

From the Guest Editors

This issue has been years in the making, malingering, if we may choose a suggestively morbid word. Each of us comes to the subject with our own perspective and our own purpose. This is always the case in any subject, so why does it bear repeating? Perhaps due to the profoundly personal nature of the task at hand; or at the very least, our personal approaches to it. Death: more than a subject, a way of life.

Each of the articles in this special issue of *Folklore Forum*, The Folklore of Death and Burial, deals in some way with the incorporation of death into everyday activity. The primary division between the articles occurs across worldview. The first paper looks at death as an aspect of life, as a gateway to rebirth. The next three concern themselves with grave decorations, each treating the subject from a different perspective of tradition and individuality.

In the first article, Nikki Bado-Fralick has composed an auto-ethnography in her explication of Death as perceived and presented in the Wiccan religion. As Bado demonstrates, Death is as much a power for beginning as it is a power for ending. Wiccans perceive these various forces in distinct aspects of the deities Bado discusses, in addition to perceiving Death as a cosmological force unto itself. Death can represent change—it can be the moment of change, or the catalyst for it. As such, it is as much a part of life as any life-giving force.

Carolyn Long's contribution leads a series of papers concerned with grave decoration. She discusses the work of New Orleans resident Arthur Smith and his treatment and care for several specific gravesites. Long situates his work in relation to a historical tradition of African American grave decoration in the southern United States, and explores the connections between Smith and these traditions. Her writing does not fail to address his own attitudes and beliefs. As Long demonstrates, although his decorations are reflexive of several traditional practices, Smith's work is largely the result of his own unique genius and drive.

In contrast, Sandra Posey describes a situation of unity in diversity where the actions of many form a whole. Her ethnographic research in Green Hills Memorial Park juxtaposes the actuality of one particular cemetery against the historic view of U.S. cemeteries and cemetery aesthetics. The families of those interred celebrate cultural and individual diversity through decoration. In doing so, they proclaim the presence of both death and life in a cemetery whose flat headstones are designed to obscure both.

In the final article, Karen Heege's description of the decorated graves in a Kentucky church community emphasizes harmony in unity. She traces the specific tradition of grave decoration in this community, discussing its past, shifting present, and possible future. It is a history of a place and a representation of belief that is outlined onto these graves: belief seen in praxis as an act of piety.

This issue could not have been completed without all of the assistance of the Forum staff who have contributed time and energy beyond expectation for little more than the occasional prospect of a pizza slice or two. We would especially like to thank John Roleke, whose unflagging diligence and dedication has helped to push this issue toward completion in a manner that is always superlatively professional. John Fenn has been his usual helpful self, doing with computer programs what we thought could not be done. Not least thanks to Lisa Gilman, past editor extraordinaire, good person, and bon vivant for words of encouragement, advice, and the occasional editing pen.

Onward into the void.

KURT HARTWIG, ANDY KOLOVOS, ELINOR LEVY