

The Pet Cemetery by Ned Beaman

The pet cemetery is almost full and it's my fault. This letter to you, my successor, is meant as an explanation and an apology. When I started the job almost twenty years ago, I was initiated in person by old Amir, the gravedigger before me. But by the time you are appointed, I will be gone. I'm truly sorry about that, but I can't stay. I've failed and the shame is just too great.

Today, there are only four free spaces left out of eight-one gravesites. But when I first arrived, the situation was reversed: the cemetery contained just two dogs, two cats, one pig and one parrot.

I remember expressing my bafflement to Amir: I knew the pet cemetery dated back several centuries, to before the Mongol Invasion, and surely Amir alone must have burned far more than six animals in the many years he'd worked there. Amir smiled. He explained that I would soon learn the secret of the cemetery. But I would have to see it for himself. There was no point in his telling me, because I wouldn't believe him.

A week later, a woman came from Ghulmess with her pet cat wrapped in a shroud. The unfortunate animal had been hit in the head by a rock crumbling off a hillside. Under Amir's supervision, I dug a hole next to the two existing cat graves, and while the woman murmured a tearful prayer, we interred this third cat.

In the middle of the night, I awoke to a strange rumbling from the earth beneath me. The next morning, I wondered if it had been a dream. But when I went out into the cemetery, with Kersi, the cemetery dog, gambolling at my feet as usual, I found that there had indeed been some sort of minor cataclysm. I rushed to find Amir. All three of the little slate headstones that had marked the cats' graves had been smashed, I told him, and the parrot's headstone was in the wrong place, flung somehow to the grave of the cat we'd buried the day before.

No, Amir told me, the parrot's headstone was not in the wrong place, and I should not move it back. If I were to dig beneath it – which I shouldn't – I would find the remains of the parrot, not the cat. There was nothing for me to do, he insisted, but sweep up the fragments of the three smashed headstones, because all of those cats were gone now.

That was how I learned the secret of the cemetery. If you bury three of the same type of animal in a straight line, then, overnight, they will vanish, and the animals buried to the north will shift south, as if pulled down by gravity, to fill the newly available space. Nobody knows why, but this is how it has been for as long as the cemetery has existed. The cemetery must have accepted tens of thousands of animals in that time, but because of the careful stewardship of its gravediggers, it has never filled up its eighty-one gravesites. So far.

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That winter, when Amir was dying, I swore to him I would faithfully carry on his work. And for the early part of my time here, I believe I did. I always thought hard before I chose a gravesite, and I would even ask visitors if they knew of any pets in their village that were getting old or sick, so I could take future arrivals into account. At one stage, I had cleared out so many animals over the previous few months that there was nothing left in the whole cemetery but a single greyhound.

But then, one day, a brother and sister came to the cemetery, wanting to bury two ducks. I had never heard of anyone keeping a duck as a pet before, but they told me they had adopted the two lost ducklings when they were still very young. Now both ducks had died from a fever the same night, and the children were distraught.

I didn't know it at the time, but that was where it all started to go wrong. Naturally, I buried the two ducks in adjacent graves and left a space for a third duck. I assumed that eventually a third duck would come. Amir had told me that a third of any type of animal would always come if you were patient.

But the third duck didn't come. The three gravesites, two full and one empty, were only a tiny proportion of the cemetery, and yet they became like a tiny crack which spreads and spreads until it shatters the whole edifice.

I became so obsessed with leaving that third gravesite open to complete the duck triad that I arranged all the other burials with this in mind, even to the detriment of the overall plan. More and more animals began to accumulate in the cemetery, in awkward and spotty patterns, but I told myself that it didn't matter, because before long I would get that last duck and after that I would easily flush out the whole place. And yet I must already have known in my heart that I was in trouble, because I was drinking more and more arak in the evenings. I warn you, the cemetery is a lonely place, and even when things are going well, the nights are long.

Although all of this was happening slowly, over months and years, I began to panic, making reckless decisions, sometimes even gambling on what the next animal might be. At last, much too late, I gave up on the third duck, and filled that space with a cat in the hopes of rescuing myself.

The very next week, a man came from Saqar Tappeh with a dead duck.

I raged and spat at him for not coming sooner, even though his duck had only died the day before. That winter – and I am truly ashamed to admit this – I slaughtered Kersi, the cemetery dog, just so I could bury him and complete a triad. But it hardly helped. And without him I was even lonelier.

This is my wretched legacy to you, whoever you are. When I finish this letter I will walk out into the desert, leaving only four free spaces in cemetery. You must try and salvage it. I don't know if you have any chance of success, but I pray that you do.

Once, early on, I asked Amir what would happen if the cemetery ever filled up, which at that time, of course, seemed quite impossible. Nobody knew for sure, he told me. But there was a lore passed down from gravedigger to gravedigger. It said that, at the moment the eight-first gravesite was filled, everything would empty out and start again from nothing. You mean the cemetery, I asked him – the cemetery would empty out. No, he told me. Not the cemetery. The world.

'The Pet Cemetery' by Ned Beaman was written in response to Poupak Sarah Shoughi's exhibition at Her Gallery in the summer of 2018.