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Death

28 February 2019

Memorial in a Digital Age.

On the death of the gravestone and its living replacement.

When we were kids, I'd ascend the large boulder in the bush out the back of my grandparents' house that we had named *Big Rock* as though one slip might be the end of me. Today I float up the sandstone, a hop and a skip and no jump at all has me looking out over a snippet from the highlight reel of my childhood. My grandparents are dead, and some alien has thinned the yard out. My sisters and my cousins and I played here, wary but not worried by the countless invisible death traps. Brown snakes, funnel webs, and loaded rifles behind laundry doors.

From the rock I walk through the bush to the lookout, where you can see out across the valley. The drop below has me wondering if I'm lost. My memory of this place and my right-now-experience have stepped into an elevator together, uncommunicative in jarring proximity to one another.

Dad and I drove out here today because he'd been contacted about the state of my grandparents' shared gravestone. It's 43°C outside, and we each walk our own ways to the cracked grave, my kelpie threading through the grass between us. I delivered a eulogy here, fifteen years ago. Or as my father says it, *the eulogy*. My grandfather and I were close. Dad chatters on about how much it will cost to have the crack seen to, and whether it would be worth pursuing his brother for half the cost.

I have not been to this grave in over a decade, and wandering through the bush behind my dead grandparents' house made a lot more sense to me — conjured a lot more *feeling* within me — than staring at a memory-token. Perhaps the un-used keyword here is *value*. The grave has become not just a source of guilt — for as far as I am aware, like most of them, this grave is barely visited — but even worse, it has been reduced to being an expensive inconvenience.

When my friend Brenton killed himself a few years ago his family did the same thing that my family does when someone dies. Funerals climax as we lower the dead into a pocket in the earth. When we fill the pocket and allow grass to grow on the enriched soil, all that remains is a big rock with words and numbers on it. Manicured and primed for its new life as a name-tag on a memory. I have never been back to Brenton's grave. It's out of my way and I have no living memories of that place other than the one created out of his death, and that does nothing for me.

We get back into the car and I wonder whether or not to ask my Dad, “why bother?” Of course I do not. But I do go on Brenton’s FaceBook. I go on his Instagram, too. I’d known Brenton a couple of years, and we’d shared some rather intimate moments in a comparatively short space of time. I look at his social media and I wonder whether or not, in an age where more and more of us are recording and uploading ourselves, that it is possible that the whole gravestone concept is becoming obsolete.

At a time when a mirror into myself will live on as data in a *cloud* backed to a hard disk on a stack of hard disks in a row full of stacks of hard disks between other rows of the same in a warehouse between other warehouses in a desert storing memories on the other side of the world, I wonder why anyone would bother visiting a rock with my name on it where the dead version of myself rots. Digital graveyards already exist.

The *self* as a metaphysical concept is being re-invented by this idea of a *digital grave*, where a certain recorded version of it, truer to the image of the once-living than any gravestone, lives on forever as data accessible from a device in the palm of your hand.

Is it possible that someone will invent an app that a family indefinitely subscribes to, instead of burying the dead and erecting a small stone monument, that amalgamates a dead person’s online footprint into a memory sleeve for the living to visit as they would a grave? Although I’ve never brought it up, I can’t be the only one visiting the Facebooks of dead friends as though I were visiting their actual grave. I can’t be the only one looking at a grave thinking thoughts about its relevance that feel too callous to allow roll into speech.

My grandfather died before this new phenomenon came about. I can’t help but wonder whether by the time I die that my family will feel comfortable being left with a last will and testament that says:

“I have left my Facebook and Instagram activated and on public. Throw me in the ocean or whatever is cheap and convenient. No need for a corpse to be at a funeral, and no gravestones. X.”