March 6, 2014 and was buried on Hart Island sometime in June or July when the medical examiner’s office was sure no one would be claiming her body. She’s there for one reason: there was no money to bury her anywhere else. Gladys mattered a lot to a lot of people. The insult of Hart Island is not only that it is so difficult to access, it’s the fuzzy math that equates money with mattering.

But what can the story of one person tell us? How many stories of the people on Hart Island does it take to show that they count? The cartographers in Jorge Luis Borges’s story, “On Exactitude in Science,” are so exacting that they make a map of the empire that’s the size of the empire itself.²⁷ Is there an acceptable sample size to mattering or can we agree that putting a number on that would be as absurd as a map that has to represent everything? Perhaps talking about Gladys reminds us of what we ought already to know. If that’s not enough, it’s at least a start.

X.

Gladys was what you’d call a character, a “little old lady” who wore “funky outfits” and loved to sing. Everyone agrees that she didn’t have much of a voice. But Gladys didn’t care a whit about

that, nor did anyone else. She did things “her own way and her own way and her own way,” says Rosalee, and that way was karaoke:

She always went to her karaoke wherever she was. When she had her own house in Grandville, Michigan and a car and a couple of roommates to help her keep the expenses, and every night she’d be out at some or another karaoke bar, karaoke singing. Anyplace her car would get her. She just did that. Karaoke was entirely the focus of her life.

Gladys was from a working-class family in Michigan. Rosalee didn’t know much about Gladys’s childhood, but she knew it was hard. The first time we talk, Rosalee is quick to cry over her mom, but she says they “never got along until the very end.” Rosalee thinks that was because of memories. “I think before I was me that I was my mother’s mother, like I have her memories,” she tells me. “I always hated her,” she says, “from my memory of being her mother. She was sort of the face of stuckness. I didn’t appreciate her that much. Just I saw ‘mother.’ I don’t know, part of Grandville, Michigan that I had to flee to save my own life.”

Whether or not Rosalee really was her mother’s mother, I don’t know, but oral history interviews aren’t a just the facts ma’am investigation. They’re about the meaning people assign to their own lived experience. Alessandro Portelli says “invented stories reveal meaning.”²⁸ The truth that matters is this: for a long, long time, Rosalee and Gladys didn’t have it easy between them and, still, in the end, Rosalee was devoted to her mom.

So when Rosalee brought Gladys to the city, the first thing they needed was a place for Gladys to sing. They found The Time Out Lounge in Hell’s Kitchen, where Gladys was quickly so popular that they built a “step lift with a G for Gladys” on it so that she could get onto the little stage to sing.

When the trip became too hard to make, Rosalee and Gladys found Amsterdam Tavern, which was just a block away from Rosalee’s apartment: “It turns out they’d been having karaoke

there a long time but I didn't know about it till Halloween, so she managed two Halloweens. I found her her costume for the first one and made her second one. She was the Great Pumpkin, you know the one that the Charlie Brown characters are always waiting for? That was her."

X.

Sabrina Asch (the karaoke emcee) and Kiki vividly remember their first time meeting Karaoke Gladys in 2012. Sabrina recalls:

Karaoke Gladys first came to Am Tav on a Halloween. She had this crazy black and fuchsia wig on that wasn't even placed on her head right. It was sort of sideways and she could barely see out of it, sort of like one of those dogs that have their hair all over their eyes and you're like, how do you see? But you're doing it, okay, you're having fun.



Halloween at Am Tav, 2012. (Photo by Sabrina Asch)

And she had some other crazy clothes on. And she sang her songs. And the first time she sang, she sang with such bravado. She was standing up, all of maybe 4'9', 5'1" at most, and she did this little jiggy dance, probably it was like all the dance she had, but it was so vibrant. And she sang her song and before the song, she made an announcement about how great life was, is, to everybody and how happy she was to be there. And she did the same at the end of her song. And maybe it was the announcements, maybe it was because she was this adorable older woman with more energy than most of the 20-year-olds there, maybe it was the song, maybe it was all of it. But she had instant fans.²⁹

Kiki's first night at Am Tav was in December that year; she befriended Gladys right away:

From the first time that I met her, we just connected. She came in with her cane at that point, she had a cane, she didn't have a walker, and so she would come in and I would go and open the door for her, every time. And the *whole bar*, their heads would turn and see Gladys was coming in and if there were people who weren't part of the regular crowd, they just were like looking at her, looking at us, what's this young 22-year-old doing helping this 83, 84-year-old coming into the bar? Do they know each other? What's going on?

And then karaoke would start. And Gladys usually sang within the first three songs. It was Greer [another regular] or Gladys or myself always sang the first three songs. As soon as she started singing, the whole bar would go silent, everybody is watching. Everybody was just completely taken with her.

Eventually her health deteriorated a lot and I would have to walk her to the bathroom, wait outside the door because she couldn't lock and unlock the door so I would wait outside for her. People were always just so curious about our relationship. At some points I claimed she was my grandmother, my mother even. "She's my New York mom, my New York grandma."

I don't know if she ever had a spectacular voice or if it just was totally just a fun thing for her. But no matter what, she was never shy about just getting up and singing a song. And she would do her little dance moves, even when she had a walker, when she had a cane, she would stand there with it and move her little body and just dance along to her songs. She just captured everyone. You'd have to watch her really, because you wouldn't want to listen to a recording of her necessarily, you would want to see her, because it's the whole performance that really makes Karaoke Gladys.³⁰



Kiki and Karaoke Gladys at Am Tav.
(Photo by Sabrina Asch)

Gladys wasn't simply a curio whose quirky style entertained the young crowd. She was open and joyful in ways that just appealed. Kiki says Gladys "lit up the room." Sabrina says she was inspiring, always arriving in "some awesomely expressive outfit" and showing people decades younger than herself that "you can still have this much fun, even when your body parts hurt, even when you don't have a lot of money."

X.

Kiki and Sabrina wanted Rosalee to appreciate Gladys the way they did. At first, Rosalee just walked her mom to the bar, but didn't stay. Maybe she'd come back to bring Gladys her cane or to get her to come home if she thought the night had gone on long enough. "We all sort of assumed that Rosalee was Gladys's mother, even though it wasn't possible because she was

obviously younger,” recalls Sabrina. “But we would all say, ‘Oh Gladys’s mother, uh, daughter,’ but we were convinced in our minds and hearts that Rosalee was her mother.”

It’s uncanny – Sabrina witnessing the playing out of a seemingly impossible relationship that Rosalee remembers. Elderly parents and their adult children often switch caretaker roles at some point so that in itself wasn’t the thing; but there was something unusual about the way Rosalee related to her mom and the community was paying enough attention to notice. “I made a point that every time Rosalee came in that we all would show Gladys so much love and kind of show Rosalee the light in a way,” Kiki says. “I think all of us at the bar showed Rosalee just how special her mom was, which makes me really happy.” With time, Rosalee started to stay for a bit and to record Gladys at the mic.

Then Rosalee started to sing. Sabrina recalls:

I remember seeing Gladys watch Rosalee sing her song, “Second Hand Rose.” I remember seeing the joy and pride in Gladys’s face when she saw her daughter participating. And that was when Rosalee seemed to start tapping into what was going on there. Seeing people really adore her mom, which is something that Caitriona [that’s Kiki’s real name] and I had a particular mission in doing, making sure that Rosalee saw how celebrated Gladys was.

In the end, Sabrina and Kiki succeeded, so much so that Rosalee says, “Kiki sort of taught me how to treat my mommy.”

X.

Gladys was in the hospital on her 85th birthday in August 2013, so the crowd at Am Tav threw a belated, surprise birthday party when she was back at karaoke a couple of months later. Rosalee, Kiki, and Sabrina each have told me about how great that night was. Says Sabrina:

We staged the surprise to happen after Gladys would sing her first song. And I gave out noisemakers and balloons to everybody, so they were ready. And we had a cake, and that was ready to be lit up. And we had some gifts. So, Gladys sang her song and right on cue, she said, “I am so happy to be here. I’m so grateful. I’m having the best time of my life. Thank you.” And right on cue after she said all of

her things, everyone started coming in closer to her, balloons were sailing over her head and noisemakers were being blown and flowers were being thrown at her. And at first she just looked around like, “What is going on?” and then she realized – she saw the cake come out, it said “84” [85, actually] – that this was a celebration of her, and she was kind of in a state of shock. And she sat down, blew out the candles. And I announced that we didn’t get to celebrate her birthday with her on her birthday so we were celebrating it now. And I made a photograph of her and I framed it and I gave it to her in leopard print wrapping because that was totally her style and she opened it and immediately started taking it out of the picture frame and asked for a marker.

She wanted to sign it and at first my instinct was, “No, this is for you,” but like what happened with all the cellphone photos, this became a part of her legacy, this photo she immediately signed and put back in the frame. And she said, “Now put it up at the bar.” So we put it up on the bar and every Sunday it’s up at the bar for everyone to see like a star on the wall.

Gladys said that that was the best day of her life and Rosalee agreed.

Two weeks later, Gladys wore the Great Pumpkin costume that Rosalee made for her to the Halloween party at Am Tav. But by January, Gladys was in the hospital again, unable to walk. “By the time she was in the hospital,” Rosalee tells me, “I really fell in love with my



Karaoke Gladys with Sabrina, the karaoke emcee at Amsterdam Tavern, at the surprise party for Gladys’s birthday. (Photo provided by Sabrina Asch)

mother and felt like I was the most fortunate person to have known her.” Gladys was optimistic – “frigging brave and kind of fun” – even when she was what Rosalee calls a “ragdoll” of 100 pounds and paralyzed. She was scheduled to come home the day she died. Sabrina had gotten a message from Gladys the day before saying she wanted to sing. “We were ready to take karaoke to her house to do it there,” recalls Sabrina.

X.

Karaoke was on Sunday nights at Amsterdam Tavern. The day Gladys died, March 6, 2014, was a Thursday. Rosalee went to The Time Out Lounge, Gladys’s first karaoke spot in Hell’s Kitchen, that night: “It was karaoke night. I cried with her friends.”

Paying Respects

X.

The absence of a public way to grieve or memorialize creates its own sorrow. Hart Island concretizes that privation. “I think it is cruel and unusual punishment,” Rosalee says about the strict limits on visiting Hart Island. “They shouldn’t be able to keep the dead basically in prison.”

Many find comfort in visiting the gravesite of a loved one, and Hart Island’s inaccessibility makes that almost impossible. That’s not only a source of heartache in itself, it’s an in-your-face reminder of the powerlessness, dead or alive, of the poor. As William says,

I have a real problem with the island being under the control of the Department of Correction. It’s almost like an insult. It’s an insult to the people who are buried there. They’re in jail. It’s like the jail cemetery. But also in the sense of the security. I mean the Department of Correction is a pretty secure institution. And the idea that it’s almost like a barrier between people who want to have closure, who want to go over and have closure, and where they’re wanting to go.

X.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur says that “an *examined* life...is a life *recounted*.” For Ricoeur, it isn’t just that we like to tell stories about ourselves, it’s that our consciousness, our very being, rests in the story we tell ourselves about who we are.³¹ But your story, like your life, intersects and overlaps with a lot of other people’s. That’s what family and friendship and community in many ways are about – the lovely, messy, difficult small h history we create together. Try telling the story of your life without the people in it; you can’t. “We are all familiar with ghosts,” oral historians Gerry Albarelli and Amy Starecheski remind us, “in a sense we never go anywhere without them – those people living or dead who hover about” our story, crucial to it but “no longer around.”³² Some of the people in your story may be dead, but they’re still in your story. Memory keeps them with you.

But memories are fragile; they're shape-shifters. That's part of what makes death so scary. It's not just what is or isn't on the other side, but what will be left of us here on earth that preoccupies us. The fear of fading from memory is that much more acute when you're living on the edge. As William puts it:

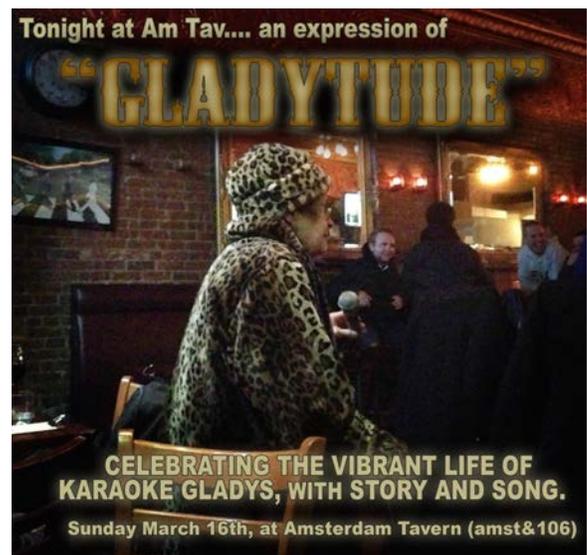
It's not just as a living person if I have a relationship with you, I want to be able to have closure with you. But it's also the realization that what if I'm buried on Hart Island? Is there going to be a proper memorial at least? And so it happens both ways. Some of our participants in our potter's field [campaign], actually some of them are dead now. But they knew they were close to death, time-wise or age-wise, and they're wondering if they're buried on Hart Island, is somebody going to remember them?

So the idea that you want to remember, but you're also worried, are you gonna be remembered? It's kind of a two-way street.

X.

If you observe a faith, you probably have a good idea of what it means to pay respects. I'm not sure for myself. The people I talked to about Hart Island have fluid ideas, too, but one thing we all agree on is the respect part of paying respects. The dead deserve a farewell that befits them. Karaoke Gladys's friends gave her a karaoke good-bye – an “expression of Gladytude” – just as she'd have wanted.

For the next couple of years, Sunday night karaoke at Am Tav became a site of remembrance and celebration of Gladys. “Since I can't have her,” Rosalee tells me, “I started going to the karaoke myself.” As Kiki recalls:



The karaoke community at Am Tav held a karaoke memorial for Gladys at the bar. (Photo provided by Sabrina Asch)

After Gladys passed away, I think that Rosalee really wanted to feel close to her. It would have been a lot harder if it hadn't been for Amsterdam Tavern being a block away from her apartment, where she was able to come and be with a community where everybody knew and loved her mom. And Sabrina brings this framed photo of Gladys and puts up Christmas lights around it and makes a whole little shrine to her every time that we're there. So I think that Rosalee felt like she was able to come and be part of the community there.

“That’s a place for Rosalee and her family – I met one of [Gladys’s] granddaughters – for them to come to celebrate and be with Gladys’s energy,” Sabrina says of karaoke night at Am Tav. It felt like this way of remembering Gladys would last and last.

X.

How do the living claim their right to mourn? That’s a matter of culture and clout and faith. As William tells it:

In one of the early campaign meetings, while we were talking about potter’s field – you know, Charlie is a Baptist, and he’ll tell you, “I am a Baptist!”, and Mohammed is a Muslim – and so you had these people from different faiths talking about how they come at the question from their different faith perspectives about how you depose people. And what kind of dignity people deserve from their faith perspective. And so that conversation was taking place about potter’s field, in the potter’s field campaign. And I remember I was sitting at the table and I’m looking at everybody and I said, “Listen, how we depose people and whether people have access for closure, these are pastoral questions, so where the fuck are the pastors?” And I love saying it that way, because I did actually say it, but when I tell people the story, sometimes they get shocked, especially if I’m in a faith-based audience.

But I did ask that, “So where the fuck are the pastors?” So we began to do the work of reaching out to see if we could find the pastors. And we did.

We developed a pretty big group of faith allies to come back us up. And when we had our first meeting with the deputy commissioner of the Department of Correction who has jurisdiction over Hart Island, we were in that meeting with a lot of faith leaders standing with us, which made it very difficult for the deputy commissioner to say no.

The DOC yielded to the public pressure and agreed to bimonthly memorial services on Hart Island and built a simple gazebo for what turned into the Thursday visits open to anyone.

Beginning in 2005 and for the next several years, members of Picture the Homeless and faith leaders organized volunteer clergy – a Catholic priest, an Eastern Orthodox bishop, a Baptist minister, and others – to take turns leading the services. No one I asked remembers exactly when they stopped, but at some point it was too hard to keep the services on Hart Island going. Everyone remembers, though, what it feels like to be on the ground and reclaim the dignity of the dispossessed.



Rosalee in City Island, walking toward the ferry dock to Hart Island on March 19, 2015. (Photo by Dave Sander

X.

Rosalee and I went to Hart Island on March 19, 2015, the third Thursday of the month and a year after her mother’s death. Visits directly to burial sites weren’t allowed yet. That will come in July, when the city settles a class-action lawsuit about gravesite access for family members. This day, Dave, who wrote the song “Michael Cosgrove” about Hart Island for his punk-rock band

and is a photographer now, came with us. With rare exceptions, DOC doesn't let journalists or photographers onto the island, so he could only come as far as the gate at the dock on City Island. When I get to Rosalee's building before 7:30, she's outside waiting for me, smoking a cigarillo. She has dressed for her mom and is wearing Gladys's leopard print winter hat, a leopard print scarf, and two coats because it's still below freezing. Kiki has told me about that hat and that Gladys "always, always, always" wore leopard print. We've each got a bundle of flowers.

When we get to the dock, the gate is shut. "New York City Correction Department, RESTRICTED AREA," says one of the signs. There's another visitor today, Glenn, who has come to pay respects to a friend he'd been trying to find for more than twelve years.



Waiting at the gate to the Hart Island ferry. (Photo by Dave Sanders)

When the gate opens, we step into the restricted area. A few ferry workers are there. Each gives a nod or says hi; otherwise, they're quiet. The dock is really just a concrete stretch to the ferry. Condos, which will look right at Hart Island, are under construction next door. Someone collects cellphones and cameras and we walk to the "Michael Cosgrove." When I ask, one of the guys tells me that the morgue truck and the van with the inmates crossed at about 7. He doesn't know how many inmates are on the burial detail, says he's never seen inside the van.



Hart Island as seen from City Island. The ferry dock on Hart Island is on the far left and the gazebo is behind the one-story building. The Department of Correction does not allow cameras on Hart Island. (Photo by Dave Sanders)

The ride is quick. Calm waters. A straight shot. Rosalee goes into one of the narrow cabins that are on either side of the ferry to get out of the cold, and I stand outside at the front next to Glenn. He's having a Mass read for his friend on Saturday, but says he felt his friend calling him, so he wanted to stand on the ground where his friend is. He's upset when I tell him

that he won't be able to leave the Mass card he has brought at the burial site because we'll only be allowed to go to the gazebo.

X.

It turns out that the best view of Hart Island is not on the island itself. Approaching the island feels like coming upon a long-deserted ghost town. From City Island and on the ferry ride over, you can see the remains of several buildings. They've been on a steady march to ruin since Phoenix House, a residential drug rehab facility, closed on Hart Island in 1976. The buildings sit in a cluster on the southern part of the island and the ferry comes into a dock, made up simply of old wooden pilings, at the edge of town, as it were. Because we can only go to the gazebo, once we make land, in some ways we have less of a sense of the place. We mostly see barren land.

We're New Yorkers and it's so still here. You can almost feel this sliver of land floating on the water. If it weren't so forbidden, could this place feel peaceful, sacred even?

X.

Captain Thompson, who runs the island, is waiting for us. He's a man in his 50s and remembers Rosalee from her failed attempt to visit last year. He says he's glad she made it this time; he likes it when people visit, thinks it helps dispel the "rumors". Small stone cherubs flank the short wooden dock. Someone whispers that the ferry workers put them there, presumably the Madonna and two cherubs in front of us as well. Captain Thompson walks with us around a one-story, boarded-up, red brick building, a short distance to the gazebo, which covers a few wooden benches and a lectern, here thanks to Picture the Homeless's work. I can imagine a hallowed service here.

Except another correction officer has silently accompanied us. He has driven a massive pick-up truck the few hundred feet we walked from the dock and now stands next to it. The captain tells us that the Hart Island detail includes himself, four correction officers, and between

six and 15 inmates, each sentenced to less than a year. Even though I don't see the captain's gun, I know he has one; all the officers do. We can't see any activity from where we are, but the island is busy. This morning the morgue truck brought 15 bodies for burial, the captain tells us. I think of Ned Balbo's poem about the island and read it again when I get home:

Who works here? Convicts, guards joined to one purpose:
bury the dead, the unidentified,
the destitute unclaimed in city morgues,
the lost, the homeless no one wants to see.
The cost is light – obedience and labor –
though the knowledge that they gain is hard:
what lies ahead for those without a family,
those in exile, those who die alone.³³

Despite herself, Rosalee likes Captain Thompson. He tells us about the island and has a seriousness about him that feels respectful. She just wishes he'd give his little presentation on video so she could share it with her family in Michigan. It'd comfort them.

Thompson shows us a laminated map of the island. He has used golden colored post-its to indicate which part of the island people were buried on during which years. 2001-2005 faces City Island to the west; that's where Glenn's friend is. We look in that direction for a moment. Glenn really wants to put the Mass card he brought on the site where his friend is buried. Current burials face the Long Island sound; that's where Gladys is. We look that way for a while. We can't see past the bare trees or decaying buildings in the distance to the actual site. Everything is shades of brown and grey, no signs of spring yet. A white bus drives by in the distance, the inmates heading to their base camp for a break.

Post-its are a far cry from a marker. One falls off and the captain puts it back; Glenn shakes his head. The only marked grave on the island is for the first child to die of AIDS in the 1980s. I've read about it, people were so afraid of AIDS that the grave is off on its own somewhere, as if the island itself had not been remote enough. There's one gravestone for

everyone else, and it's to the side of the gazebo, facing a battered big three-story building, with stripes of red, green, and white paint from various eras peeling off of it, all windows long since broken out. Ruins have their own kind of dignity, and the building feels like a marker of sorts.

We leave our flowers by the stone; Rosalee tells me to unwrap mine. She reads the engraving out loud: "The City of New York Potters Field," it begins, and includes a line "He must have loved them, He made so many of them." We wonder about this when we talk about it later: If God loves the poor so much, shouldn't there be fewer?

Rosalee seems invigorated on the island. She wants it to be a park (there's a bill before the City Council, which she favors strongly, to transfer the island to the Department of Parks and Recreation), but she likes it here. She's going to come often, she says, "make a day of it." She's told me before that "the whole loosening up of getting Hart Island turned into a park has made a wonderful turnaround just as my mommy got there. She could chase the devil out of hell, and is busy doing so."

When we leave, the morgue truck and a van that seems to be accompanying it come back



The morgue truck returning with us from Hart Island. (Photo by Dave Sanders)

to City Island on the ferry with us. Death feels very close.

X.

Grief is about missing, in the most literal of senses. It's a form of sensory deprivation. You're left longing for someone you can no longer see or touch, hear or smell.

Rosalee was surprised by her own grief. She had never missed anyone like this before. “When my mother died, I was just, I didn’t think I’d be so, *whew*, crunched,” she said when I first interviewed her, “but I was, and I still am.” Maya Angelou says no matter what your relationship is with your parents, you’ll miss them when they’re gone.

But being on the island makes Rosalee “more content with what has happened and the ongoingness,” she’ll tell me later. Rosalee has captured something important about what grief turns into when it gets incorporated into life: ongoingness. I’ve heard it called melancholy survival.

X.

We went to Hart Island again on July 19, 2015, a Sunday, the first day the DOC allowed burial site visits to family members (they can bring up to four people with them). The press was waiting by the gate to the ferry dock.

We sign releases, show ID, leave our phones, and get on the ferry. On Hart Island, DOC officers have vans ready to take the various groups to their specific sites. We’re in a van with a young couple going to what turns out to be the open baby trench just feet from a big, fading phoenix painted on the side of a big, fading building.

Is the ground solid enough in this place to hold the weight of a dead baby and its grieving parents?

X.

When the van drops us off at the edge of a rocky field of dirt, the first thing Rosalee, her friend Sebastian, and I see is the flowers. There on this dreary patch of land lies a bouquet to mark where Gladys is buried.

A DOC officer has gotten out of the van with us. He hangs back, gun in its holster, and stays quiet as we approach the spot. Rosalee opens the flowers she and I have brought and mixes them with the ones from the DOC. She lays the pretty collection on a small, white embroidered cloth that had been on Gladys's dresser.

Captain Thompson arrives. He picks a yellow carnation from the bunch for Rosalee to take home and says he thinks Karaoke Gladys would like a song. Thompson walks off to stand near the DOC officer, while Rosalee, Sebastian, and I softly sing the only verse we know of Amazing Grace. Rosalee has covered my shoulders with her scarf to protect me from the sun.

No one is in a hurry.

The field is between the smokestack that you see in photos of the island and a couple of buildings. We see the ferry dock and condo construction on City Island in one direction and Long



Rosalee after her first gravesite visit (Photo by Leyla Vural)

Island in the other. Rosalee and I each take a couple of rocks. The officer says that's fine, but when I walk to the bumpy road to get closer to the water, he calls me back.

Cut off sections of white metal pipe ID each trench. Gladys is in #365. Right next to us is the open trench for adults. With just a few boxes at our end, under a sheet of plywood peppered with dirt and gravel, it must be new.

When Rosalee is ready to go, the officer drives us around the island. The north end is lovely: green grass, wooded areas, a statue of a cross, white stones marking burial sites.

When we get back to City Island, the press is still there and Rosalee tells them she's "glad to be poor" because "the rich don't get a better place than this." She extolls the environmental virtues of "apartment style" and "green" burials (the people buried on Hart Island are not embalmed) and is only troubled that the field where Gladys is buried is so bare.

X.

Meanwhile, deep in the body, some cells were making a fatal mistake.

X.

Facebook, March 2, 2016: "Today I got diagnosed with pancreatic tumors with liver involvement. Told them no chemo, no radiation, no heroic measures if I start heading off to Hart Island."

March 6, 2016: "Yay for the Hart Island Project once I am planted there I plan to haunt every sucker who won't let there be grass on the graves. I'll be a pretty convincing demon if need be."

Two years after Karaoke Gladys's death, one year after Rosalee first put her feet on Hart Island's soil to mourn her mother there, Rosalee learned she'd die soon, too. She tells everyone to bury her on Hart Island. That seems to be a first, and it even makes the news.³⁴

X.

The last time I see Rosalee, it's a cold, wet April day and we go junking, a favorite pastime of hers, in East Harlem. We talk about Rosanna, Rosalee's daughter, while we wait for the bus home. The conversation segues to Gladys, and Rosalee says again that she regrets she wasn't nicer to her, but they'll be together "soon enough." Rosalee has been to Hart Island several times and is set to go again on May 21 with Rosanna and TJ, her grandson.

I ask Rosalee what she thinks happens after we die. "God recycles," she says with a skyward wave. It's sort of like we're us, "but free." She thinks she and her mom will be around here, somehow. Meanwhile, she'll be annoyed if she's alive in the winter since she didn't buy that warm, velour dress she liked at the thrift shop.

X.

Death breaks time as we know it. Time stops for the dead, and zigzags for the living. "If the dead are not in time, or not in our sort of time," writes C.S. Lewis, "is there any clear difference, when we speak of them, between *was* and *is* and *will be*?"³⁵ Maybe that's why I'm swaying between present and past as I write.

X.

William studied ethics at seminary "because it gives you a framework for trying to evaluate the right or wrong."

What would our city's moral topography look like if we treated poor and homeless New Yorkers not as outcasts but as equal members of our city? If we didn't shunt our poorest neighbors to the margins in life, how might we see them in death? We'd have to become new mapmakers, making new meaning of places and carving a new ethics into the land.

A moral topography wouldn't forsake those buried on Hart Island. We'd value the place because we'd value the people on it, just because they were people who lived and loved, struggled and survived the same as the rest of us. We'd recognize the island as a place where people who deserve respect are buried, and we'd treat it, and them, that way. Rosalee saw Hart Island as "the kind of place where one can contemplate infinity [because] you can kind of see all the way to infinity from there." The map we'd make if right and wrong were its legend would contemplate that infinity and make a space for everyone. That's what paying respects would look like, a place where loss can be borne, a world to live, and die, in.

X.

Rosalee died on May 10, 2016, and Rosanna and TJ went to Hart Island on May 21 as planned. They visited Gladys's burial site and surreptitiously sprinkled wildflower seeds. Soon after, the men on the Hart Island burial detail buried Rosalee in plot #376, not at all far from her mommy.

X.

When there's a surprise knock at the door, how will you face the specter of death?

X.

"Potter's field," says William when I ask him where he thinks he'll be buried. "And to be honest with you, I want to be buried on potter's field. We worked so hard to make sure that folks there are remembered. So I want to go there and have them tell me what they think about that work. It's almost, we had solidarity in life, let's be in solidarity in death, too. 'You see I remembered you. What do you think?'"

Notes

¹ Raphael Samuel, "Local History and Oral History," *History Workshop Journal* 1, no. 1 (1976): 199, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/1.1.191>.

² V. V. Ganeshanathan, "The Politics of Grief," *Granta Magazine*|Online edition, August 28, 2011, <https://granta.com/the-politics-of-grief/>.

³ Quoted in Meghan O'Rourke, "Good Grief," *The New Yorker*, January 25, 2010, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/02/01/good-grief>.

⁴ Sean Field, "Imagining Communities: Memory, Loss, and Resilience in Post-Apartheid Cape Town," in *Oral History and Public Memories*, ed. Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 107–24.

⁵ *Eye Candy Season 1 Episode 9 FYEO*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPa5PRdCsFY&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

⁶ Seth Edgardo, *Hart Island* (New York: Blackbird Books, 2010).

⁷ Ned Balbo, *The Trials of Edgar Poe and Other Poems* (West Chester, PA: Story Line Press, 2010).

⁸ Balbo, 31.

⁹ "G7 Welcoming Committee Records," accessed March 18, 2015, www.g7welcomingcommittee.com/bands/hiretsukan.php.

¹⁰ "Lower East Side Tenement Museum Archive, Temporary Exhibits and Programs, Box 6, RG 4.1.20, Folder 4.," n.d.

¹¹ Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York, N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890).

¹² Bonnie Yochelson and Daniel Czitrom, *Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism and Photography in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, Reprint edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2014), 132.

¹³ "Lower East Side Tenement Museum Archive."

¹⁴ Steven High, "Mapping Memories of Displacement: Oral History, Memoryscapes, and Mobile Methodologies," in *Place, Writing, and Voice in Oral History*, ed. Shelley Trower (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 219.

¹⁵ Interview with William Burnett, March 2015. Note that I only use the full name of each narrator the first time I name them. I chose to do this because we know each other now and continuing to use last names would felt falsely formal to me.

¹⁶ Johnny Lorenz, "Postcards from the Labyrinth," in *Education by Windows* (New York, N.Y.: Poets & Traitors Press, 2018), <https://www.poets-traitors.com/education-by-windows>.

¹⁷ "Do the Dead on This Island Deserve Better Visitation Rights?," MSNBC, January 11, 2015, <http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/watch/do-the-dead-on-this-island-deserve-better-382932547616>.

¹⁸ Interview with Rosalee Grable, January 2015.

¹⁹ Emily Brady, "A Chance to Be Mourned," *The New York Times*, November 12, 2006, sec. New York Region / The City, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/12/nyregion/thecity/12home.html>.

²¹ bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2008), 6.

²² hooks, 14.

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- ²³ hooks, 17.
- ²⁴ hooks, 223.
- ²⁵ Balbo, *Hart Island*, 37.
- ²⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: Tragicomedy in 2 Acts* (Grove Press, 1982), 69.
- ²⁷ Alessandro Portelli, “Memory and the Imagination” (Lecture, April 3, 2015).
- ²⁸ Alessandro Portelli, “Stories I Skipped: Narratives of Care, Narratives of War” (April 2, 2015).
- ²⁹ Interview with Sabrina Asch, March 2015.
- ³⁰ Interview with Caitriona (Kiki) O’Grady, February 2015.
- ³¹ Paul Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (New York: Routledge, 1991), 31. Italics in original.
- ³² Gerry Albarelli and Amy Starecheski, “Telling Lives Curriculum Guide” (New York, N.Y: Columbia University, April 2005), 27.
- ³³ Balbo, *Hart Island*, 32.
- ³⁴ “NYC Woman Asks to Be Buried in Potter’s Field,” *Newsday*, accessed April 14, 2019, <https://www.newsday.com/news/new-york/hart-island-city-s-potter-s-field-set-to-receive-rosalee-grable-1.11789168>.
- ³⁵ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 1 edition (San Francisco: Harper, 1961), 24. Italics in original.