

The ground of being

by [Rosanne Osborne](#) in the [September 18, 2007](#) issue

The artist's eye caught the bent iron grating intended to separate
the living from the dead, the bars pulled apart as though a wandering
specter

had recovered his human form, escaped a deadened community. The
camera

lens focused the rows of tampered vaults, doors nearly askew, lines

of dead diminishing to infinity. Framed by pillars past, the photo pressed
into time

absence of brass bands blowing funereal dirges, colorful umbrellas
swaying

to the beat, second-liners celebrating release. I thought of reading old
Creole stories

of George Washington Cable and Grace King, the scourge of yellow
fever,

the cycle of death and renewal acted out in another century. Or my own
death

and renewal in the sixties, the damp breeze blowing across the iron bed
frame

where I lay reading Paul Tillich one Saturday afternoon. His text called
into question all that Pleasant Bethel Baptist Church had taught me,
questions

I had never allowed to take root, Noah's flood, the sacrificial testing of
Abraham,

Esther's dubious path to the throne. Driving past Lafayette Cemetery

to seminary classes, I pondered the rationale for burying the dead
above the ground, the belief that levees would hold, the cockeyed
certainty

that the mystical combination of voodoo and faith would somehow
render the Big Easy indomitable. Katrina changed all that,

but New Orleans has always shunted bones to the rear, reopened
tombs

for the newly dead, believed in resurrection.