

CELIA LAWREN

LAMENTATIONS OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

This morning, my dog and I walk Old Gray, the 1800's garden cemetery blocks from my house. Remy races through buttercups, pees on mossy, crumbling headstones and orange cones and relishes the shady cover of age-scarred centurions. The air is thick with pollen and humidity; the ground, with war and pestilence. I sense the dead wrestling with their fates. The entire McNulty family—Mother, Father, John and Mary—wiped out by influenza, slide southward into the driveway gutter. Across the way, in section H, the Curleys shift north to higher ground. Someone has again stolen the head of a Union soldier, which can no longer watch over his own decay. Life and death can change in an instant. Mary Elizabeth Diaz born and died on Christmas Day 1868. My daughter crushed in a car accident and survived a different person. A shape-shifter, grief changes reality. We lose pieces of ourselves as decomposing bodies lose form on their way to dust. How much sorrow has this old misshapen Red Oak I lean against absorbed? Even a leaf on my shoulder hurts. A murmur of ghostly cries rises from the damp earth, swirls the treetops and joins the weeping of long-forgotten mothers and fathers flung across their children's graves. So many tears I've cried; still more. The oak, barely alive, keeps on shedding blossoms, leafing out, trying against odds to do what it's done every spring for over a hundred years. Remy and I walk home along empty streets.