

CULTURE DESK

## THE IMPROBABLE JOURNEY OF DOROTHY PARKER'S ASHES

*After two decades in a filing cabinet and three next to a parking lot in Baltimore, the author returns to New York.*

By Laurie Gwen Shapiro

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*Dorothy Parker's ashes en route to the reburial.* Photographs by Joseph Michael Lopez for The New Yorker

On February 6, 1965, Dorothy Parker signed her last will and testament in her small suite at the Volney Hotel, on East Seventy-fourth Street, in Manhattan. A friend named Pauline Kraft signed as a witness, as did an employee at the Volney named Richard M. Moyer. Parker's French poodle, Troy—short for Troisième, because she was the third of her litter—was by her side. Her second husband, the writer and actor Alan Campbell, had died two years earlier, of an overdose of alcohol and barbiturates. Parker was seventy-one, small and thin with big dark eyes, and suffered from a weak heart, bursitis, and reduced eyesight. Widowed, with no heirs, she had spent months mulling what to do with her estate. After her debts were paid, her assets amounted to some twenty thousand dollars, but her estate also included future royalties and licensing fees for her body of literary work, which was substantial.

Parker had been raised in Manhattan by a prosperous family that lost its money when her father got sick and stopped working; she left school at fifteen and learned to rely on her smarts. At twenty-two, she got a job as an editorial assistant at *Vogue*, and two years later she was poached by *Vanity Fair*. Soon after, the editor Harold Ross and his wife, Jane Grant, recruited Dorothy Parker to work at *The New Yorker*, which they were just getting off the ground; Parker helped them cobble together their first issue, in 1925, and wrote for the magazine for the next thirty years, contributing fiction, poetry, and criticism. Her poetry has been collected in the best-selling anthologies "Enough Rope" and "Sunset Gun." She also co-wrote the screenplay of the 1937 movie "A Star Is Born," which was remade for the third time in 2018, with Bradley Cooper and Lady Gaga. She was a founding member of the Algonquin Round Table, a group of writers and enthusiastic drinkers who gathered at the Algonquin Hotel, in midtown Manhattan. Today, Parker is probably most widely known for her bon mots, including the famous couplet "Men seldom make passes / At girls who wear glasses." During a party game called Give Me a Sentence, around 1929, Parker drew the word "horticulture," and, seconds later, said, "You can lead a horticulture, but you can't make her think."



*At a Boston demonstration, in 1927, Dorothy Parker was arrested and fined for picketing the roundup of anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. Photograph courtesy of the Dorothy Parker Society Archives*

She is less well known for the activism she engaged in before and during the civil-rights era. As a critic, she was outspoken about racist portrayals on the stage, writing in *Ainslee's Magazine*, in 1920, of a play called "Come Seven," "The characters who appear in it are not of the colored race, but of the blackface race—the typical stage negroes, lazy, luridly dressed, addicted to crap shooting, and infallibly mispronouncing every word of more than three syllables." She helped raise funds for the Scottsboro Boys, nine Black men in Alabama who were falsely accused of raping two white women. Her activism got her put on the F.B.I. watch list, and, in 1951, at the height of the McCarthy era, she was blacklisted from working in Hollywood. So in 1965, when writing her will, she instructed that she be cremated, and that her entire estate be left to Martin Luther King, Jr., then thirty-six, whom she had never met. She joked in *Vanity Fair* that she wanted her gravestone to read "Excuse My Dust."

Two years later, Parker died, of a heart attack, and was found slumped in her suite by her chambermaid, with Troy at her side. Parker named her friend Lillian Hellman, a playwright and columnist, the "executrix" of her estate, but when Hellman learned that she hadn't been left any money, she fumed, swearing that Parker must have been drunk when she wrote the will. Out of spite, Hellman ordered all of Parker's effects to be thrown away, including her papers, books, clothes, and keepsakes. She also disobeyed Parker's wishes for a quiet cremation and organized a public memorial at a funeral home on the Upper East Side. Parker's body was laid out in a size-three beaded gold caftan given to her by Gloria Vanderbilt; Hellman delivered a eulogy for a packed house; a violinist played Bach. (A court eventually stripped Hellman of control over the estate.)

Later that week, King was interrupted at B. B. Beamon's Restaurant, in Atlanta, and told that he had inherited Parker's estate. He had never heard of her, and was baffled, but exclaimed to his dining companions, fellow-activists from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, "This verifies what I said, that the Lord shall provide." Parker had specified in her will that, should something happen to King, her estate should go to the N.A.A.C.P. Ten months later, King was assassinated, at the Lorraine Motel, in Memphis, Tennessee. The N.A.A.C.P. soon became the owner of her assets and her

work. (To this day, the organization approves all uses of Parker's writing. It has not disclosed how much it has made from licensing fees and royalties, but the amount is likely not insignificant; "The Portable Dorothy Parker," a best-selling collection of her work, has never been out of print since it was published in 1944.)

Parker was cremated at Ferncliff Crematory, in Westchester County. No one ever came to collect the ashes, and they sat on a shelf for years. Storage fees were never paid, and so, in 1973, after many unreturned phone calls, a frustrated clerk at Ferncliff sent the urn to the address listed on Parker's paperwork, which had once belonged to the office of Parker's lawyer, Oscar Bernstein. By this time, Bernstein had retired, and his partner, Paul O'Dwyer, had taken over the practice. O'Dwyer had barely interacted with Parker and didn't know what to do with the delivery. He stuffed the urn into a filing cabinet attached to his desk, where it was soon forgotten.

In the early nineteen-eighties, the author and actor Malachy McCourt visited O'Dwyer's office and began telling a story about meeting Parker at a Hollywood party in 1961, without recognizing her. "She was brightly dressed, her hair not white, blondish, warm and friendly and somewhat amused by my attention," McCourt told me. "And I said, 'You're sure now that you don't want to spend the night with me?' And she said, 'Young man, you might think you are flattering me, but you're mistaken.'" O'Dwyer asked McCourt if he wanted to see Parker again. "I said, 'Yeah, but I think she's dead.' He gave me a look and went to his desk and pulled out an urn from a metal filing cabinet in his bottom drawer. It was not large, maybe the size of a small flower vase; it was only about ten inches, I think. Very small. And he said, 'So here she is again!' And I said, 'Oh my God! How are you, Dorothy?'"

**I**n 1988, O'Dwyer, then eighty-one, decided to do something about Parker's ashes while he still could. He called Liz Smith, a gossip columnist for the *Daily News* who had been a friend of Parker's, and asked for advice. Smith mentioned Parker's plight in her column, and soon received more than seventy letters in response. O'Dwyer then held a cocktail party of thirty Parker devotees at the Algonquin Hotel. He explained to the guests that the instructions in Parker's will were unclear about where her remains should go, and he asked them for suggestions.

The ideas were elaborate. Smith wanted the urn in a lighted vitrine in the Algonquin, but the manager, Edward Pitt, declined to take it, saying it made him squeamish. An aviation-company representative proposed sprinkling the ashes out of an airplane over the Hudson. An artist said that he had developed a way to mix the ashes with oil, and could paint Parker so she could live on as a “portrait in perpetuity.” A guest proposed that she be encased in a bar, to honor her love of drinking. One inebriated brainstormer wanted to wrap the ashes in paper like cocaine, and divvy them up among the crowd. O’Dwyer thought these suggestions “macabre and inappropriate.” He confessed at the time, “I have no idea what we will decide.” The conundrum soon became headline news in papers as far away as Australia; the critic Joseph McLellan at the *Washington Post* set it to a thirteen-stanza poem:

Liz Smith (the columnist) has told,  
A story grim and dark,  
About a girl named Parker who,  
Can’t find a place to park.

Benjamin Hooks, then the director of the N.A.A.C.P., attended the raucous Algonquin meeting. The N.A.A.C.P. had recently moved its headquarters from New York to Baltimore, and he offered that Parker could be sent there. Diehard New Yorkers scoffed at the thought of shipping her out of the city, but the idea won O’Dwyer over. The dean of Howard University’s architecture school built a site for the burial, in a grassy area next to the parking lot behind the N.A.A.C.P.’s offices, calling it the Dorothy Parker Memorial Gardens. The site had four concentric circles of brown bricks, to evoke the Algonquin Round Table, and was surrounded by rhododendrons. Parker’s ashes were interred there in October, 1988. “The idea of a white woman leaving her entire estate, all she had, to the Black cause was unparalleled,” Hooks told a local reporter. “I can imagine the gesture was greeted with a raised eyebrow by many whites.”

Over time, Parker's gravesite, though well intentioned, fell into some disrepair. The site was largely forgotten by fans, hidden as it was behind a suburban office building. By the time I visited, earlier this year, tree roots were breaking through the sidewalk, and thousands of brown pine needles covered the area. The nearby parking lot was empty. The only marking on the grave was a small circular epitaph set in Helvetica italics that praised a connection between the Jewish and Black communities. (Parker was half Jewish, though she attended Catholic school.)

In 2006, Kevin C. Fitzpatrick, a professional tour guide, found out that the N.A.A.C.P. was considering moving its headquarters to Washington, D.C. Fitzpatrick is fifty-four, with a crewcut, and is an avid Parker fan: he wrote a guidebook called "A Journey into Dorothy Parker's New York," founded the Dorothy Parker Society, and hosts a yearly event at the Algonquin called Parkerfest. "I identified with her as a New Yorker with bad jobs, bad relationships, bad bosses, and a love of having fun," he told me. Fitzpatrick worried about what would happen to Parker if the N.A.A.C.P. moved. "There's this thing with the Round Table people: disgracefully very few have graves," he said. The urn of Parker's best friend, the humorist and actor Robert Benchley, was sent to his family empty. The ashes of the critic Alexander Woollcott were meant to be sent to his alma mater, Hamilton College, but were instead sent to Hamilton, New York. Fitzpatrick thought that it might make more sense to move Parker to a more permanent resting place. "This can happen," he said. "Judy Garland got moved. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald moved. . . . Look what happened to Truman Capote." After a dispute, the writer's ashes were divided between his partner and a friend, and some of his remains were later sold at auction. "You could write a book about his afterlife," Fitzpatrick said.

Fitzpatrick had been in touch with Parker's relatives, three grandnieces who live in central New York. "She was Aunt Dot," Nancy Arcaro, Parker's middle grandniece, told me. They lost touch with her after she and their uncle had a tiff over a family funeral; they didn't realize that she was famous, even though their mother kept her books in the family's home library. "I remember we heard about her death when we were getting in the car," Joan Grossman, Parker's youngest grandniece, said. "It was on the radio, and it was on the nightly news, too. Headline news in the *New York Times*." The

grandnieces were shocked to hear about the fate of Parker's remains. "Our family never knew that her ashes were in a drawer," Susan Cotton, the eldest of the trio, said. They wanted her brought back to Woodlawn Cemetery, in the Bronx, where Parker's parents and grandparents were buried. When the grandnieces called Woodlawn, they found out that, in fact, Parker's father had purchased a plot with six places, and two empty ones had been passed down to Parker; the fact had been forgotten after her death. "Our family never had any say in the Baltimore situation, and of course we would want her with the family," Arcaro said.

Fitzpatrick worked on a proposal for her move, which required collecting signed letters from family members and retrieving court documents. ("Parker's cremains are treated like an asset, like a condo," he said.) At the beginning of this year, fourteen years later, permission was granted. This August, Fitzpatrick met me at Penn Station, wearing a polka-dotted mask and carrying a ten-by-fourteen-inch pinewood box, which he had built to carry the urn. "I can't believe this is actually happening," he said, as we boarded a train to Baltimore.



*Dorothy Parker's ashes are transported to the burial site.*

The following morning, we drove to the N.A.A.C.P. building. Last winter, more than a decade after it was first rumored, the N.A.A.C.P. finally left its headquarters, with plans to move to D.C.; the building was now deserted. At 9:30 A.M., a three-man construction team began digging through the dirt where Parker's urn was buried. When they hit concrete, they broke through with a wrecking bar, a sledgehammer, a shovel, an air chisel, and, eventually, a jackhammer. (Fitzpatrick whispered to me, "Dorothy has a two-forty-five train ticket home. I hope she will make it.") Eventually, the workers revealed the urn containing Parker's ashes. Once bronze, the small urn now had an almost black patina, and pieces of cement clung to the sides. The crew's foreman gently placed it into Fitzpatrick's box. Two executives from the N.A.A.C.P. spoke, and a rabbi who had attended her initial burial said Kaddish.

On our way back to New York, Parker had her own seat on the train. Fitzpatrick, who has also written a compendium of Algonquin Round Table cocktails, poured us some gin-and-tonics, cutting a lime with a conveniently packed knife.



*A memorial is held for Dorothy Parker, at Woodlawn Cemetery.*



On August 22nd, Parker's birthday, Fitzpatrick put on a blue seersucker suit and brought her ashes to Woodlawn for her reburial. He showed me a tiny brass plaque that he had affixed to the top of the box, which would be buried with the urn:

Dorothy R. Parker  
1893-1967  
"Excuse My Dust"

The day was warm and punctuated by sunshowers. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, Parker's grandnieces, who are elderly, couldn't attend. But twelve other witnesses gathered in masks, social-distancing. Hazel Dukes, an eighty-eight-year-old civil-rights activist and a former president of the N.A.A.C.P., thanked the family and Woodlawn for including her in the ceremony. "I'm here because Dorothy Parker gave to the cause when it was not popular," she said. "Benjamin Hooks, another past president, always said, 'Whatever you do, don't bother Dorothy Parker.'" The cabaret singer Bill Zeffiro sang a song that Parker wrote the lyrics for, "I Wished on the Moon," which Bing Crosby made a No. 2 hit, in 1935. Fitzpatrick discussed Parker's return to New York and read passages from an essay that she wrote in 1928, called "My Hometown": "London is satisfied, Paris is resigned, but New York is always hopeful. Always it believes that something particularly good is about to come off, and it must hurry to meet it." The pine box was lowered into the grave and covered over with dirt.



Afterward, I spoke to Susan Olsen, Woodlawn's historian. There was ongoing discussion about whether the gravestone should read "Excuse My Dust" or something more serious. Either way, Olsen said, "I am sure Dorothy will be a pilgrimage site." She noted that the graves of several famous residents, including the jazz legend Miles Davis and the intrepid journalist Nellie Bly, received regular visits from fans. "We've had so many Melville celebrations where everyone's got to read Melville," she said. "How many pens, how many stuffed whales, how much sea salt he gets!" Fitzpatrick piped up from behind us, "I hope Parker fans know her poem 'One Perfect Rose' and bring roses to the grave, and not gin bottles that I have to pick up!"

Leaving the cemetery, Fitzpatrick called Parker's grandnieces. "I drank a Martini for Aunt Dot once at two when you arrived, and again at two-thirty when she was in the ground," Cotton, the eldest, said. They were sad that they couldn't come to the reburial, but planned to convene in a year for the gravestone unveiling. Fitzpatrick hoped that it could be a big affair, open to her fans, with the governor and several A-list celebrities in attendance. "I see a hot jazz band, and people could bring a flask of something," he said. When we drove away, he adjusted his mask, and added, "As a guidebook guy, I know books in two states will have to be rewritten, Web sites updated, maps changed. And I'm happy."