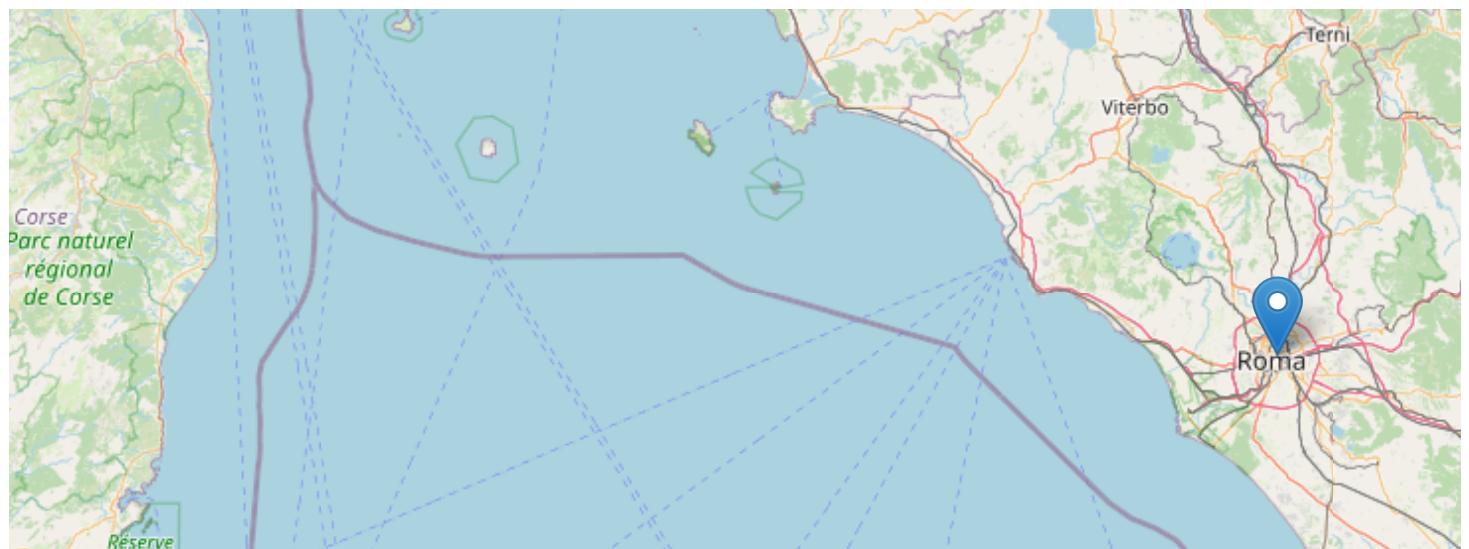


ISSUE 35

# PROTESTANT CEMETERY, ROME

BY PAYAL KHANDELWAL





A second-hand, slightly battered book with a mustard-coloured cover was my first introduction to a bunch of poets referred to as the Romantics. Blame it on the first year of university when English literature was raining down on me like fish from the sky, that I was fascinated by the Romantics' vivacious and crazy lives much more than their work. A wobbly black and white movie screening where most of them, mainly Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley and John Keats, were mingling in an astoundingly reckless party made that morbid fascination stronger. Of course, over the years, I got better acquainted and enchanted with their works too.

Thirteen years later, I found myself in Rome, where two of the great poets from the Romantics' disruptive and brilliant group – Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats – lived for some time, died and then were buried in the Protestant cemetery. Visiting their tombstones was a crucial part of my itinerary for two reasons, one being my continued delirious curiosity for the Romantics' lives and works, and the other my inexorable need to visit cemeteries during my travels.

A cemetery is an anthology of stories about a place. Some stories are sketchily told, some are well documented, and some you just have to imagine. These phantoms of the past and the place they hold in the city's present form one of the most intimate portraits of any city you can find.

Of course, my personal liaison with cemeteries has greatly evolved over the years. When I visited the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris in 2012 (my first official cemetery visit) in the naive romantic search for Jim Morrison's grave, I was overwhelmed with the idea of being surrounded by so much death. At one point, I walked into a clustered patch of graves that were silently soaking in the October sun. Whatever reverie I might have felt was quickly overpowered with the fear of being surrounded by, well, way too many dead

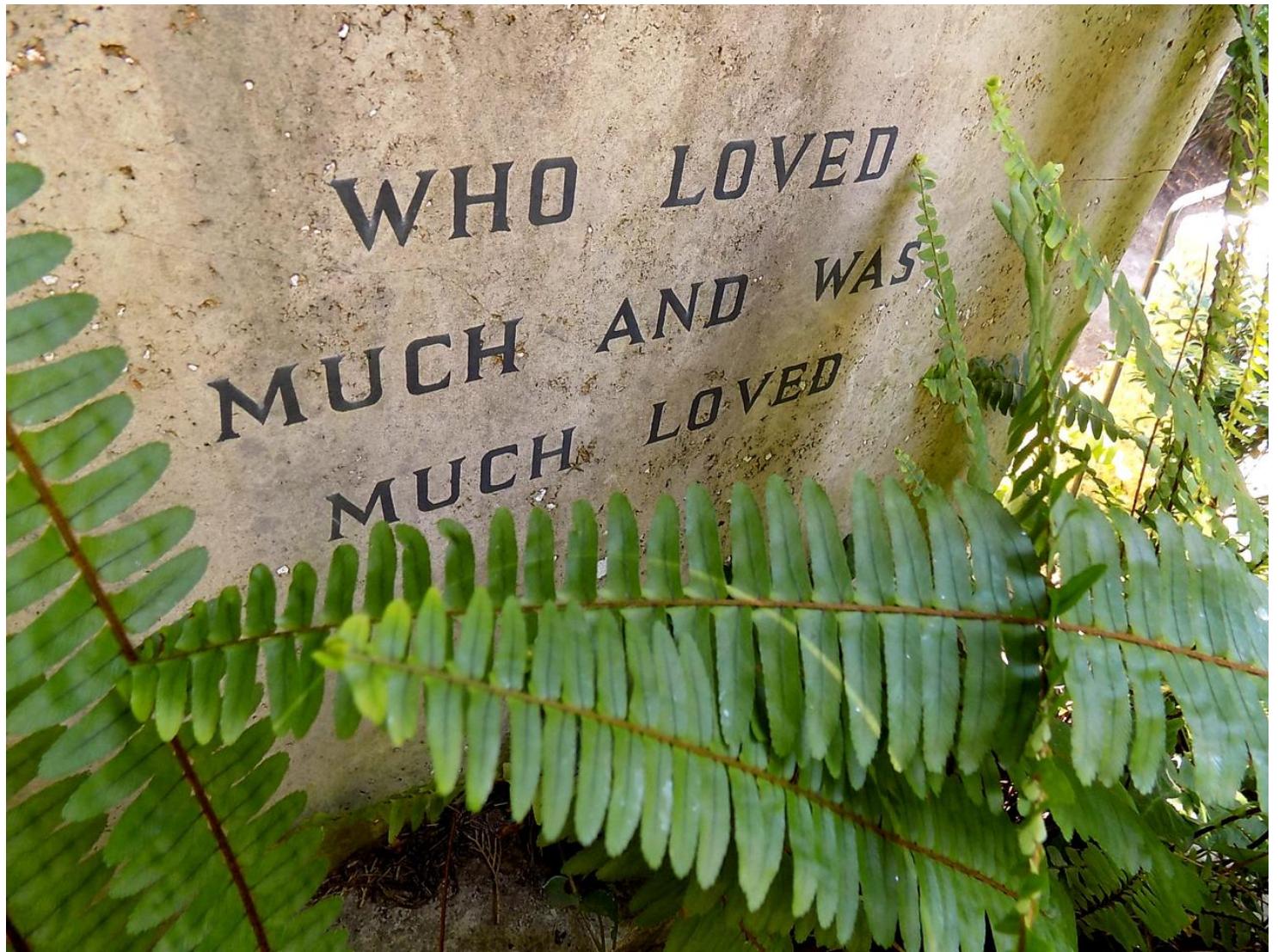
folks. Without even exchanging pleasantries with Jim Morrison, I quickly found my way out, promising myself never to enter a cemetery again unless absolutely required. The next morning, during my casual stroll in cobblestoned Montmartre, I found myself intrigued, walking inside the Montmartre Cemetery. Before I realised, I had spent five blissful hours there. That was the beginning of my love affair.

Now with my seventh cemetery visit in Europe, this affair has bloomed into an unwavering and genuine long-term relationship. So there I was, braving the menacing heat of July, armed with a muffin, a water bottle, a sketchily drawn map of the walk from the Piramide metro station to the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, among other essentials.

Under the fairly mild morning rays of the sun, I reached the cemetery and spent some minutes at the main gate, which documents important information about this legendary place. Protestant Cemetery, also known as The Non-Catholic Cemetery for Foreigners in Testaccio, is one of the oldest burial grounds in continuous use in Europe, the board told me. While there are a great number of Protestant and eastern Orthodox graves, the cemetery is also a burial home to many other faiths including Islam, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Confucianism, with tomb inscriptions in more than 15 languages. Interestingly, in 2016, the cemetery will be a glorious 300 years old and will mark its birthday with an exhibition centred on its story, by various artists from around the world.

After seeing a small temporary exhibition near the entrance, which showed sketches of a few interesting graves by some university students, I was finally out in what felt like a familiar place. I started meandering through the little alleys to get as close to as many graves as possible. The graves were nestled amongst the extremely well-maintained garden, which looked like it had freshly been tended to by some very thoughtful hands. Even though densely populated, it's small and easily navigable, so unlike some of the larger cemeteries like Père Lachaise, you don't really need a map to traverse the nooks and crannies of this cemetery.

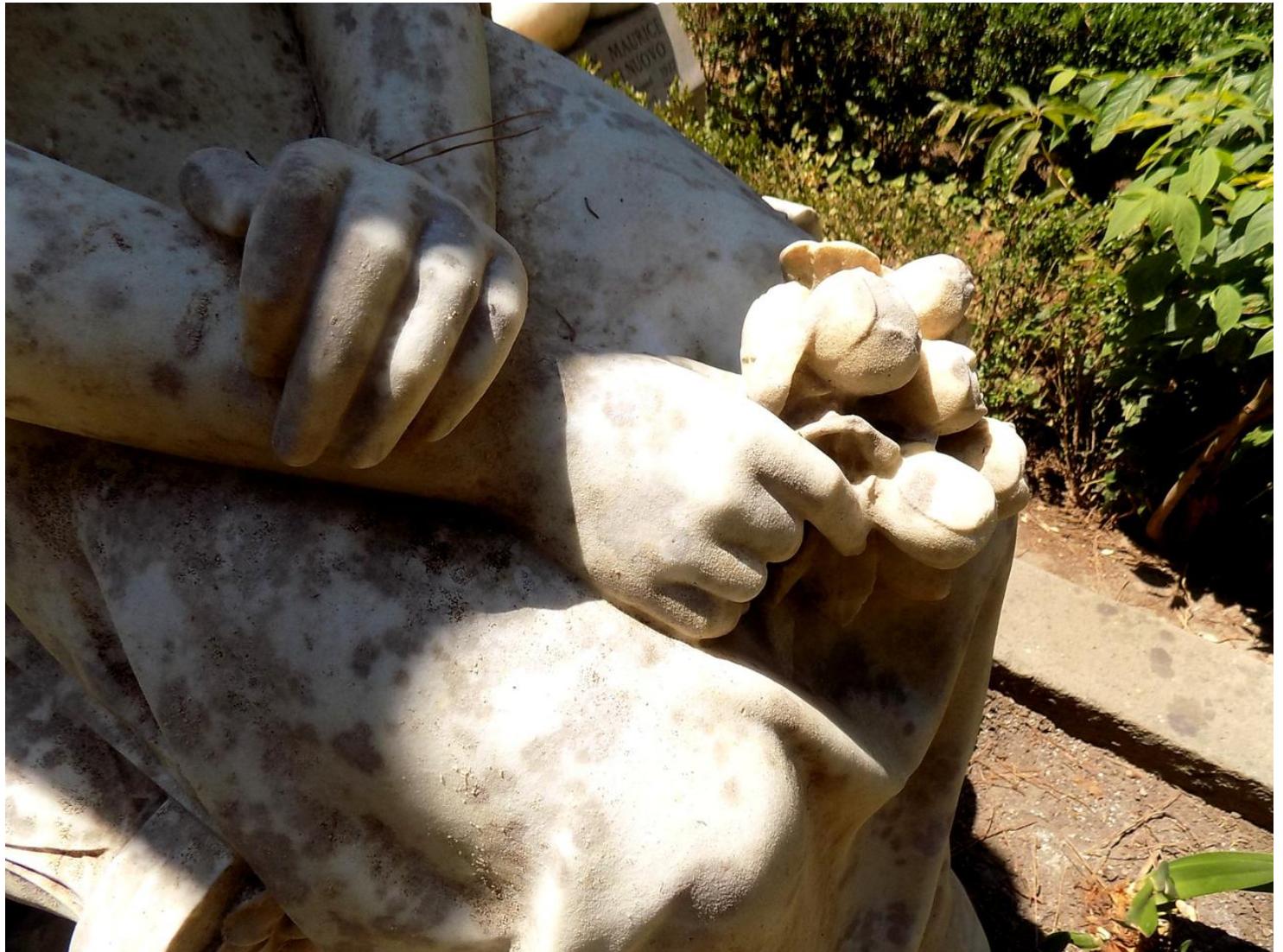
Protestant didn't have too many visitors when I visited, much to my delight and surprise. The silence of the surroundings was the symphony I needed, after being lambasted with the tourists' cacophony at the magnificent Colosseum the previous day. As the morning began to lose its inhibitions and erupt into a full-blown afternoon, the sun shone brightly on the graves, and the cypresses and pines stood even taller. I was in a stream of poetry that was going to carry me around for the next few hours.



Like poetry, art flows abundantly in the Protestant Cemetery. It is not just the art that adorns so many of these graves, but also the house guests that include many sculptors, poets, artists and the like. Rome, like the eternal Paris, has been a magical potion of inspiration that many creative people were desperate to drink. Many of them came here

and stayed on, and didn't even let death part them from Rome. The testimony lies all around me in the Protestant Cemetery.

'Notable graves', as the cemetery calls them, are in abundance here. The cemetery website lists them all. People from different professions, beliefs and walks of life peacefully co-exist here. What brings them together is not just death but their relationship to the city of Rome.



Another thing that peacefully co-exists here is the variety of graves and their distinct paraphernalia. I try to freeze time as I slowly learn and imagine stories about each of them. Some graves are highly embellished, with stunning sculptures erected on top of

them. Then there are simple tombstones, and even simpler plaques. There are slightly stale flowers and fresh flowers. Some tombstones are dotted with small objects, keepsakes. Some are humbly surrounded by the natural shrubs. Many stories are told through words- words of melancholy, hope, remembrance, respect, fondness and love.

*“We are saved by hope”* - I read and smiled.



As the heat began to act vindictively, I tried to find patches of compassionate shade. I soon landed in front of American sculptor, poet and citizen of Rome, William Whetmore Story's grave. He is buried, along with his wife Emelyn, with a tombstone that is one of his own creations, 'Weeping Angel', a much replicated composition in many parts of the

world. I had to spend some time on this one because the work looked spectacularly different from different angles. Another American sculptor, one of my favourites, Hendrik Anderson, is also buried nearby. While his house, which is now a museum, is a great place to visit while in Rome, here he quietly rests with many of his family members in a family tomb.

Of course, for me, the most notable graves had to be Shelley and Keats, predictably enough. And I kept them for last as treasured dessert to be savoured after a great meal. When I finally found my way to Shelley's tombstone, it was surrounded by a pack of four tourists led by a guide who was handing out fragments of Shelley's life. I pretended not to listen. I waited for the group to move on so I could be alone with Shelley. When I finally did, I somehow felt too proud of the bizarre proximity I was feeling to the poet. I stood there gazing into the white marble tombstone that loaned lines from Shakespeare's *Tempest*:

*Nothing of him that doth fade,  
But doth suffer a sea-change,  
into something rich and strange*

I read these lines several times over, and then tried to remember some of the poems by him that I had read while in college. I managed to recall bits of *An Ode to the Westwind*, along with vague recollections of my college classroom, the old fashioned wooden benches, notes that were being passed about which more often than not had nothing to do with the poets and writers we were dealing with. I also started wondering where Mary Shelley, the Frankenstein creator and PB Shelley's wife, was buried (which I now know is in St. Peter's Church in Bournemouth, UK). And Lord Byron? (Also in the UK).

Anyhow, interestingly, both PB Shelley and John Keats (whose grave I will take you to in a moment) are buried with their closest friends. English author Edward John Trelawny, who was also good friends with Lord Byron, is comfortably buried next to his companion Shelley with a beautiful epitaph about their friendship.

*These are two friends whose lives were undivided.*

*So let their memory be now they have glided  
Under the grave: let not their bones be parted  
For their two hearts in life were single-hearted.*

Keats, who came to Rome in the hope of nursing himself to better health, resides in the Old Cemetery, which is adjacent to the new one. The Old Cemetery is like a park, with much fewer graves and more benches and ground to sprawl. When I finally reach the park, the same tour group was now getting better acquainted with Keats.

As I looked from a distance, the guide seemed much more animated than he was near Shelley's grave. I decided to wait, again, this time much more patiently. A girl, with her back resting against a tall tree, was sketching and I secretly half circled around her to peep into her sketchbook. She was drawing a triangular structure, which undoubtedly was the striking Pyramid of Caius Cestius, right ahead of us.

Soon after, Keats was finally alone.

Keats, who died of tuberculosis in 1821 at the age of 25, has a simple tombstone and a humble epitaph.

*This Grave contains all that was mortal, of a YOUNG ENGLISH POET, who on his Death Bed, in the Bitterness of his heart, at the Malicious Power of his enemies, desired these words to be Engraven on his Tomb Stone*

*Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water*

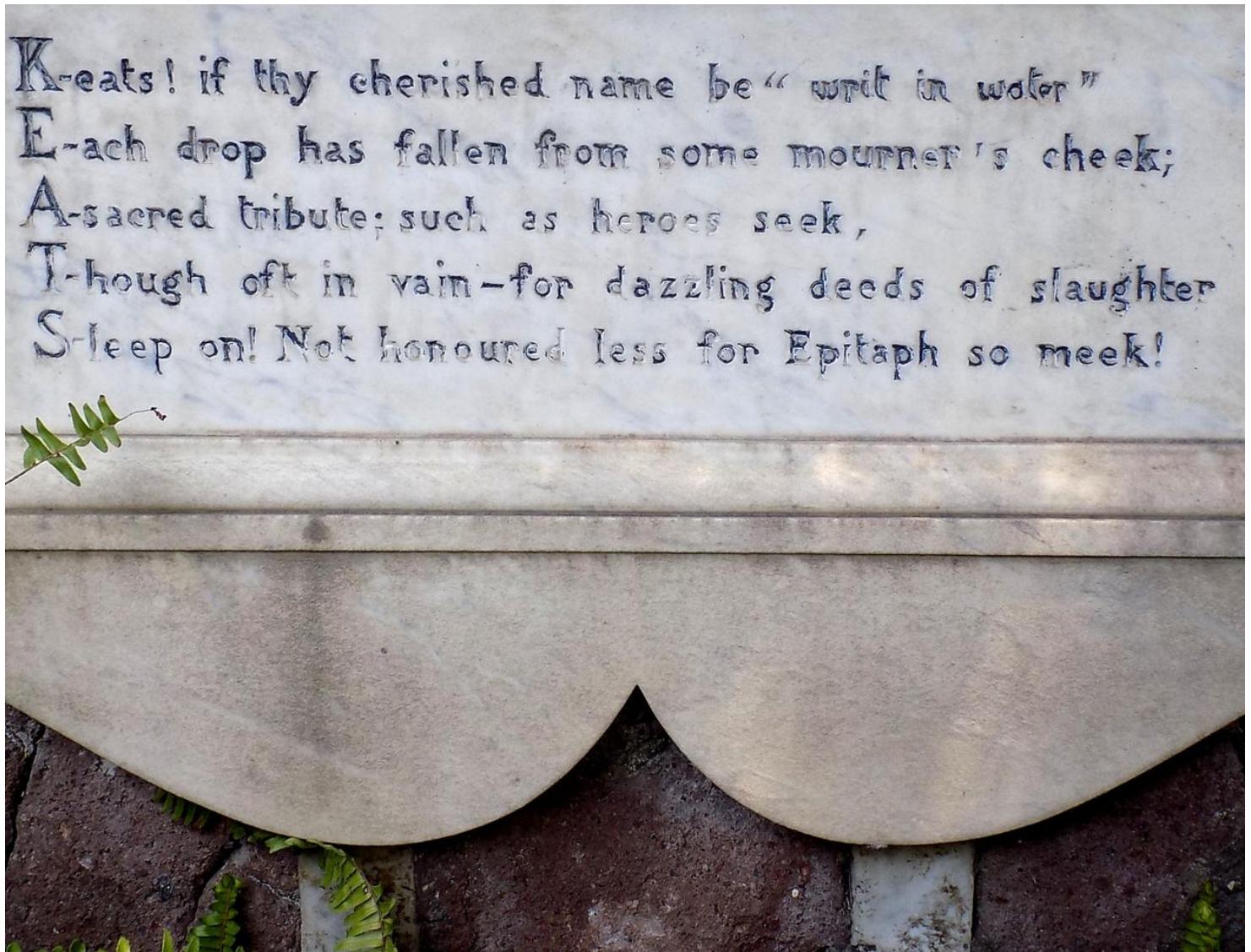
I walked in into the triangular area, a bench right in front of his tombstone, and on another side an lyrical and forlorn retort to the words on Keats' epitaph.

*K-eats! if thy cherished name be "writ in water"*

*E-ach drop has fallen from some mourner's cheek;  
A-ssured tribute; such as heroes seek,*

*T-hough oft in vain - for dazzling deeds of slaughter*

*Sleep on! Not honoured less for Epitaph so meek!*



Keats' epitaph is flanked by his "devoted friend" Joseph Severn, who lived till 85. Severn's son Arthur, whose epitaph on a small tombstone documents that he was accidentally killed as a child, lies in between the two close friends.

After reading all the literature I finally sat down at the bench, ate the blueberry muffin that I had carelessly packed and drank some sweet Rome water from a plastic bottle. I then took out a notebook and a pen, and scribbled some personal notes. It all felt like a ritual.

Burials continue to be made today of those who qualify.

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