

Babyland

Whistling by the infants' graveyard at Oakwood Cemetery is not an option; weeping seems more appropriate.



Visiting a graveyard is freaky even on a crisp and sunny winter day. You can try to be distracted by the cute mini-temple tomb designs, the Egyptian obelisks thrusting up towards heaven, the gently draped urns balanced atop high columns and the beautiful marble, granite or alabaster angels lovingly watching over the countless souls who have quietly “fallen asleep.” But there’s just no escaping the fact that death broods melancholic everywhere – in the crisscrossed shadows, among the gray and leafless tree branches, in the ancient decayed headstones and the polished new ones, even in the bright red plastic flowers and metallic green balloons billowing above a recently visited grave.

Austin’s Oakwood Cemetery has 23,000 residents, with another 13,000 in the adjacent Annex. As I passed between the endless rows of gray granite and marble tombstones – almost all of them facing East to greet the rising sun (eternal hope triumphs over brutal reality) – I couldn’t help feeling maudlin, thinking about mortality and loss, wondering about the lives that had drifted away like dry leaves in the gusting wind. I will say up front that I am not happy with, or reconciled to, the idea of death. Still, it’s a fact, hard and cold as it may be. It’s the trade-off we must make in order to live, the natural order of things, an unavoidable arc in the Circle of Life, as the Disney Corporation reminded us in *The Lion King*. But at least there is the joy of the life lived before the silence. That’s the one thing that makes it all worthwhile. As I look across this very fertile field of graves, one idea unites them all. Every headstone is an expression of existence, a defiant affirmation of a once-held reality. Each tomb shouts out in its own granite voice, “I was here. I may be gone now, but *I was here!*”

Such were my thoughts when I suddenly realized that I was no longer marching along the neat and formal rows of statues, temples and ornately carved headstones. Instead, I was in the middle of a jumble of small markers randomly strewn about like discarded toys on a lawn. I started looking at the names and dates – and a cold realization washed through me.

They were all babies. Stone after stone, cross after cross, everywhere I turned images of tiny graves rushed in on me as I felt an overwhelming sorrow mixed with panic. I was no longer in a stately, well-ordered domain conducive to serene contemplation – this was a children’s graveyard. The brown grass itself seemed to cry out in a hundred tiny voices under my feet.

Martha Bliss, born & died Mar. 1, 1931. Baby Riggs, Sept. 20, 1934 – Sept. 21, 1934. Or no name at all, just Baby, Apr. 22 – Apr. 29, 1933. This is Babyland.

Babyland, an incongruous name conjuring up images of a children’s playground or a fun-filled theme park of carousels, fuzzy animal costumes, fairy-tale castles, and afterwards a tired but contented ride home with your parents. But this is home. One unnamed grave supports the soiled sculpture of a baby playing with a white plaster cherub. It invokes a lovely thought – the baby’s soul is now up in heaven, an eternal infant blessed with eternal play.

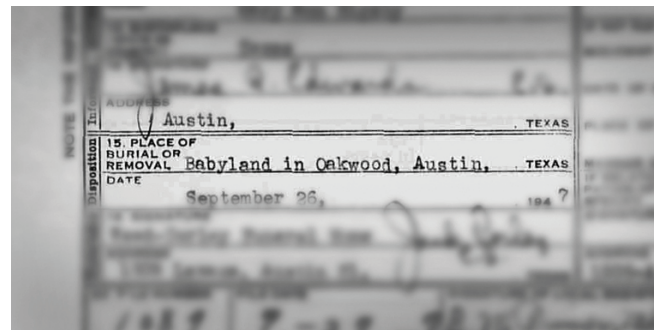


Such an idea, of course, begs the question of why a loving and just God would take away an innocent child’s life. Good answers are hard to come by, but should you dare ask, one can be found at ChristianAnswers.net: “Since ‘all have sinned and come short of the glory of God’ (*Romans 3:23*), there is no one who has the right to freedom from God’s wrath on the basis of his own innocence.... As far as babies are concerned, and others who may be incompetent mentally to distinguish right and wrong, it is clear from both Scripture and universal experience that they are sinners by nature and thus will inevitably become sinners by choice as soon as they are able to do so.”¹

Not so easily comforted by religious surety, I’m forced to find answers elsewhere. But in Babyland, the rules have changed. The last, best, *only* justification for death – paying the bill for the gift of life – itself meets an untimely end. Suddenly, there are no more answers, no understanding either shallow or deep, no nimbly contrived reasoning that can enlighten the darkness of this grim reality. These are children, and the life that you and I so often take for granted was snatched from them at the very beginning of time.

There are more than 1,700 infants and children in Babyland, Sections A and D of the Oakwood Annex. Not much is known about how the custom started, but at some point in the early 20th century, the area became designated as the place for infants who did not survive childbirth or children whose parent(s) had nowhere else for them. The first infant recorded in this area was 1-year-old Willard Miller in 1904. Single burials are noted in 1911 and 1912, two each the next two years, then the number jumped to 28 in 1915, 47 in 1916 and 65 in 1917. The numbers remained fairly consistent for the next 43 years before the record abruptly stops with 20 burials in 1961. While unofficial, the name “Babyland” eventually began appearing on death certificates under “place of burial or removal” (see photo).

Some of the children lived a few days, some a few months – a small consolation. Marjorie Escamilla, Oct. 14, 1922 – Oct. 14, 1922, has a simple pink granite marker. Elizabeth Addcox, March 28, 1938, is watched over by a little praying angel. Infant



Larvin has only his name roughly scratched into a brick-sized rock that itself is nearly covered over by the dirt. Many markers, a very many, don't even have names; they simply say "Baby," some with dates, most without. And judging by the number of names in the cemetery's database,² most of the children of Babyland have no marker of any kind; the earth holds them in absolute silence.

But there is one thing we can do for these children. Just as the other, larger tombs proclaim their residents' lives and insist on being remembered, these little ones deserve the same recognition. We can know that they are buried in Babyland. We can acknowledge that like us, they were, even for the tiniest of moments, here. Their names are in the cemetery database. Their graves are in Oakwood. The memory of a few must still stir a faint, sad echo in a parent's heart.

In the Southeast corner of Oakwood there's a massive pink granite column that thrusts up into the sky, proudly and triumphantly proclaiming, "I am Oran M. Roberts. I lived for 82 years. I was a citizen of the Republic of Texas. I was District Attorney and District Judge. I was Chief Justice of the Texas Supreme Court, President of the Secession Convention, soldier of the Confederate Army, Professor of Law at the University of Texas and twice Governor of the State of Texas. I was a husband and father and patriarch to a host of progeny who bear the name Roberts. *I was here.*"

And just across the road there's a 6-inch by 3-inch rough-hewn stone almost completely covered by dirt and grass that whispers in a tiny voice lost to the wind, "I am Baby. *I was here, too.*"



¹ ChristianAnswers.net: Why does God allow innocent people to suffer? <http://www.christiananswers.net/q-eden/edn-t023.html>. In his *Questions of Faith: A Skeptical Affirmation of Christianity*, sociologist and theologian Peter Berger is not so smug and suggests that "no theodicy (i.e., religious explanation of suffering, death, or evil) is tolerable if it cannot be recited face-to-face to suffering children and their parents."

² *Oakwood Annex Cemetery*, work by Robert Sage: <http://www.austintxgensoc.org/cemeteries/oakannexsecA.html>. This database is a record of all the burials in the Annex.

Additional information for this story was provided by Save Austin's Cemeteries: <http://www.sachome.org>