Short Essay 1: Neighborhood Spaces

It's a Small Afterworld, All

**JULIA: [describing her death]** We went to visit some friends for the weekend. Everybody wanted to go into town, but I wanted to stay at the house and go swimming. So I went outside, tripped over the chaise lounge, hit my head on the cement and rolled into the pool.

**DANIEL: What did the East German judge give you?**

--- Defending Your Life, Albert Brooks, dir.

Wherever the living go, the dead just won't leave us alone in Chicago. Their names are on our streets, our expressways, our schools. If you take the word of losing candidates, the dead won't even bother to stop voting. Chicago's horizontal residents have struggled with vertical ones for land usage since the city's earliest days. Yet their resting places within city neighborhoods remind us about who formed our city—as well as caution us that, like the accidentally ascendant Julia in Defending Your Life, we are one misplaced chaise away from joining them.

In the mid-1800s, the City Cemetery at what is now the southern end of Lincoln Park was deemed too close to Chicago's water supply (and
possibly a property too valuable) for interments to continue there. The deceased were relocated to cemeteries outside the city limits, but the expanding city limits just kept catching up and enveloping them again (Grossman et al.).

Among these destinations included, in then-remote countryside, what would become Chicago's largest cemetery. Rosehill Cemetery now forms a 350-acre polygon of green on the city's north side. It completely interrupts two major cross streets—Damen and Bryn Mawr Avenues—and has a solid border on two others—Peterson and Western Avenues. The mile-and-a-half or more required to circuit around Rosehill can tempt the living to take a nominal shortcut winding through the cemetery. Judgment may await those who do—in the form of Chicago Police patrol cars that often lie in wait at the other side.

Rosehill’s main entrance is reached through a viaduct supporting the elevated tracks of the Metra Union Pacific North Line. Formerly at ground level (Edgewater Historical Society), these tracks once brought both mourners and recreational visitors from the distant city, encouraged to make a day of their visit to Rosehill (Grossman et al.). It's a tradition that continues to this day among nearby residents. Rosehill is like a neighborhood park that just happens to have a lot of dead people under it.

Granted, this is a park with its own peculiar rules. As you approach the small limestone castle that houses the entrance gate, there is a prominent sign. "Ravenswood Gate / Open daily at 8:00 a.m. / Locked @
5:00 p.m. sharp! / Don't get locked in!" It goes on to prohibit "all riding cycles" along with jogging, loitering, and dog walking. But as long as you move slowly enough, sans wheels and animals—welcome!

Walking through Rosehill is like a condensed tour of Chicago. Sections are so dense with street eponyms that one can momentarily mistake groups of headstones for intersections: Foster and Hoyne, Lill and Clybourn. Because they have the same architect, it shouldn't be surprising if Rosehill's limestone entrance gate rather reminds one of the Water Tower downtown.

While "cemetery" and "surprises" usually aren't considered favorable together, walks through Rosehill over the years have provided a number of revelations.

Most significantly, there was the walk, more than twenty years ago, by my wife and her mother—having just moved into the nearby building where we all now live—as they wheeled Kate's grandmother on a stroll through the cemetery. Already in early stages of Alzheimer's, the eldest member of this party looked over at one gravestone and said very directly, "There's Aunt Tita." Far from a neurological misfire, Grandmother had indeed spotted her Stewart forebears, ones believed to have stood in Lake Michigan to escape the Great Chicago Fire.

Unknowingly, Kate and her mother had bought property just blocks away from Kate’s great-great-grandmother’s current place of residence. And Aunt Tita was just reminding everyone she was there.
One hears those reminders so clearly because the cemetery is strikingly quiet. Despite being surrounded by busy streets, most areas of Rosehill are absent of any traffic sounds. The train embankment and concrete walls surrounding the grounds also cut off sightlines to the outside. This insulation does serve to amplify the air traffic passing overhead. Without other ambient noise to obscure them, the planes evoke those first few days of resumed air traffic after September 11, 2001, which drew our eyes to watch every single airplane in the sky.

The physical qualities of memorials at Rosehill also serve to remind us about who is there. "Long John" Wentworth was provided a towering obelisk in death to match his six-foot-six frame in life, with extensive biographical details of this Chicago mayor and U.S. Congressman covering a good portion of the massive stone.

At first glance, it appears that "Long John" has this spacious parcel of Rosehill turf all to himself. However, up close one sees that family surrounds him, albeit under markers flush to the ground, making the "Long John" obelisk appear all the more, um, prominent.

The afterlife, manscaped.

By contrast, in a recent Rosehill surprise, I happened upon the very modest headstone of Julius Rosenwald. This Sears, Roebuck and Company co-owner and philanthropist, who funded schooling for African-American children throughout the South, also indirectly provided me with my current job—by founding the Museum of Science and Industry.
I discovered myself standing on his unpresuming marker—flush to the ground, a simple name and his bookending years—while looking at another stone. His is so modest that I was compelled to check later that it was indeed the same Julius Rosenwald, someone with millions of dollars and plenty of deeds that could have filled an engraved humblebrag like Wentworth’s.

The dead of Rosehill tell us that the future is not yet written. The Berger family headstone has a color photo portrait of a mother, father and daughter. The center engraving reads: *Marianne / Special Olympian / May 1, 1962 / April 19, 2007*. Two years later, according to the left side, the father joined her. The mother and her birthdate are shown to the right, but it would seem she is still alive.

Another nearby stone for Ho (d. 2013) has a side-by-side engraving that tells of a chapter rewritten. Ki Leung is memorialized on the right, but on the left side, four worn strips of red duct tape cover a matching engraving. It is hard to make out the name or information being obscured, but it is clear no date of death is there. Perhaps there was a change of plans. Or heart.

The Rosehill Entrance gateway also contains the cemetery offices. A laser printed sign taped in one of the office cemetery windows faces visitors who are about to exit: "If you are locked in, call" with a phone number. Clearly, this occurs frequently enough that signs were created for both sides of the fence. It also seems like a cruel taunt, because neither
the living nor the dead will get good cell reception in Rosehill's towerless expanse. It's a total dead zone.

Across Ravenswood Avenue from the entrance is the Fireside Inn, one of the city’s oldest operating taverns (Chicago Bar Project) and host to Rosehill’s mourners and day-trippers since they began arriving by train from the city. On a more recent Sunday, several of Fireside's outdoor tables were occupied by diners enjoying a sunny brunch.

They sit within sight of a Fireside advertisement, hanging on the fence across the street, just next to the viaduct leading to Rosehill.

"Fireside Memorial Lunches," the sign advertises.

Enjoy your meal, folks, but remember: it could always be your last.

**Works Cited**


[http://www.chibarproject.com/Reviews/Fireside/Fireside.htm](http://www.chibarproject.com/Reviews/Fireside/Fireside.htm)