





# WEE

# AUBURN

I ALWAYS SUPPOSED that the worthy dead of Cambridge were conveyed to the Mount Auburn Cemetery, there to be buried more or less intact or to be cremated, and if rendered into ash, I reasoned, they would be scattered over a half-acre or so of consecrated scattering ground. Thus distributed, through the gentle action of rains and other natural events, they would be incorporated slowly into the richest of loam, changing chemically, but indestructible withal. I cherished the notion that at Mount Auburn the constituent elements of generations of New England aristocrats were coming up together in the same blade of grass—a little nitrogen from the Peabodys, a little phosphate from the Hallowells—keeping company into eternity. But it isn't happening that way.

I paid a visit to Mount Auburn this summer to satisfy my curiosity, to see if the grass looked greener there, perhaps to whistle through a blade composed of Cabots and Lowells. But I was told by Alan Chesney, president of the place, that no scattering-ground exists. Ashes are unsightly, Mr. Chesney observed, and to scatter them around would be impractical. I tend to believe that because I had an ancestor who insisted that his ashes be scattered on Penobscot Bay. When the old gentleman died, his grandson, who had a full black beard of which he was immoderately proud, dutifully loaded the ashes into his dory and rowed out into the Bay. There, overcome by the emotion of the moment, he made a silly error for a Maine man and threw the ashes to windward, getting quite a lot of grandfather back in his beard. At Mount Auburn, if ashes are not to be displayed somewhere in an ornamental container, they simply go into a plastic bag in a cardboard box and get tucked—planted, actually—under the bushes. The situation isn't quite as nice as it used to be in my mind, but one can still imagine the Cabots and the Lowells, after a decent interval for their plastic bags to disintegrate, getting together fundamentally in the root system of a rhododendron. And the rhododendrons are magnificent. Indeed, the three really remarkable things about Mount Auburn are the plants, the famous dead beneath them, and the living, who come to be consoled by beauty, to sit in the sun reptile-like, to frolic quietly, to smooch discreetly. Mount Auburn is mostly for the living, and so it has always been.

Alan Chesney, who was sales manager of the Head Ski Co. before he became president of the Mount Auburn Cemetery a couple of







years ago, is a frank and pleasant man with a butch haircut and a youthful face and nothing lugubrious about him. He was not at all what I expected. He had a good, warm handshake, and his eyes weren't sunken. His bearing wasn't especially aristocratic, whereas I had assumed that any place long ago filled up with the most patrician New Englanders would be presided over by a sepulchral antiquarian of impeccable antecedents, and a gardener. I know nothing of Mr. Chesney's antecedents, of course, but I was wrong anyway about the nature of the place. There are a few Midwesterners buried there, for one thing, and there is still plenty of room for newcomers. The Cemetery has no one on its staff called a salesman, but plots can be bought, at rates a trifle on the high side even in the Cambridge real estate market. I was interested to learn that there are some areas in the Cemetery where people can buy a plot in which they will be buried only one deep because I have listened to my father and uncle argue for years about who was going to be first into the family plot in Milwaukee, and therefore who was going to seep down on whom. They should investigate Mount Auburn.

Mount Auburn was the first "garden cemetery" in America, Mr. Chesney told me. Its founding in 1831 started a trend that gained momentum in the nineteenth century and became so well established by the twen-

tieth that we now expect cemeteries to be beautiful. In 1831, people didn't. On September 24 of that year some two thousand gathered in one of the deep valleys of the wood at Mount Auburn for the public consecration of the Cemetery, where they were addressed by the Hon. Joseph Story, in part as follows:

If a tender regard for the dead be so absolutely universal, and so deeply founded in human affection, why is it not made to exert a more profound influence on our lives? . . . Why should we deposit the remains of our friends in loathsome vaults, or beneath the gloomy crypts and cells of our churches, where the human foot is never heard, save when the sickly taper lights some new guest to his appointed apartment, and "let's fall a supernumerary horror" on the passing procession? Why should we measure out a narrow portion of earth for our graveyards in the midst of our cities, and heap the dead upon each other with a cold, calculating parsimony, disturbing their ashes, and wounding the sensibilities of the living? Why should we expose our burying-grounds to the broad glare of day, to the unfeeling gaze of the idler, to the noisy press of business, to the discordant shouts of merriment, or to the baleful visitations of the dissolute?

Why indeed. But Jacob Bigelow notes, in his *History of the Cemetery of Mount Auburn* (Boston, 1860), that a change of burial place from the city to the country was not easily effected, and it was only after several years of effort on the part of its advocates that the tract of land in Cambridge and Watertown, known to the College students as "Sweet Auburn," was trans-





formed into a place "in which the beauties of nature should, as far as possible, relieve from their repulsive features the tenements of the deceased."

It happened that Jacob Bigelow was corresponding secretary of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, which had just been formed. The public was lukewarm or strongly hostile to the removal of the dead from the immediate precincts of populous cities to the solitude of a distant wood, and Mr. Bigelow thought that if these prejudices were to be overcome, he had better have the help of a young, active, and popular society. He laid the whole matter before the officers of the Horticultural Society, who received it favorably, and a decision was taken to see if enough money could be raised from individuals to cover the price of the land for a cemetery to be run under the auspices of the Horticultural Society. One hundred people eventually chipped in \$60 each, and the land was bought of George Brimmer for \$6,000. Each subscriber got a plot for his subsequent use containing not less than 300 square feet. The Cemetery was off and running.

The following paean appeared in the *Boston Courier* as part of an account of the consecration exercises:

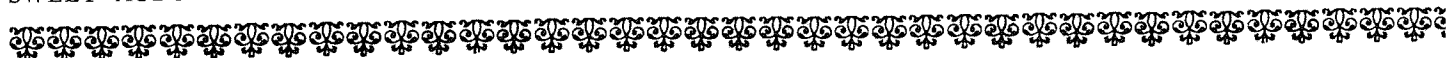
The natural features of Mount Auburn are incomparable for the purpose to which it is now sacred. There is not in all the untrodden valleys of the West, a more secluded, more natural

or appropriate spot for the religious exercises of the living; we may be allowed to add our doubts whether the most opulent neighborhood of Europe furnishes a spot so singularly appropriate for a 'Garden of Graves.'

In the course of a few years, when the hand of Taste shall have passed over the luxuriance of Nature, we may challenge the rivalry of the world to produce another such abiding place for the spirit of beauty.

"How does a sales manager of a sporting goods company decide he wants to be chief of a Garden of Graves?" I asked. Mr. Chesney explained that there was nothing at all odd about it, that in many respects Mount Auburn was a small business like any other. Mr. Chesney has a staff of over a hundred. He has an annual operating budget of almost \$800,000. He has nineteen major vehicles. He has 8.9 miles of road to plow in winter, 11.5 miles of path to keep tidy in summer, 164 acres to police, 3 large ponds to worry about, half a dozen major buildings, 23,200 square feet of greenhouse, a waterworks system comprising pumping station, 20 wells, and over 12 miles of underground drains and pipes, and so on. In 1968 Mr. Chesney's staff erected 70 monuments, 328 headstones, and 2 family mausoleums. They sold 68 lots, 284 single graves, and 10 urn graves. They planted 712 trees and shrubs. They sodded over 770 lineal feet of path, and buried 509 people, bringing total interments to 68,326, which I calculate to represent 14,075,156 bones.





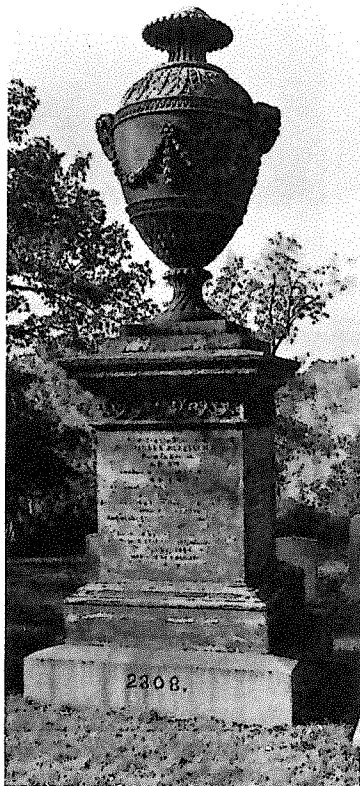
I asked Mr. Chesney if his police force had to be a large one to maintain order in the Cemetery, and he said no, that about the only time they had trouble with theft was on Memorial Day when visitors stole flowers from graves of people they didn't know to lay on the graves of their own loved ones. Vandals come sometimes and break things, and a few years ago a group from the Lampoon were found at dawn cavorting in one of the ponds, but on the whole the people who go to the Cemetery, as they might to a park, maintain the delicate balance between solemnity and frolic that good manners require. Mr. Chesney regrets that bike riding cannot be allowed, and one sees no joggers puffing up the hills, but slow-moving visitors are more than welcome. Some four hundred local bird-watchers even have keys to the gates, and they pussyfoot in at dawn to catch a glimpse of an indigo bunting, a cedar waxwing, a rose-breasted grosbeak, or once in a great while a shy ovenbird.

We took a tour in Mr. Chesney's car all around the place — on roads named Elm, Walnut, Beech, and Fir — and walked on paths called Cowslip, Bellwort, Ailanthus, Yarrow. The hand of Taste was everywhere apparent. Near the Story Chapel, of Potsdam red sandstone, lies a formal garden with a sunken pool and fountain, an expanse of grass, and concentric rose and perennial beds, surrounded by plantings of rhododendrons, azaleas, and other flowering shrubs and trees. Only a

few hundred yards away, a deep gorge, silent and wild, rimmed by immense evergreens, offers an altogether informal prospect. The pond at the bottom of the gorge is a little bit stagnant, Mr. Chesney revealed, and it poses tricky engineering problems, but the view of it is wonderful. In another, less rustic part of the Cemetery, willows weep in the manner of a nineteenth-century embroidery over a large pond, rimmed with yellow Siberian iris, hazy in the June sun. From the top of the granite tower erected in 1853 in memory of George Washington, on the summit that gives the Cemetery its name, one looks out over the curving avenues of Mount Auburn to the Harvard Stadium and Boston, to the broad glare of day, to the noisy press of business.

Mr. Chesney pointed out monuments of notable architecture: the massive sphinx near Bigelow Chapel, the immense Celtic cross of Theodore Thomas, the sorrowing maiden on Amos Binney's monument. Each marker sits on a piece of ground large enough to accommodate it easily; the Cemetery insists that the proportion of stone to setting please the eye. Occasionally, up goes a monument thought ugly by Mount Auburn's arbiters of taste, but ivy, or if need be, bushes, quickly hide it.

The symbolism of markers is a fascinating subject about which Mr. Chesney and I know equally little. One stone has a dog on it. Another is covered with foraminifera, brachiopods, and the like. And Puzant



Zildjian has embedded in his marker a literal cymbal, with the knob unscrewed, maybe to express the percussive music of his name.

A goodly number of distinguished persons remain at Mount Auburn. Here is Edwin Booth, the actor, whose life was marked by a series of almost Homeric misfortunes, and who played tragedy. There is Charles Bulfinch, architect of the Massachusetts State House and University Hall, who shaped the face of Boston and who lies beneath an urn-topped monument that one suspects he did not design.

"Great numbers of those buried in Mount Auburn," says Foster Russell in *Mount Auburn Biographies*, "knew each other in their day and generation, dined with each other, heard each other speak, crossed swords in active business or profession, or, pooling strength, cooperated for the general good in ventures large or small. Through a myriad complex relationships, they were to each other vivid presences in life, as neighbors now in death." A few I spotted on Mr. Chesney's tour, or read of later: Louis Agassiz, geologist, zoologist, who got his start descending into cracks in glaciers on the end of a rope; Thomas Bailey Aldrich, author of *The Story of a Bad Boy*; Nathaniel Bowditch, navigator, astronomer, whose memorial was the first full-length statue of bronze ever cast in this country; Phillips Brooks, preacher; Dorothea Dix, who conducted in Boston a school for girls where moral

character was stressed; Mary Baker Eddy, discoverer of the principles of Christian Science, who is widely believed to have ordered a telephone installed in her grave (Mr. Chesney thinks the best explanation of this fancy is that during construction of the elaborate monument, workmen had on the site a telephone with which to communicate with their foreman, thus energizing rumorists); Fannie Farmer, who wrote the cookbook; Isabella Stewart Gardner, Mrs. Jack, a reckless, witty woman whose motto was "C'est mon plaisir;" Asa Gray, botanist, who had the good luck to be born just when the whole vast continent of North America was being explored; Henry Lee Higginson, founder of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, who gave to Harvard Soldiers Field and the Union; Oliver Wendell Holmes, essayist; Winslow Homer, painter, who was apparently without need of human companionship; Julia Ward Howe, who wrote the words to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" (for which the *Atlantic Monthly* paid her four dollars); Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, poet; Amy Lowell, who smoked cigars; Harrison Gray Otis, a lifelong enemy of government by the people; Josiah Royce, professor of philosophy at Harvard; Evangelinus Apostolides Sophocles, professor of Greek at Harvard; and Charles Sumner, abolitionist, who once asked, "Can there be in our age any peace that is not honorable, any war that is not dishonorable?"



Mount Auburn is disappointing in two ways: There are precious few anecdotes about it — Mrs. Eddy's telephone being the best — or at least this ferret-like reporter discovered very few. And I found no memorable epitaphs, none of the sprightly irreverence of some really old gravestones in New England burying-grounds. Mount Auburn began in a season of unrelieved piety. But that's all right; I never need to hear another epitaph after W. C. Fields's "On the whole, I'd rather be in Philadelphia."

In other respects, Mount Auburn is a triumph. Look for only a little while and the mind forgets what all those stones declare — a family's children wiped out by pox all at once years ago, a Vietnam victim newly mourned — and the stones become part of a beautiful landscape. The people one sees wandering in Mount Auburn come — certainly the column of ladies from the horticultural society, who ooh at the splendid purple beech, who ah at the weeping dogwood, who compete to identify the Turkish hazel tree — light-heartedly. Don't be afraid of all the granite and marble. Go and see. At one time Baedeker said that the only things worth looking at in Cambridge were Harvard and Mount Auburn.

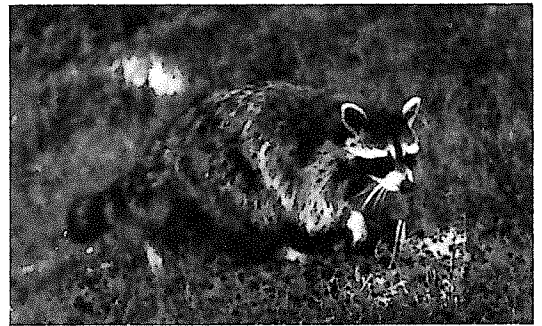
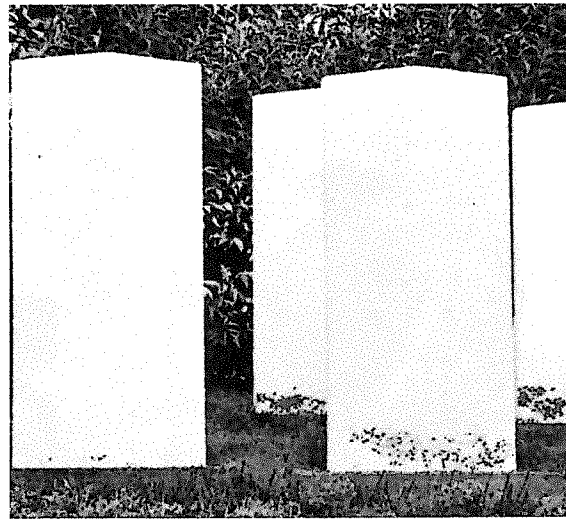
Toward the end of our tour, which took longer than expected because Mr. Chesney got lost, we passed a sparkling tomb about fifteen feet square that Mr. Chesney told me had been erected last year. It was tremendously solid looking and had two little benches out front (for mourners? for passers-by?). I asked him what it had cost the family it memorialized, and he said that he didn't know exactly, but that when everything was added up, it probably came to about \$80,000.

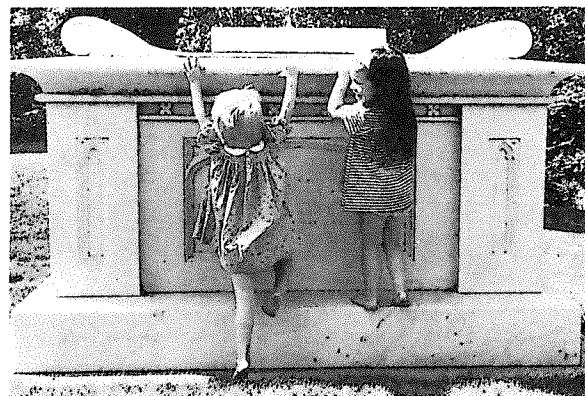
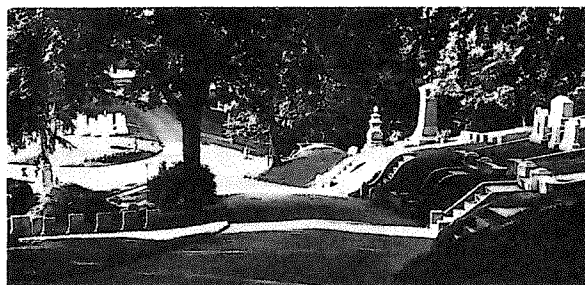
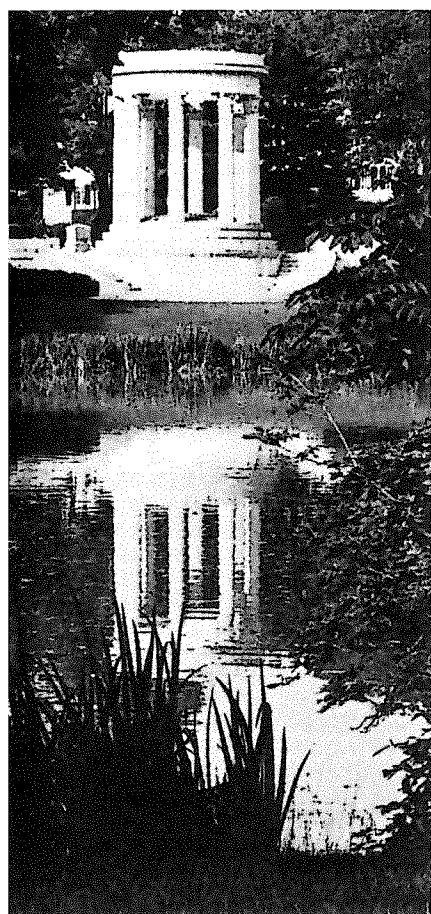
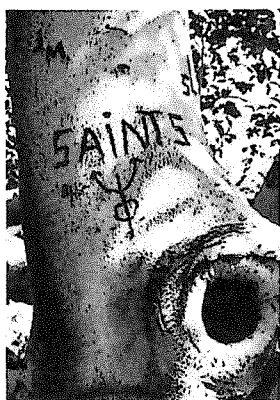
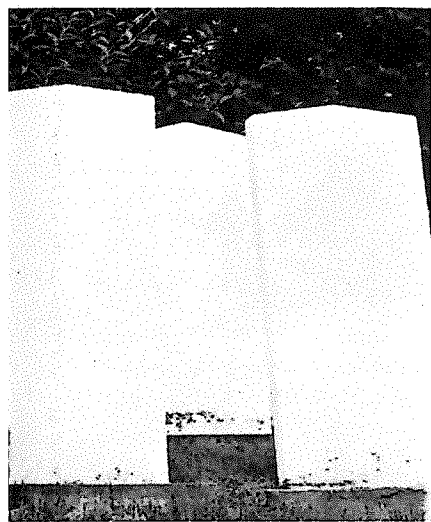
"They could have endowed a scholarship for that," I said. Mr. Chesney nodded and said that he was sorry to see people spend fortunes on monuments, but that the whole question of what a person wants to have happen to his body when he dies is a very emotional one, and one man's decision may not make much sense to another. People ought to be able to do what they want, and have a beautiful place to do it in, he said.

"I don't believe I'd like to be buried anywhere, no matter how lovely," I ventured. "In the old days, I used to come courting here in winter with a sweet girl who had an hysterical small dog named Robespierre, and I thought if we could get rid of the poodle, I'd like to be scattered with her somewhere. And then I thought I'd get my grandson to fling me out onto Penobscot Bay. But now I guess I'd like to be reduced to the smallest possible volume, with the least offensive looks, and be launched by my closest friends from the Cambridge Common in a multi-colored hot-air balloon."

"And I'd just as soon be buried at sea," said Mr. Chesney.

— CHRISTOPHER REED





*The temple-like monument of Mary Baker Eddy, where a telephone may or may not be interred, dominates her corner of the landscape, reflecting formidably, massive and assertive, as though the spirit of the dead might prevail at Mt. Auburn. But this lovely place is for the living, for the children who clamber on President Kirkland's stone in the sparsely peopled Harvard plot, for the carvers of the long-lived beech, for the perambulating raccoon, for the carefree lovers with their book of verse. For these, the chill stones blend quickly into the soft terrain, their names, and dates, and intimations of mortality washed away by sun and the transient pleasures of the living.*

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