

Taphology with Robyn S. Lacy

Ologies Podcast

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Oh hey, it's those discount Halloween socks that you'll buy November 1st and then wear all year, Alie Ward, back with a Spooktober October finale and it's honestly, maybe, going to give me nightmares. I've already had recurring night terrors about gravesites and tombstones and cemeteries and burial grounds... Ah! Boy howdy, shiver me timbers.

Now, Halloween doesn't get much more on-the-nose than this episode. Will it be goth? Will you be surprised? Will you never think about some things the same, forever? All of those answers during this delightful discourse with an ologist who got her bachelor's in Archaeology and a master's in Historical Archaeology leading a whole excavation team for months, looking for lost burial grounds from the 1600s. She also does ongoing research on gravestone symbols, and iconography, and preserving historical burial sites. So, this woman digs graves. Don't have plans for Halloween? Don't worry, she's got you covered.

But before we dig in, quick thanks to patrons at Patreon.com/Ologies for making this show possible. You can join them; you can hop in there for a buck a month. My love is not expensive. Thanks to everyone who just tells friends about the show and rates and tweets and 'grams and reviews, of course, so I can snoop them each week and then dadbarrass you by reading a fresh one like this. OBX Benj, wrote:

Hey, pod-dad! [Alie whispers: That's me] I had to listen to every last episode just to be extra certain before rating Ologies. (Spoiler: from Volcanology to Kinetic Salticidology, it's been a solid five stars.) What am I supposed to do with the rest of my life now in between Tuesdays?

OBX Benj, I dunno, relisten. There you go. And thank you, also.

Okay, Taphology; straight-up Greek word here. *Taphos* means funeral, or grave, or tomb. So, let's just get into this wonderful episode in which we discuss: traipsing past tombs, the ethics of headstone cleaning, picnics in the graveyard, poltergeists, goths, the best epitaphs, coffins and caskets, Puritans, witch trials, cemeteries versus graveyards, is there a difference? What is it? And why you want to spend Halloween font-spotting among the dead in an episode that I'll be honest, kind of fucked me up a little bit in terms of graveyard history, but I am richer for it. With Archaeologist, tombstone conservator, scholar, and Taphologist, Robyn S. Lacy.

Alie: Okay, first thing, if you could pronounce your first and last name and your pronouns?

Robyn: Yeah, Robyn Lacy, she/her.

Alie: Awesome. Robyn Lacy, do you know that there is a word and it's taphology, is the study of graves?

Robyn: Yes. Yeah, I've heard of that one.

Alie: [*gasps*] You have! Is this a commonly used word or is it pretty obscure?

Robyn: I see it a lot on Instagram and stuff, people will describe themselves as a taphophile.

Alie: Nnhh. [*"Nnnhhh" repeated and slowed down*]

Robyn: I don't see it as much in archaeology. [*laughs*]

Alie: I would imagine, as an archaeologist, you'd be more apt to describe yourself as a taphologist than a taphophile. You're not just tripping about a cemetery, taking photos. Right?

Robyn: I feel like that's half of my research... *[laughs]* is just stumbling around gravestones, I would more just describe myself as an archaeologist though.

Alie: Right. Are you a goth?

Robyn: No. *[both laugh]*

Alie: That's the first time I've straight up asked that question.

Robyn: No, I'm like the least goth graveyard person, basically.

Alie: Do you find a lot of other archaeologists who work in the burial space, both figuratively and academically, do they tend to be more of the recreationally spooky? Or are they history nerds?

Robyn: I think definitely both. Everything we do in archaeology basically deals with death; everyone that we study, for the most part, unless you're dealing with the living community, everything that comes out of the ground is from someone who has already died. So, even if you're doing archaeology and you're not even looking at burials per se, you're still in some way dealing with death as a theme.

Alie: Yeah. I guess archaeology is just one big estate sale. You know what I mean? *[Robyn laughs]* What did they do with this? What kind of a person were they? What can I understand based on these artifacts, right?

Robyn: Exactly.

Alie: How did you end up in this space? Are you from the Eastern seaboard? Did you grow up around spooky cemeteries?

Robyn: I'm from Halifax, Nova Scotia originally, but I grew up in BC. I wouldn't say I grew up in cemeteries but during, like, family trips and stuff, my family would always go to historic sites and if there was someone really interesting buried somewhere, or if people told us that the monuments in a specific graveyard were very impressive, we would go look at them. So, it was definitely something I was comfortable going to and being interested in.

But initially, I wanted to do either Maritime Archaeology, which I know you've talked about on the show before, or Archaeology in Mesoamerica. And then I did a field school in my undergraduate degree through the University of Liverpool, and we were doing surveys of graveyards in Ireland. It was rainy and cold, and I sat down, and we started recording everybody's names on the stone, what kind of headstones they were and I was just like, "Well, I think this is where I'm going to be for the rest of my life." *[laughs]*

Aside: I asked Robyn if she ever listened to The Smiths' "Cemetery Gates," like, on repeat?

[song plays, Morrissey sings: So we go inside and we gravely read the stones. All those people, all those lives. Where are they now? With loves, and hates, and passions just like mine. They were born, and they lived, and then they died. It seems so unfair, I want to cry.]

She was like, "No." And I can't blame her. I listened to Morrissey before he crumbled before our very eyes like ancient marble. So, being 16, watching her crush smoke cloves and complain about his dad in a cemetery was not something that we had in common. That's fine.

Alie: There was a lot of recreational graveyard-hanging in my own particular youth. But straight off the gate, as someone who studies burial grounds, cemeteries, graveyards, are they a good place to picnic or is that very rude?

Robyn: It definitely depends on the site. I know that some larger sites, like Mount Auburn in Cambridge, don't let people do that just because it is such a significant historic site and, like, you wouldn't go sit and have a picnic in downtown Boston.

Other rural sites, if you're going there to visit family members, I think definitely you can have a picnic in the cemetery. I've done that; when we're doing fieldwork in graveyards, you're just going to eat your lunch there. In the Victorian period, they would go and have picnics and go for walks in graveyards very regularly so kind of doing it now is almost keeping that tradition.

Alie: Okay, that makes me feel a little better. Because out here in LA, we have the Hollywood Forever Cemetery, which is like a straight-up nightlife venue. I saw a concert there a few weeks ago, they have screenings...

Robyn: That is so cool.

Alie: Right? But it seems like there's different schools of thought in terms of, "Hey, everyone buried here would have wanted to go to a party, so why not have a party?" and "This is very, very sacred, hallowed ground."

How does it differ in different cultures, different parts of the world, how we dispose of bodies? Is it a very western thing to bury your whole skeleton and have a whole plot of land? Or is that pretty worldwide?

Robyn: I mean, definitely everybody around the world has different burial customs and funerary customs and even different ideas about what dying is and how it takes place, when death happens. But it's definitely a very North American idea that when you buy a plot of land and bury an entire body in it, that that is something that you own for all of eternity, basically. We have so much space in North America and this idea of burial in perpetuity and your final resting place is sort of ingrained into how we see a funeral and how we see a burial space.

But if you go to Luxembourg or places in Europe that don't have as much space, the burial space for the body itself is something that's temporary and after not too many years – like a decade or so... or 20, 30 years –they'll ask the family if they want to renew, basically a lease on that burial space. Often the families don't want to anymore so once the body is decomposed, they cremate them, and then the remains are put in a mass burial space for cremated remains.

Alie: Oh, I didn't know that. That makes a lot of sense though. It always seemed a little odd that we're like, "This is my plot of land," because if everyone did that for the last several million years, there wouldn't be any space that wasn't a graveyard, it seems.

Robyn: Exactly. I mean I feel like a lot of Europe... there isn't a lot of space that's not a graveyard. But yeah, it's a very North American idea that that's a space that you get to own, or your corpse gets to own, for hundreds of years after you're no longer there.

Alie: And what's the difference between a graveyard and a cemetery and a burial ground? Walk me through... literally, traipse me through some of these different plots?

Robyn: Yeah so, the terminology is in some ways interchangeable depending on what country you're in, but in my research, a burial ground is a space... that term could be used interchangeably... In 17th-century New England, which is one of my study areas, a burial ground, that term, was used by Puritan settlers specifically to mean an unconsecrated place for burials, because that was something that they did.

But if it's space for graves that is around a church, that would be the churchyard also the graveyard. Graveyards can also be not attached to the church but still directly associated with the church, whereas burial grounds and cemeteries are often municipally owned. But not always... it's all murky.

But cemeteries, as a term, is really interesting because a cemetery comes from this rural garden burial space aesthetic: the rural garden cemetery movement. And that didn't come to North America until 1831 when Mount Auburn was constructed in Cambridge. So, anything older than that is technically not a cemetery in North America.

Alie: Oh!

Aside: Fun fact: I am sitting between Cambridge and Watertown, outside of Boston. I just looked it up and I am one mile away from Mount Auburn Cemetery. Huh! And it's dark out and I'm not wearing pants and the cemetery is closed. I'm in a hotel recording this right now. I leave Boston tomorrow and I'm a mile away from Mount Auburn Cemetery. There's 5,000 trees there! And 10 miles of winding roads and bird watching. From what I gather, it is like the Disneyland of old, cool cemeteries. Even the word "cemetery" was a rebrand in this era and it means, 'a sleeping place' in Greek. Nice.

Alie: What happened in the 1830s where suddenly there was this shift? Were there some bros that were like, "We're here to disrupt the graveyard industry"?

Robyn: I feel like, probably yes. You hear about the changing ideas of death in America and in Canada as well. It was a lot of people being kind of freaked out about bodies after a while, whereas you used to be buried a little bit closer to the areas that you were living in. When those spaces got full, people got a little bit freaked out when they could smell the bodies. Sometimes these burial grounds, and there were some in New York like this, they got so overcrowded that you could smell the decomposition. People started getting sick, they were worried it was from "the miasma" coming from the bodies.

So, they were like, "There are no more bodies allowed to be buried inside New York City, let's move the graves." So yeah, it was like this movement to sort of, pastoralize, I guess, the graveyards by making these more open, beautiful, airy spaces. But at the same time, it came a little bit from people being scared of bodies.

Alie: Oh wow. So, it was a little bit of column A/column B, "We just are honoring you, please turn into liquid and fungus elsewhere."

Robyn: Absolutely. *[laughs]*

Alie: Makes sense. Okay, so you're getting your PhD right now. How did you narrow down your studies?

Robyn: *[laughs]* With great difficulty, I'm going to say. So, I did my master's at the same school that I'm at right now, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador. And for my master's I was looking at sort of, 17th-century burial landscape development – as usually the short form of saying it – which is how burial spaces were organized in communities and how that related to other communities. And if you can take that information and see if there were

overarching trends like, did everyone in the 17th century put all of their bodies in the center of town?

For my PhD I was like, what were other countries doing in North America at the time? Because I'd only really looked at British sites at that point. But then also, I was really interested in sort of looking at ways that these burial spaces that were established through colonialism, how you could see bodies represented in them that weren't just of white settlers, because that's sort of the narrative that we get fed: that all the settlers were white, which they clearly weren't. A lot of them were there against their will and being buried in spaces that weren't traditional to them and how visible that is... Or not visible. *[laughs]*

Alie: Right. What kinds of facts and history and narratives have you been learning about doing that?

Robyn: I've been doing a lot of reading on the African burial ground in New York City and the community archaeology that was founded; a little mismanaged at the beginning and then they brought in a lot of community partners to make it the National Park site that it is today.

Aside: Okay, this information is going to be rough but it's terrible that more people don't know this. So, 30 feet below Broadway in Manhattan, excavations uncovered a six-acre burial plot with, according to the National Park Service, 15,000 intact skeletal remains of enslaved and free Africans who lived and worked in colonial New York, dating from the 1630s to 1795.

So, in 1993 the remains were sent to Howard University in Washington DC to be examined by archaeology teams. And in 2003 they were re-interred in Manhattan in what was called a ceremonial cradle-moving event. So, the discovery rocked a lot of historical assumptions and it's caused historians to rethink their understanding of enslavement in the area. So, it's a reminder of just how much history is covered up and buried, in many cases, quite literally.

Robyn: And so far, it's been quite difficult to find any evidence from the 17th century, which is the time period I'm really interested in looking at, showing Black or Indigenous people being buried in these spaces, because a lot of times they didn't get grave markers or they weren't the ones writing the records, so they're not the records we have.

Alie: Yeah, how far back do a lot of records go? How were they even kept? Are there books that have survived in either municipal records or in churchyard records?

Robyn: Yeah, so there definitely are books. It helps if people were wealthy and had the money to record things properly. There's a book that Samuel de Champlain wrote about his trips in North America, I think it's just called *Voyages*.

Aside: So, for those not well versed in their French colonists, Samuel de Champlain was a French colonist... There you go. So, he sailed across the Atlantic over 20 times and founded Quebec. He was like, *[French accent]* "Bonjour. It's very cold."

Robyn: And from that, we have maps of Quebec City, and we have maps of an island called St. Croix from 1613 so we know exactly where on that island in particular they had a graveyard, and they had a church, which is amazing. And for other sites that I've worked on, we have no records at all from the time period talking about that kind of thing. And yeah, if stuff survived well enough, in perfect circumstances, and/or if the people were really important,

is often a good example of things that would have been kept from the 17th century. That's 400 years ago by this point.

One of my favorite documents is the diary of Samuel Sewall; he was a judge, and he was a participant in the witch trials as well. But he kept a diary from— It's on my desk, [laughs] from 1674 to 1729, and he wrote about all the funerals he attended, which was all of them apparently because there's hundreds of records in there. It's amazing.

Alie: Wow. What were the funerals like back then?

Robyn: Well, Sewall was a Puritan, very, very Puritan judge, person. So, he writes not too much detail, they didn't really have too much pomp and ceremony in the earlier 17th century with that religion. So, there would be church bells maybe, people would not even say a prayer over the coffin, and then that started to change, and you can tell in his writings that he doesn't like that very much. He'll be talking about a coffin going in the ground and be like, "That one had a cross on it, and I've never seen that before..." Kind of thing and it's really funny.

Aside: Okay, so I found a passage of this hoping for some Darwin-level, emo laments. But rather, it's stuff like, "October 11, 1692. Went to the funeral of Mrs. Sarah Oliver, widow, aged 72 years. Buried in the new burying place. A very good, modest, humble, plain, liberal matron. Scarves and gloves." So, I guess it was early October just under the falling, golden leaves of a graveyard. And you know he wanted to write like, "Holy shit, it's pumpkin' weather y'all!" But he was like, "Scarves and gloves, keeping it low key. Come on."

Alie: When did coffins and caskets get more and more elaborate?

Robyn: That's not something that I study specifically. I'm more of a landscape above the surface in that respect. But there are a lot of really interesting examples going back to the 16th century of coffins. There's 17th-century lead coffins that exist. I know in the 19th century they started standardizing coffin hardware, like the handles and the little filigrees you could nail on the top to decorate it; there would be catalogs of them. So, it definitely went from a period where not everybody could afford one, or there would even be a communal coffin that would open up and put a person in the grave and then they'd take this hinge-door coffin... [laughs]

Alie: Oh! Wow.

Robyn: Yeah, it was like a parish coffin, it was amazing, you could borrow it. But as the 17th and 18th century happens, it became something that was more affordable for everyone and so you started seeing a lot more simple coffins or just ornate coffins that have these objects on the outside that are mass-produced, basically.

Aside: Okay, so some fun trivia: caskets are four-sided and square, think of a banana loaf. And coffins are hexagonal, and they fit your shoulders and then they taper at the feet, and they look like, "Ahh! Scary." So, why the trend-hopping? Well, the violence and all the bloodshed of the Civil War changed the way that the funeral businesses sold their goods. So, embalming took off because soldiers' bodies needed to last the trip back home and coffins were deemed kind of creepily body shaped. Suddenly, people wanted death to seem a little less deathly. Speaking of horrors...

Alie: How old were you when you saw *Poltergeist*?

Robyn: I have never seen *Poltergeist*.

Alie: WHAT?! [*Robyn laughs*] Howww is that possible?

Robyn: I know. I don't like horror movies. I'm a very, I think, odd person who studies graves.

Alie: I mean, do you know what it's about?

Robyn: A poltergeist?

Alie: Oh my god. Oh my god, Robyn! [*Robyn laughs*] It's about a family in the suburbs who buys a house and then they find out that they didn't properly move the graveyard... Hence, they get polter-goosted, hardcore.

Robyn: Excellent.

Alie: How much of your work deals with moving gravestones or moving cemeteries? How often do they [*quiets voice and asks with side-mouth*] just move the gravestones and not the bodies?

Robyn: A lot of the time.

Alie: Whaaat?! Nooo.

Robyn: A lot of the time, if you weren't wealthy, your grave just stayed right there and they would just put some more dirt on top of it, to sort of level out the divots in the ground. Often when you see records saying that they moved a graveyard, they just moved the headstones.

Alie: Oh my god! [*clip from Poltergeist: Steve shouts "Son of a bitch, you moved the cemetery, but you left the bodies, didn't ya? You son of a bitch! You left the bodies, and you only moved the headstones! You only moved the headstones!"*]

Aside: Okay, so that was from the film *Poltergeist*, co-written by Steven Spielberg. And yes, a tiny spoiler but y'all have had 30 years to catch this flick. So, see it at your own risk, it's the worst, it's so scary. Also, they used real human skeletons in it, which the actors who were working with the skeletons didn't know until after. So 0/10: do not like or support that practice. But yes, gravestones: way easier to move than graves. No spoilers there.

Robyn: Most of the time. [*laughs*]

Alie: So, does that mean in certain parts of the world, particularly this newly colonized continent we call 'Murica, that as they were moving westward and maybe cities were getting more congested they just built right on frickin' top of stuff?

Robyn: Oh yeah, definitely. [*laughs*]

Alie: Do archaeologists ever... Are they ever called to construction sites as like a big, "Oopsie, definitely a lot of bodies down here."?

Robyn: Yeah, so in commercial archaeology, if there's a body found, we would get called for sure. That's not what the construction people want to hear, so sometimes you get stories of people cutting straight through graves which is really unfortunate. But typically, if a skull were to come out of a little bank of a ditch someone was digging with an excavator, everything would stop. The police would be called first, is usually what happens, to make sure it's not a homicide. And if it's deemed to be archaeological, then the archaeologists would be called in and we would excavate out and make sure everybody was out of there before more construction happened.

Alie: Oof. Whoever is running that excavator, I hope they... I don't know... Burn some incense, get a lucky crystal.

Aside: Umm, did everybody know that underneath Washington Square Park in Manhattan are 20,000 unmoved bodies from what was once a potter's field, or a graveyard for the impoverished? Nobody told me that, nobody said anything. People are just like, "We've got the best bagels." And no one can say shit about it because there are bodies under our feet in, like, every city and it's just staggering, and I guess there's nothing anyone can do.

But I hope those people turned into fungus, and worms, and frogs, and leaves, and that their bones don't mind being underneath all those *Sex and the City* shoots and New Yorkers being like, [*New York accent*] "Heyyy, I'm walking on your graves over here."

Alie: I'm from the West Coast, so when I went back east, or if I've ever been to older cities, where there are gravestones that are tilted and covered in moss, the one thing that really spooked me was this coffin-sized depression in the ground that I feel like I didn't see so much on the West Coast. Is that just the wooden box collapsing on itself? Is that what's going on?

Robyn: Yeah, it could be a number of things. The coffin falling in on itself definitely would cause some of the ground to slump down. A lot of it also could be from when they dug the grave, air gets mixed into the dirt, and when you put it back into the hole as it settles it can definitely depress because you can never get quite all of it back in there.

In more modern cemeteries, we don't see that same type of depression because there's all these rules about having concrete-lined grave shafts, which is basically a vault underground. And the purpose is nothing to do with the burial itself, it is literally so that we don't get divots in the grass so that lawnmowers can have an easier time.

Alie: Oh my gosh.

Aside: I didn't know burial vaults were even a thing! So, they put your casket in a concrete casket so that your casket doesn't leave a casket-shaped depression, just double-bagging your actual ass right into heaven.

Alie: You know, how have gravestones changed over the last several hundred years? I'm sure lawn mowers and John Deere mower tractors have changed the way that we mark our graves, right?

Robyn: They definitely have, they don't help old stones at all. So, in the 17th century, in North American settlements, and the oldest settlements in North America from the British were, like, Jamestown and Plymouth. And then in Canada, we have Cupids Plantation, which was 1610, and Ferryland from 1621. And we see at Ferryland, examples of the oldest British gravestones in North America which were carved in the 1620s on site from local slate. And they sort of reflect the style that was really common of the period in the UK, which is a curved top and all capital letters.

And then, as you go through the 17th century into the 18th century you see a lot of mortality symbols, they're called, which is like the skull with the wings, and the hourglass; that kind of imagery that sort of really projects this idea of, like, your mortality to you, which is exactly their point. They're supposed to remind the viewer who's standing in front of the grave that the person below them is dead and that they're going to die too. Sometimes they literally say that on them.

Alie: Helpful. I mean, live for today. I guess it's saying like, "Get an éclair, tell the neighbor you're in love with them," whatever.

Robyn: There's really famous epitaphs that have lines like, [*echo effect*] "As I am now so shall you be," kind of thing, which are nice and spooky for spooky season. But then, it's called the

softening of the ideas of death, so you see these... the skulls become sort of like cherubs and sometimes there are pictures of the deceased themselves kind of represented with wings, and that's supposed to be the soul going to heaven. And you get more plant life on there, and basically less morbid pictures. And then in the 19th century there's, like, willow trees and urns and the, sort of, romanticizing.

Alie: I'm always so curious, how long ago in Europe did they start using tombstones?

Robyn: So, I can really only answer this for the UK and Ireland. But the use of grave markers definitely goes back... I mean, what we think of as a gravestone today probably goes back to the 16th and 17th century. And it could have been earlier, but we don't really have too much evidence from before the Reformation, when it changed from the Catholic to the Anglican church and lots of stuff was wrecked, basically. The monasteries were all shut and smashed up, a lot of monuments were defaced and destroyed.

So, there is the idea that there could be older traditions of what we expect to be a gravestone but before that there were... they're called effigies, like a big carving of a person laying on the ground; a big slab from the Medieval period called ledgers that still exist today; and larger monuments and crosses and like... I'm gesturing the shape of it... Like, a big mound burial and stuff. So, it's definitely a tradition... in every country, marking where a grave is, is often quite common. But what we think of as a gravestone today is sort of like a 16th/17th-century thing.

Aside: And of course, this varies according to era and religious rights and even soil temperature and composition. And some religious practices, like Judaism, traditionally call for a simple wooden coffin or casket. Other rites forego the box and just go for a shroud. In some Islamic burials, the gravesite is traditionally marked with a border so as to protect it from any foot tread. And then unlike historical Islamic and Jewish death rituals, Hinduism typically involves cremation although some sects favor burial, and sometimes sitting upright in a meditation pose, which I'll be honest, I think that's kind of a neat way to do it. Nobody asked me though.

This is all, of course, incredibly general, but my point is: death care varies by region, and by history, and by culture, and the more we appreciate the meaning and the intention behind the customs, maybe the more we'll just appreciate being on the flip side of the grass, as my dad says, just where we are today, still living and breathing, making the most of things, telling people that we love that we love them. Now before I start crying too much, let's change the topic to typology.

Alie: Were there specific fonts that were just used or reserved for tombstones? Or was it really standard back in the day?

Robyn: I don't think any were reserved for the gravestones themselves but there were booklets that gravestone carvers used to be like, these are the scripts that I can do. And once they started printing stuff like that, they were getting a little bit more standardized in what you would see on the gravestone. Like, when you see a script with serifs on it, the way that they would carve these letters was a little bit similar to the way you would expect them to be written.

Aside: So, my wonderful friend, Cole Imperi of the Thanatology episode, about death and dying, also studied typography and she created her own font called Mausoleum and she sells pens that say, in that font, "I don't have time for bullshit." Because really, none of us do.

So, Cole echoes her love of cemeteries and she told me over text that when people visit a cemetery, they often feel more present and thoughtful about life. So, stroll through one and listen to a bird, and enjoy the breeze, or get nerdy about sans serif lettering. And if you want to fall headfirst into a postmortem font hole, check out MonumentLetteringCenter.com, which studies and preserves monument typography. So many typefaces! It's a wealth of information on how type and lettering has evolved as our taphology has. Also, real sad that there's a cool cemetery a mile away from me right now. Eugh!

Alie: And you know, when, let's say, colonizers go into a new place, are they doing anything in terms of Indigenous burial grounds or practices? Any adoptions of it? Any respectful hands-off? Has your work uncovered anything about that intersection of colonists and Indigenous burials?

Robyn: I wouldn't say they were very respectful, unfortunately.

Alie: Yeah, that was going to be my guess.

Robyn: Yeah. So, a lot of the time there'd be missionaries going in and sort of, trying to eradicate a lot of Indigenous traditions. In Labrador the Moravian missionaries arrived, in the 17th and 18th century I believe, and they were sort of changing a lot of burial practices. And I don't believe they were adopting any of the Indigenous practices themselves. There's a Jesuit mission near Quebec City that was established specifically to Christianize the Indigenous people and they had, within the palisade or their site, a burial ground for converted Indigenous people, which is something I'm going to be looking at in more detail because that's a space that was separating them in death and sort of marking these people, that that wasn't their burial tradition, as this separate group now, whether or not that's something they wanted.

Alie: How is the taphology community? Do you share resources? Or do you take rubbings? Do you take extensive photos? Are there databases where if someone's looking for, "Hey, I'm looking to find out a little bit more about this person or this site," where you share information?

Robyn: Cemetery Twitter as we call it...

Alie: *[laughs]* That's a thing!

Robyn: ... is a really great community. *[laughs]* One thing that covid has been good for, and the internet has been good for overall is networking online. A lot of people that study graveyard stuff aren't anywhere near me so being able to connect with them over the internet has been great. So, people will be like, "I'm looking for other examples of this type of gravestone." But there's also databases like Find a Grave and BillionGraves that are all online and those are sort of like, community-driven uploading. But we don't take rubbings, rubbings are very bad for the conservation of historic stone.

Alie: Oooh, tell me more. I had no idea!

Robyn: Yeah. So, it used to be super common. It was something that people did all the time. But after a while, when you push on the stone that much, it is actually physically wearing away pieces of the stone, especially when it's something really soft and a couple hundred years old, like a marble, or a limestone, or a sandstone.

There's an example in Sleepy Hollow, New York at the Old Dutch Reformed Church, I think it's called: the grave of Katrina Van Tassel who is possibly the inspiration for the character

in the *Sleepy Hollow* book. Her grave used to be pretty legible. It's sandstone. People would go because it's possibly this literary connection, take rubbings of it and the state of the gravestone, if you look it up now, it is almost completely illegible, literally just from rubbings, which is really unfortunate.

Alie: Oh no! I had no idea.

Robyn: Yeah, so I always encourage people to understand that pushing on it can do damage and that's something we want to avoid going forward as a graveyard community.

Alie: Now, I have done, or I had a rubbing done of an ancestor's gravestone that was hard to find for my dad. Do family members ever do like a one-off? Is it discouraged for really noteworthy, touristy type of attractions? Or if you've got one of a family member, is that okay? [*Robyn laughs*] Asking for a friend.

Robyn: It's okay if you already have it, of course. But I wouldn't recommend, going forward, that people do that for any gravestones. Some stones will weather much better than other ones. If the gravestone was granite, it's not going to be too much of an issue. It's more for these old historic ones. Pushing on marble headstones too hard can break them in half, unfortunately. So, doing a rubbing on it can do some significant damage which sucks because they look really cool.

Alie: Right. Well, okay, in old cemeteries, how come a lot of the gravestones are like crooked teeth, going every which way? Are they sinking into the ground? Are raccoons vandalizing them? What's happening?

Robyn: It would be much cuter if it was a raccoon. I would love that. So, some of them are literally sinking straight down. Some are because the coffin has collapsed or because the body has decomposed, the ground shifts, they start falling over. A lot of it depends on the style of gravestone as well. There were these older styles that went... They were quite long, like what you see on the surface goes down into the ground, like, two feet. I find those ones hold up a lot better, actually.

More modern styles will be stuck in sort of a key, we call it. They go in a couple inches and it's just this little base. And those are often set on big blocks of concrete underground. And the problem with that is it's so heavy. The dirt underneath it isn't going to support it forever, and then that starts to sink, and then the whole stone goes down, and then people like me have to come in and dig a gigantic wad of concrete out of the ground and replace it with something that's actually going to hold the gravestone up for more than, like, 50 years.

Alie: Oh wow. Have you ever been in a cemetery or graveyard doing work and just been at all overwhelmed by mortality, or by history, or by a particular person's story? Does the work ever get to you on a personal level?

Robyn: Definitely, sometimes. The first excavation I was involved with where we were exhuming human remains because there was a development going in, I had a dream that night about the skull that I had exhumed that day. And that took a minute to consider and stuff, and remember that these are people, and they have ancestors in the area, probably, and that's something that you need to be really aware of when you're working with burials, for sure.

Alie: Have you ever gotten creeped out at all? Or is it just purely science and history for you? Are you able to walk through a cemetery after dark and be like, "It's just a place"?

Robyn: I feel like it's just a place because it's something that everybody's going to end up in a place like this. So, to me it feels like a really natural place to go hang out, I guess. But I probably wouldn't walk through it after dark because I'm definitely a wimp. *[laughs]*

Alie: Right. Same. Do you think you're going to be buried in a cemetery or do you want to be ashes that get launched into space? What's your plan?

Robyn: My plan... I remember hearing in elementary school, which really just tells you that this is exactly what kind of job I needed to be doing, *[Alie laughs]* someone said that your ashes could be put in a concrete block, and it could be put in the ocean to help grow coral reefs. And I thought that was the coolest idea ever and I was like, "I want to be in a blue orb in the ocean." So, I probably want to be cremated and I keep telling my husband I want to be cremated in an open-air pyre on a beach but that is not legal. So, I guess that's not going to happen. *[laughs]*

Alie: Dang it.

Robyn: But there is a process called aquamation or alkaline hydrolysis, which is also known as water cremation, which is a little more environmentally friendly than fire cremation. It's legal in a couple provinces and a couple of states now, so I think like, that's probably the route I would want to go.

Aside: Okay, I discussed this in the Thanatology episode but the TLDR short version, too long didn't read, of alkaline hydrolysis is: a metal cylindrical chamber is sloshing full of warm water and alkaline lye and you, you're in there too. And then you kind of dissolve into a syrupy liquid and then you get flushed down the sewer system, which is the same place your blood goes if you get embalmed, no biggie. Same place your burrito goes, five minutes ago, it was part of your body, it's not a big deal.

So, after hydrolysis, some of your bones, though, might remain in the chamber, and then those are ground up into dust. So, think of it as kind of a final warm bath as you tuck into your eternal bedtime. Maybe grow some sea polyps on yourself after, I don't know, it's your life. And by life, I mean death.

Alie: If you had a concrete block in the ocean, would you want it etched with your name and a pithy epitaph?

Robyn: I hadn't actually thought about that, but I feel like that would be an awesome idea.

Alie: Yeah, I mean, just in case anyone ever, for some reason, is studying coral and they're like, "Oh my god! This is Robyn Lacy's."

Robyn: Coral growing in my name, that would be awesome. *[laughs]*

Alie: How do you feel around Halloween when people set up prop graveyards on their lawns? Does it ever make you do double-takes? Like, "Oh, what's that cemetery?" And then you're like, "Oh man, that's just the Robinson's front lawn."

Robyn: I mean, I love it, but I'll definitely be the person walking around being like, "That's not accurate." *[both laugh]*

Alie: What's a Halloween amateur hour mistake when we're putting up a fake graveyard?

Robyn: Well, just like, when it says just "RIP" across the stone or something. I would be like, "That would just be in the top or that would be only on the bottom." I've actually seen very few gravestones that actually have "RIP" on them.

Alie: Really?

Robyn: Usually I'm like, it should say this other thing! *[laughs]*

Alie: What are some things that you've seen in historical, maybe a little bit creepy, tombstones?

Robyn: Anything that says, "Here lieth the body of..." Or "Beneath this stone lie the mortal remains..." Any ones like that are my favorite. *[laughs]*

Alie: Yeah, that's already, that's pretty dark and spooky. That immediately makes me think of a corpse, for sure, but in the respectful way. Is there a graveyard that you really, really want to go to? That's on your own bucket list?

Robyn: Yes, I would love to go, I'm going to butcher the name because I don't know any French at all, I'm a terrible Canadian... Père Lachaise, I think *[man speaking in French: "Père Lachaise"]* something like that. *["Père Lachaise"]* It's in Paris and it is technically the first garden cemetery in the world.

Alie: Ahh, that's beautiful.

Robyn: It's supposed to be amazing, lots of important people are buried there, but it's the start of the rural cemetery movement, globally. So, it would be really exciting to see that one for sure.

Alie: Gotta go there. Can I ask questions from listeners?

Robyn: Absolutely.

Alie: Okay, they know you're coming on, they've submitted hundreds of questions.

Aside: So, before that, some words from *Ologies* sponsors who make it possible to donate to a charity of Robyn's choice, which is UNICEF Canada's COVID-19 Vaccine Initiative to provide vaccines to countries that haven't been able to get enough for their citizens. So, let's get those burial rates down by getting some vaccine rates up. Literally life-saving work. So, there will be a link to that in the show notes and that donation was made possible by sponsors.

[Ad break]

Okay. Let's dig deep, let's dish the dirt as we answer your taphological questions.

Alie: Paul Smith wants to know: What's the funniest epitaph you've ever seen? Have you ever seen one that made you chuckle?

Robyn: I didn't see it in person, I read it in a book, and I wish I had a copy of it exactly, here. I can try and remember the whole thing. It was a joke about these gravestones that would be like... basically being kind of pompous about the burial space. And there was one that was like... Can I remember the whole thing? "Here lie I by the chancel door, here lie I because I'm poor, the further in, the more you pay, but here lie I, as warm as they." *[both laugh]*

Alie: Nice! That's a really beautifully thought out, "Fuck you" to classism.

Robyn: Right? It's amazing. *[laughs]*

Alie: Yeah, like a postmortem treatise on the ills of classism and death is the great equalizer. *["Death is real."]*

Aside: So, some patrons had durability questions including Meghan McLean, Margaret Ebacher-Rini, Carolyn Wolfram, Olivia Flick, Ayshia Yaeger, LungOx, Grace Robisheaux, Mary Leiby and...

Alie: Megan Stingle wants to know: What kinds of stones are 'best' for longevity of a gravestone?

Robyn: Ooo, definitely granite, which is the most common thing you see in North America today. It weathers very slowly. That's what the Egyptians used for a lot of statues; they look great, your gravestone will look great too. I also really like Welsh slate, that is a very durable material and it's very clean looking. I don't like all the speckles in granite sometimes, the Welsh slate is also really good.

Alie: Ah! Good to know. I love that you're just like, "Here's the answer."

Robyn: *[laughs]* I've thought about that one. *[laughs]*

Alie: Heathcliff the Cat wrote in to say, "History of zincys! When did zinc headstones first become popular and how prevalent are they today? Do people still use them?"

Robyn: Hmm... I don't actually know when they first started being used specifically, I know it was in the 19th century and they were mostly on the Eastern seaboard.

Aside: Okay, I looked it up, and yes, you can still spot zinc tombstones by this very characteristic blue-ish white color, kind of like the light sapphire tones of a glacier, think of that. And according to *The Tomb Tone, A Better Place: Death and Burial in Nineteenth-Century Ontario*, by Susan Smart, the main zinc headstone producer in North America was Monumental Bronze Company of Bridgeport, Connecticut – shoutout to, I guess, Bridgeport, Connecticut – and that company opened up in 1874.

Robyn: They had a secondary factory in St. Thomas, Ontario, which is near London, Ontario, for a while. They were, I'd say, moderately popular. You do see one or two *[laughs]* in graveyards, sometimes a couple more than that, but I can think of one in all of St. John's, Newfoundland, where I live. So, they were like... things that happened but they aren't the most prevalent type of gravestone from that period. But they do hold up beautifully, they just look stunning.

Alie: Ooo! Do you call them zincys or is that just Heathcliff the Cat?

Robyn: No, people... I don't call them that because I think it sounds funny, *[laughs]* but that's like one of the nicknames for it. Zinc is the material they're made of, but historically they were called "White bronze" because they were trying to make them sound very high class and fancy, but they are made of zinc. That's where zincys comes from.

Alie: Oh, I think it sounds kind of cute. It also sounds like a party drug; I'm not gonna lie to you.

Robyn: It does a little bit, yeah. *[laughs]*

Alie: Like, "Dude he was rollin' on zincys." *[Robyn laughs]* Anyway, Emma Fitzpatric, I thought this was an awesome question...

Aside: So awesome it was on a lot of minds such as Early of Greymalkin, Leanna Shuster, Jessica Ward, Polly Robarts, first-time question-asker Lydia, Kaydee Coast, Hannah Dent, Rachel Casha, and Cassie Kenton; many of whom wanted to know about grave makeovers, or they were referencing someone on TikTok named LadyTaphos. So, yes Emma Fitzpatric.

Alie: ...asked: Have you seen the gravestone cleaning TikToks? If so, how do you feel about them? I've heard people say they're bad because of chemicals and increased weathering, but what's the truth?

Robyn: So, I actually recently gave a conference paper about the gravestone cleaning TikToks. [*"You came to the right person."*] [*laughs*] So, a lot of people that are doing it, are doing it correctly. They're using what looks like a chemical, it's a non-ionic, biological solution. The main one in North America is called D/2 Biological Solution. So, what that is, is a pH-neutral cleaner that won't introduce any salts or acids to the stone, while safely removing environmental staining and stuff like lichen growth. And then it also sits in the stone and inhibits further lichen growth and staining for several years after you use it.

What I think the problem with the TikTok videos is that they're so short and a lot of the time they don't have words in them, or they don't have enough time or space in the caption; I think the TikTok caption length is quite short. They aren't able to really explain what it is they're doing, what they're using, and how they're using it safely. And we've noticed, me and other people in, sort of, history and cemetery archaeology, have noticed that throughout the lockdowns, people have been seeing the videos like that and being like, "That's a cool thing I can do while we're all trapped at home." And then maybe not knowing exactly what they're doing, going out and causing some damage, unfortunately, to gravestones.

So, I think I would want to say, those videos are cool, they're really good. I've done a couple TikToks. I'm not very good at it, but it's so difficult to explain exactly what you're doing. So, I would definitely say, if you want to go clean gravestones, get training from someone who is a gravestone conservator. Email me, I'm a gravestone conservator. And get the information and then get permission from the site that you want to clean at. Because if you don't have permission from the people that are managing that graveyard, you should not be there.

Alie: Got it. So, don't roll up with an SOS pad and a bucket of bleach and just go to town.

Robyn: Yeah. Absolutely, do not do either of those things. [*laughs nervously*]

Alie: Do not do that.

Robyn: Bleach made me cringe. [*laughs*]

Alie: Yeah, I had a feeling. Speaking of dos and don'ts of the dead, Cosmo wants to know: Is there any graveyard etiquette most people don't know? Like, if you're walking through a cemetery, should you try to walk on perimeters so not over the graves?

Robyn: I don't personally see a problem with walking over graves, but I know a lot of people find that, for themselves, is very disrespectful. I know people that will apologize if they step on a grave. I do try to avoid walking through plots that have, like, gravel and the curbing around them, on those ones I typically, unless I have to go look at the gravestone, will walk around them. But if it's a grass lawn area, it's really difficult to avoid stepping on a grave occasionally. So, just be respectful while you're in the space as best you can, basically.

Alie: Okay, good to know. Don't pee on one unless you have a personal vendetta, in which case, that's between you and the dead. Probably don't pee on it anyway; probably talk to a therapist. [*Robyn laughs*]

Okay so, LungOx wants to know: Is there a go-to source for decoding the symbology of Victorian gravestones? All those vases and dogs, *au couchant*, and lambs and plants. LungOx says that they need a website, or a pamphlet, or a decoder ring.

Robyn: A decoder ring would be sick; I would love that. There's a lot of resources online and there's a lot of different books that will talk about the different iconography and stuff. A lot of it you sort of get from reading these older books like Harriette Forbes, *Gravestones of New England and the Men Who Made Them*, is literally the start of a lot of graveyard scholarship in North America. And she does talk about the symbology a little bit.

But yeah, I can't think of a specific resource online. I would avoid ones that talk about Puritan gravestone art because that's not a thing. *[laughs]*

Alie: Oh yeah. They were very, very minimalist, right?

Robyn: Yeah, they were either minimalist or you hear that terminology applied to skulls and stuff specifically, but it's been disproven. That was like a theory in the '70s, but it's been disproven that that mortality symbology is directly related to the Puritans, and it comes up a lot because of this old study that was done and popularized it. So, you see it a lot online, and I have a personal vendetta against it. *[laughs]*

Alie: Good to know. And speaking of that kind of symbology, Jess Swann had the question: Are there any trends in gravestone imagery in the last decade? There are jokes about millennials putting QR codes on their gravestones or having little TVs with memes playing. But is there anything real in terms of changing styles?

Robyn: Yeah, so a lot of graveyards and cemeteries will have rules about the style of headstone you can have. They'll be like, "You can only have these materials, or it has to be one of these specific shapes," because they're trying to keep it looking cohesive. But what that allows is people to do a lot more creative things with laser etching pictures that are more personal to them than this stock set of images they used to get a couple hundred years ago. So, we get to see a lot more portraits of people, photos. I saw one recently that was someone's cabin, definitely, and there was a boat in the water, and you could tell that that was probably a place that was really important to them. So, that's I think the biggest trend that you see in the last decade or two, is a lot more personalization in the headstones.

Alie: I have seen more pictures and it really does personalize it and make you reflect on your own life as well.

Robyn: Absolutely, it's beautiful.

Alie: Victrona wants to know: What's the most interesting ritual you've come across? Example: placing a small, polished stone on top of the headstone is popular in Judaism. Anything like that?

Robyn: Hmm, that's a tougher one. *[laughs]*

Alie: Yeah, how do you feel about fake flowers on gravestones? I have mixed feelings.

Robyn: I don't mind them. They do last a bit longer, but also... plastic. *[laughs]*

Alie: I know, that's how I feel too.

Aside: And of course, Cole Imperi, herself a death worker and President of the Board of Overseers at Historic Linden Grove Cemetery in Covington, Kentucky, wanted to toss in a question.

Alie: Cole Imperi, death expert, Thanatologist, she says: Okay, gravestones... At her cemetery, which she works as a conservator of too, "only about 5,000 of our 20,000 permanent residents have headstones. Some of the people without headstones likely had wooden headstones. Was that actually a thing? Wooden headstones?"

Robyn: Yeah, so a lot of... And we can see this archaeologically a lot of the time, people would be marked with maybe a cross or just a little tablet or something. And what that shows up as in the archaeological record is a post hole. So, where that piece of wood has decomposed in place, it changes the composition of the sediments that it's in. A lot of the time, when there's unmarked graves, maybe they were unmarked originally, maybe they had a marker that was biodegradable and has gone for a hundred years or more.

Alie: That's interesting. If you think about how many people probably also just dealt with surprise deaths and did something kind of just with whatever they had, I'm sure there are a lot of unmarked out there as well.

Robyn: Absolutely. Gravestones are very expensive, and they weren't cheap 200 years ago as well.

Alie: That was actually going to be my final listener question. Several people including Val McKelvey, Alyssa Williams-Pierce, Rachel Phelps, Julia McDonald, and Alia Myers all wanted to know: How much have things changed in terms of cost? Why are they so expensive? Rachel asked: Are there any stats on how many families opt out of burial marking or plaques for reasons including cost or besides cost?

Yeah, tell me a little bit about how class and expense comes into play when it involves your final resting place, if no one builds a condo on top of you.

Robyn: *[laughs]* That's the goal. Yeah, so it definitely is something that you can see was based on your economic status. When you have an unmarked grave or an unmarked burial ground, a paupers' grave, they would be unmarked, they would be marked with something like a cross or a wooden board or something. I then the fancier a monument is, the more money either the person had who died, or the family, or whoever their benefactor was that put this monument up.

That goes from like, the little, tiny tablet ones with just a couple lines on them. The more types of fonts you have on a gravestone the more expensive [*"Oh-ho, it costs more because of the patterns!" "Yeah! And rightfully so!"*] When the bigger... The more pieces went into it; if it was a ledger, which is the big flat thing on the ground; or a table tomb, which has legs; or a chest tomb, which has walls as well. Mausoleum, you can just tell how much money people were putting into it and a lot of that was because people wanted to show how much... like, "Look at our material care for our deceased loved one." It was almost a way of showing off and you can kind of... People do that today as well.

Some aspects of the funeral industry are kind of predatory, unfortunately, and people get told, "You would want to honor this person this way so you should flash out and pay \$5,000 for this gigantic granite thing that maybe you can't afford."

Alie: Yeah, Gracie Zrain phrased it: Are elaborate gravestones a power play of wealthy families?

Robyn: A little bit. *[laughs]*

Alie: Yeah, but it might also be just the industry pulling at your very raw, open heartstrings too.

Robyn: Yeah.

Alie: And last questions... Or actually, I'm going to ask this one super quick, I just saw Casie Wente, long-time listener, first-time question-asker says: My husband showed me a gravestone locally that's actually a hidden chamber. You flip it over and it holds, I guess, contraband? Have you ever seen a gravestone like this?

Robyn: I require photos of that. That sounds amazing! I've never seen one like that, but I have heard that the zincys were used during prohibition era to hide alcohol as a drop point, to sell it to people and I would die to find one... pun intended.

Alie: Ha-ha! [*Slowed down, "Zincys baby."*] I mean my assessment that it sounds like a party drug, not that far off.

Now, something's got to suck about what you do? What is the worst part of your job or being a Taphologist? What's the most annoying or bummer thing about your work?

Robyn: I mean, it's not super cheery; everyone we work with is dead. I have a good time usually with that but sometimes you're like, "Wow, this is..." especially with stories like Robert that really take you back a step, and you just consider the type of work you're doing, what it means to people. But also when we're doing gravestone conservation, it's a lot of unglamorous, heavy lifting of really heavy rocks that don't want to come out of the ground. A lot of archaeology is digging holes, and this is no different, and it's incredibly tiring sometimes.

Alie: I bet. Do you bother with manicures or are you like, "You know what? Let's not."

Robyn: So, nail polish can come off, if you scratch it on marble, it can stain the marble. So, no nail paint during the field season.

Alie: Oh! Good to know. What about your favorite thing? What do you love about gravestones, cemeteries, all of that?

Robyn: All of it. Being able to work in these sites that have so much history. Especially in smaller communities, people are so invested in their local heritage and being able to sort of contribute to the knowledge that people have about a community's history, about individuals, and just being able to be involved in the continuation of protecting that heritage for the future. When we repair gravestones, there are often stones that have been neglected, they've fallen over, no one has seen the names on them for ages. So, being able to clean them and put them back up and have them back in the public eye like they were supposed to be originally, is a really nice feeling.

Alie: I bet, yeah. What are your Halloween plans?

Robyn: Ooo, my husband and I are currently making Tusken Raider masks, [*laughs*] out of cardboard and 3D-printed, the spikey things that come out of their heads and my friend is having a pumpkin carving party.

Alie: Nice. Lovely. No graveyards though, huh?

Robyn: Actually, the TalkDeath, which is a Canadian death-positive group, they do an online scavenger hunt in cemeteries. So, you go to a cemetery, and then at a certain time they release a bunch of scavenger hunt things and you have to send them photos and then there's prize packs. So, we'll probably be doing that as well and, like, everybody should participate in that too because it's awesome.

Alie: Aww, that's great! I'm sure you just gave a lot of people ideas of what they're doing this Halloween.

Robyn: I hope so. Though, I won it last year so, like, everybody's going down. [*laughs*]

Alie: Woah! Watch out, watch out. You're going down, you're doing six feet under. [*Robyn laughs*] Also, step up people, step up your cardboard headstone game in your front yard this year. Step it up.

Robyn: Absolutely.

Alie: Bigger words. GTF0 with the RIP. [*both laugh*] Thank you so much for doing this, I love that I now know a Taphologist.

Robyn: Yeah, no problem. Thank you for having me!

So, ask smart folks, simpleton questions because they are just vaults of information. You can follow Robyn @Graveyard_Arch on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). Her website is [SpadeandtheGrave.com](#) and she and her husband Ian Petty have a gravestone conservation website at [BlackCatCemeteryPreservation.wordpress.com](#). So, those links will be up at my site [AlieWard.com/Ologies/Taphology](#).

We are @Ologies on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#). I'm [@AlieWard](#) on [both](#). Thank you to Erin Talbert who admins the *Ologies* Podcast [Facebook group](#), with help from Boni Dutch and Shannon Feltus of the podcast, *You Are That*. They also help with [merch](#). Emily White of The Wordary makes our transcripts and Caleb Patton bleeps them. Noel Dilworth handles scheduling and so much more. Susan Hale is on the other side of some merch emails and *Ologies* business. Steven Ray Morris and Zeke Rodrigues Thomas are working on new *Smologies* for your kiddos, coming out very soon. Nick Thorburn made the theme music.

Right-hand man hunk, Jarrett Sleeper of Mindjam Media put it all together while I'm on the other side of the continent, in this case, this hotel in Boston for a few days, shooting for CBS. Oddly, also not very far from where my Ward ancestors were buried in the 1700s. We'll be shooting two miles away from them tomorrow. Bananas.

Now, if you stick around through the credits, I tell you something spooky. Two things, all right. Okay, Jarrett and I drove past Forest Lawn Cemetery in Burbank last week and we both spotted a frickin' casket, abandoned, mid-burial, with the top off, on the lawn, just strewn about the lawn 10 feet away. It was almost dark out, there was no one working on it. We freaked out, we were driving past, we're like "Did you see that?! Did you see that?!" We wanted to go back but we were late to see *Dune*. Anyway, we agreed the one thing you don't want to take its own top off is a coffin, then in researching this, I realized it was probably the burial vault being put in place the day before a funeral, that way a casket could be placed in it the next day, which then became not creepy, but sad.

Also, when I was a kid, I had these recurring cemetery nightmares, and I would have these anxiety attacks just driving past graveyards and my dreams sometimes involved caskets flying open. Somehow, I got over it. I think I had to go to like an open-casket funeral of a relative and I just realized everyone in a cemetery is just someone's relative. But that being said, I've watched a lot of *I Think You Should Leave* in the last few months, and I don't know if I've ever laughed harder than the coffin flop sketch. It was everything my brain fears... and... wow, the catharsis. Anyway, happy Halloween. Exunt, Spooktober. Berbye.

Transcribed by Aveline Malek at [TheWordary.com](#)

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