

# Circle Unbroken

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## HONORABLE MENTION

As isolation took hold in late April 2020, I visited Nature's Path Sanctuary in Verona, a facility that specializes in green burials. It was once a hobby farm of the Farley family. I had walked the property before but only as an interested curiosity seeker. The birds were singing the property reminded me of the wooded land I spent so much time wilding away, as a young person in Wisconsin's driftless area. The squirrels, chipmunks, songbirds and deer at Farley were going on about their daily lives. The paths were quiet and welcoming. I got lost in the wonder of nature.

In March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic brought an urgency to plan for my death. Healthy people were dying. It's not like I hadn't come to terms with the fact that I will die: we all will take that solo journey. About 25 years ago I processed several deaths of people close to me and sorted out the idea that, yes, we are all going to die. As the pandemic intensified, I was pushed to think about, and make concrete plans for death. None of us knew who the virus would pick as victims.

April 2021 the purpose of my visit was more specific: to choose a plot for my remains. Husband Dick and a friend came along with me. As we walked the wooded, undulating paths and hillsides together, I found an ideal spot on a south facing hill. The earth was waking up with new sprouts of spring ephemerals, there was an amazing bed of ferns that would be filling in below, the smell of damp soil recalled Margaret Hassle's poem *At the Tea Garden*. (See below) In it, she writes: "the unoxidized (tea) leaves that don't wither, hold their grassy fragrance like a willow under snow in winter."

With Covid constantly in all our lives, Dick and I decided that we needed to get back to reading poetry out loud at the end of the day. *At the Tea Garden* became particularly prescient with its line "I wouldn't mind becoming a part of a set of bone china..." (with cremation ashes) Not being alone but "sit between friends' quiet words."

(An ephemeral plant is one marked by short life cycles. The word ephemeral means transitory or quickly fading.) Isn't that what we really are, as humans, ephemeral?

*At the Tea Garden*

by Margaret Hassle

My friend and I mull over the teas displayed in square jars  
with beveled glass labeled by type.  
Each name seems part of a haiku:  
“After the Snow Sprouting.” “Moon Palace.” “Mist Over the Gorges.”

I'm drawn to green teas  
with unoxidized leaves that don't wither,  
hold their grassy fragrance  
like willow under snow in winter.  
The proprietor offers real china for the Chinese tea.  
Animal bones, fine ground, give whiteness,  
translucency and strength  
to the porcelain that appears delicate,  
resists chipping.  
The rim of the cup is warm and thin.  
My friend's lips are plush: her lovely mouth opens to give advice I ask for. We talk about  
memory of threshold events,  
like a first kiss or a poem published.  
She can't remember...  
I tell her about my brother-in-law's  
chemotherapy - his third bout of cancer.  
He wants his family to put a pinch  
of his ashes in things he liked:  
his banjo, the top drawer of his desk, the garden.  
I wouldn't mind becoming part  
of a set of bone china that serves tea  
in a cozy teahouse smelling of incense,  
cinnamon, musk and carved teak.  
I'd like to be brought to a small table,  
sit between friends' quiet words,  
held in hands so close that breath  
on the surface or warm drink  
makes mist rise over their faces.