Bright early morning sunshine sifts through a floor-to-ceiling window at the east end of the columbarium and bathes an alcove of urns in wintry light. Archived like library materials, the urns are filed away in niches—15 inches high, 8 inches wide, each of them fronted with a glass cabinet door, roomy enough for a diorama to memorialize a lost loved one. Tucked inside the niches are nosegays, vases, family photos and other mementos mori, the kind of miscellany that can summarize a life. The urn is the centerpiece, even when placed off center, and the keepsakes grouped around it stage the scene—a small menorah or Russian Orthodox cross, a wristwatch whose hands have stopped, a sculptural angel slumped forward, weeping. These items form a visual requiem which, as I stand here looking on, is somehow reassuring. After reducing a human body to ash, it’s appropriate to represent the life lived with a modest assemblage—a
handful of trinkets, some final souvenirs, a bronze urn, perhaps a marble one—soft sloping shapes that catch the sun’s rays and smoothly slough off any shadows. The Dead can’t speak, so the living must do so for them.

During the day, sunlight moves through the alcove hour by hour, nature’s oldest timepiece, and graces the mausoleum rows one after the other, a steadfast visitor to what seems an out-of-sight-out-of-mind, forgotten kind of place. Most of the death dates are from before 1950. As if to emphasize how the world has moved on, white stickers affixed to a majority of the little glass cabinet doors give notice that cremains in abandoned niches will be removed and disposed of in unmarked pauper’s graves.

It’s a hard message, to be sure, but it’s equally hard to imagine surviving family members losing any sleep over this. How many relatives will indulge in frantic and outraged tirades around the dinner table, condemning this final insult to Great Uncle Yuri, dead since 1939? It’s hard to know how relatives would even find out about the little white stickers because they never stop by.

They never stop by.

They have deep-sixed the Dead. Ditched the Deceased. Departed from the Departed.

The effect in the columbarium is not one of neglect, however. The space is way too neat to suggest any sort of laxity or heedlessness, its tile floor cleanly swept, the tidy rows of niches dust free and meticulously painted in an oil-based enamel. An inadvertent, unhurried relinquishing seems to have taken place very gradually over time. Loving father, Beloved brother, Cherished son. Something once dear has now been deserted. Blessed mother, Devoted sister, Loving daughter. It’s difficult to conjure someone shedding a tear here. A carved angel may weep, but it will do so alone. This is the place of griefless death.

It’s as if sadness has left the equation. The vase, the nosegay, the ashes and, of course, the urn—these objects remain. Any viable calculus of mourning
still includes them naturally. But sorrow has vacated. It’s as if at some point the objects themselves transcended their actual use or purpose because surviving family had fully absorbed, integrated and incorporated the loss. An assemblage or enshrinement for the sake of remembrance was no longer necessary.

I study the sepia photo of Great Uncle Yuri in his fedora and necktie. Pale plastic roses lie next to the photo, time-dusted and faded. All the niches are full of things the living once put in them—and now even the living are gone.

This is the look of an unapologetic, guilt-free abandoning.

The urns have stood patiently by, like books on a library shelf that no one has moved for decades, not even accidentally sliding a volume partway out, examining its spine briefly before—_oops, not the right book_—shoving it back onto the shelf. These urns have held this changeless place.

The columbarium is one of two inside the Church of St. Seraphim. They date from a period when the nondescript little house of worship was seized by the Bolsheviks and then turned into Moscow’s crematorium. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Orthodox Church reclaimed St. Seraphim, removed the incinerators and chimney and resumed services. The twin columbaria still occupy their original spot on the main floor of the building—one on the north side of the ornate inner sanctuary, the other on the south. Both are hidden from view behind temporary walls that are so makeshift and flimsy the tops of the walls do not actually connect to the ceiling.

Housing cremains in a church is sacrilegious in the view of Russian orthodoxy. The only reason these are here at all stems from St. Seraphim’s enforced tenure as Moscow’s crematorium. Intensifying the drama is the fact that the place was put to sinister use during the Purge years under Stalin, 1930-1953. Citizens were rounded up, tortured to death in the basement of the Lubyanka Prison or summarily shot there, and then under cover of darkness their bodies brought here, run through the furnaces and the ashes dumped into
pits in the vast necropolis just outside the building. Stalin’s goons used bread trucks for transport from Lubyanka—Chleb, the sign on the side panel read.

By light of day, the church-turned-crematorium legitimately processed the bodies of loved ones. The place was a business after all. Great Uncle Yuri’s cremation happened during that time. His family supplied an urn to the facility—a dove gray ceramic one was their choice—and then in the midst of their sadness, perhaps on that least consolable of days, they set about arranging his diorama in his very own niche—the sepia photo, the spray of plastic roses. They did right by him. A ritual like that was typical during the daytime business hours in the columbarium. The Dead couldn’t speak, so of course the living did so for them.

By night, the crematorium chugged industrially through the chleb.

During the height of the Great Terror, 1937-1938, an average of 1000 executions took place daily.

Since the collapse of the U.S.S.R. the Russian Orthodox Church has had to reconcile two distinct populations of the Dead in this place: the knowable, nameable, claimable ones whose ashes have been accorded respectful space in these funerary niches—and the anonymous, unacknowledged, unknown Dead secreted away outside in the clandestine pits.

It’s an odd hierarchy.

A generation has transpired since the end of Soviet Communism, and the Russian Orthodox Church is restless to dismantle the columbarium and be done with all that, just as it once dismantled the furnaces and the chimney and moved on. It is eager to rid St. Seraphim’s of this burden.

The little white sticker affixed to the glass door of Great Uncle Yuri’s niche lets everyone know that the clock is ticking on his time here. Deceased since 1939 and forgotten nearly as long, he has succumbed to the fate of most of the Named, Claimed and Known. It’s like a second death for them. First comes the loss of life. Then the death of remembrance. Steadily over slow decades higher
priority matters have risen to the top of the pile for surviving family members, lower priority ones have sunk to the bottom.

Death has become abstract, like a geometrical plane whose trajectories might just extend to infinity. Death has gotten reduced to an existential relic, the urn notwithstanding. No one is here, the family member suddenly realizes. Some kind of decomposition of memory has taken place, beyond what the incinerator has already done to the body. Distractions alter the terms of death, almost molecularly. Distractions factor the dead away.

Great Uncle Yuri’s relatives stopped coming to the columbarium, and the relatives of others, too, but time itself, as if working in tandem with the ever-sifting sunlight streaming through the east window, did not stop. Time’s fidelity was impeccable. It has loyally visited the niches alongside the rays of light, fading the plastic roses, depositing a little dust, sifting through the matters of importance and making certain that everything here acquires that vintage, antique look—artifacts of a bygone era.

Time helped family members put things into perspective. Time allowed them to prioritize this place. It created an environment where the little white stickers made sense. Only the living are troubled by death, and when the living are no longer troubled—well, what is there?

As I leave the columbarium this morning I am surprised to find right next to it, shielded by another hastily slapped together flimsy partition, a play nursery for children. While parents are at worship in the sanctuary, kids can pass the time here, and the makeshift partition keeps the urns out of sight.

A plush blue teddy bear sits on a chair at a child-sized table, awaiting a tea party. The gold-rimmed cup stands in its matching saucer, laid out on a placemat next to a toy samovar for steeping make believe tea. The stuffed bear wears a checkered bib around its neck. Everything is ready for the children, everything staged. This is an assemblage, too, I realize, just like those in the niches beyond the temporary wall, but with a critical difference: this is an
assemblage for the living. The bustling world of St. Seraphim has no relationship to the mausoleum rows behind that flimsiness. Those walls may just as well be solid brick and in another galaxy, so little do the concerns of the living touch anything on the other side.

What’s obvious is the way the living are crowding out the Dead. The Dead are not so relevant any longer that they can demand valuable real estate from the living. Or even an iota of shelf space.

And as a consequence St. Seraphim’s rightly asks, “What do we do with this stuff? The funereal trappings? Where do we put all this?”

For a church in the middle of a cemetery it’s a rhetorical question. The question for us is less rhetorical.

What is our obligation to the Dead? And if it is not the Dead to whom we are obligated, then what exactly obliges us?

Stepping outside St. Seraphim’s into the sprawling necropolis around it, I find regular tombs and crypts, a few obelisks and spires, a scattering of elaborate statues—one honoring the memory of a steel magnate from the imperial period, another a wealthy pre-revolution merchant—and mixed among them is a population of more workaday, plain stone tablets, humble graves of ordinary folk. All these plots are outfitted not for cremains but for whole-body burial, which has always been preferred in Russia by a huge margin. This entire cremation thing was an indignity the Communists, who eschewed the Church and its customs, inflicted upon the people. I also find, as if hidden in plain sight among the regular headstones, Common Graves 1, 2 and 3, the final resting place for the ashes of the Purge.

Every night the chleb trucks rumbled in and the furnaces blazed and by morning there were more ashes. Jewish ashes, the ashes of atheists, ethnic Russians, Christians. As blended as society was under Communism, the wide
net of the Purge caught everyone—factory workers, government functionaries, writers, military leaders, church officials and even the foreign-born owners of Moscow’s Chinese laundry.

The NKVD, the Soviet secret police, showed up in a neighborhood, barricaded either end of the street and rounded the residents up. There was a willy-nilly aspect to this. Roll the dice. It could be any neighborhood.

The point of Totalitarian terror was not to punish the guilty but to bring the population to heel.

Neighbors in the next block saw what was going on over there. They craned their necks. They trembled. It was not as if a locked door would save anybody either.

Moscow had no locks. Moscow had no doors.

Meanwhile, neighbors disappeared. Some were executed, some shipped to a distant gulag. It was estimated that as many as 20 million people met this fate. Who could say? Part of the terror was not knowing.

That part of the terror outlived the repressive regime by 40 years. Even though Purge executions ceased in 1953 with Stalin’s unexpected death, Common Graves 1, 2 and 3 only came to light in 1992. Ironically, or perhaps absurdly, the last ashes dumped into Common Grave No. 3 were those of Lavrenty Beria, former head of the NKVD, who had personally handed down the Purge death sentences.

After that came a period of quiet. Kruschev consolidated power, began to de-Stalinize the U.S.S.R. He introduced a thaw in the Cold War with the West and even came to the States, in fact to Iowa, to learn about corn crop production. Soviet society started reckoning with itself.

The Common Graves lay concealed and unsuspected beneath the cemetery’s crushed gravel walking paths. The site of Common Grave No. 3, for instance, became the natural intersection of four of these footpaths. For long decades visitors strolled back and forth right across the secret grave of 1000’s of
people. They paused, bouquet in hand, as they made their way to a loved one’s grave. They turned left. They turned right, trying to get their bearings before pushing on into the cemetery. And nobody knew.

Rains fell. Autumn leaves. Snow swept through.

Nobody knew—but Time’s metronome ticked tirelessly away. Faithful Time, a constant companion to the Unacknowledged, the Anonymous, the Unknown. Its remembrance, rhythmic as it was, routine as it was, had a restless agitated quality—beyond merely counting the seconds in any given day. There was a weight to its insistent tolling—an urgency. Time was sitting Shiva for these dead.

In Greek mythology, the ghosts of the unburied visit the living to demand a proper resting place. Common Graves 1, 2 and 3 had waited long enough. In 1992 their ghosts paid the living a visit.

Some Dead claim us harder than others.

They ask a lot of us, pressure us, make demands.

There’s the Dead we must remember, the personal Dead, our relations, ancestors, our very own dearly departed, the ones next to whom we may someday lie—and then there are those like the Holocaust murdered, the Siege of Leningrad casualties, staggering populations that have fallen to unspeakable atrocities, like those in Hiroshima and Nagasaki—the Dead we never knew, the impersonal numbers, the Dead who belong astonishingly both to history and also somehow to all of us.

What to do with them?

During the Gorbachev years, the perestroika reform years of the early 90’s, the public prevailed upon the government to tell the truth about those who perished in the Terror and to locate the mass graves. KGB files, made newly available, revealed much. It was possible to find out where those who disappeared ended up. The hidden sites have now all been acknowledged
throughout the former Soviet Union. Here in this cemetery there were among
the first.

Impromptu memorials arose.

Initially, the circumference of each of the former cremains pits was
delineated with a border of rough-chiseled limestone to form a large octagonal
shape, thus defining the portentous space. Staid marble slabs showed up in the
center of each octagon. At the first site, the earliest one, the slab bore this
inscription: “Common Grave No. 1. Disposal place of unclaimed ashes from
1930-1942 inclusive.”

A few years after that, a few years more deeply into the intense civic
reckoning, this Soviet grappling with truth, a second slab showed up, granite this
time, twice as big as the first, and installed back to back against the first one,
facing in the other direction. As if in dialogue with the earlier slab, its inscription
elaborated on the ashes of the unclaimed: “Here are deposited the remains of
innocently martyred and executed victims of political repression, 1930-1942.
Eternal memory to them!”

Stuck in the ground around both stones are small metal plaques—
hundreds of them clustered about—brought by descendants and others who
want to remember. There’s a keen freshness to this assemblage, a strong vital
presence, each little marker claiming a few important inches of ground and also a
visitor’s attention. Short memorials are arranged in the front, rising to tall ones
nestled in the center, a coliseum effect that draws the eye upward. Colorful
bouquets poke out at jaunty angles—vivid reds, florid purples.
On the day I stood there, snow still blanketed Common Grave No. 1. Fuchsia gladioli and pineapple-gold mums offered a living contrast to the blanched white mantle they lay upon. A blossoming garden seemed to have defied winter’s dead season and burgeoned forth with petals, posies, lacy ferns and lush greens, a floral testament to some kind of triumph.

Memorials throughout the rest of the necropolis were subdued and modest—proportional and reserved. Even when I had walked away and was standing some distance from Common Grave No. 1, I could easily pick it out from anything else on account of its riot of plaques and signs and the cascading bunches of flowers. It had the much tended look, the doted on feel, of a gravesite for those who had just died the day before.

This robust response made sense. After all, no family members had ever been able to create a small respectful diorama for the repose of those whose ashes got dumped in the pit. No one had staged the moment, staged the life, gathered
the souvenirs, framed a sepia photo, arranged fadeable roses. No family members had ever really known.

Only now could people honor the loss. Someone I spoke with inside St. Seraphim told me that new memorial plaques and markers show up out here all the time, each of them wedged down into the teeming thicket of others. There’s a whole community of those who insist on remembering, insist on speaking for the ones who were so brutally denied a voice. The Dead obligate us, yes. We don’t so much speak for them, however, as we do through them to the living—those with us now, those who’ll come long after. Common Graves 1, 2 and 3 are not by any means forsaken.

Unlike those urns in the columbarium...

They are in various stages of being peacefully abandoned, without regret, without recrimination—and the niches left quietly untended. For those Dead, the ultimate fate may be to share a pauper’s grave with others, an anonymous pit of their own, but there’s a measured, considered, careful and dispassionate feel to this. For them, death is death. It’s simple. It’s efficient.

Within the Common Graves, however, death is never just death. An exponentiality is at work. It is death plus atrocity plus panic plus chaos plus helplessness plus tyranny plus human frailty plus history.

When the furnaces were put to their dual purposes, running both night and day, Moscow was a city on fire. Inside the combustion chamber the residue of all must have commingled a little, an unavoidable fusion of soot, cinders, dust, embers, all of it twisting up on a draft of flue gas and smoke. A trace of Great Uncle Yuri blazed—bit by bit, grain by grain, crumb by crumb—with the chleb.

In some places on earth, ashes are merely ashes. Not in Moscow.