

# Urban eye

by Robin Vaughan

## THE YOUNG AND THE DEAD

"This is gross," the father is saying. "This is really gross."

"Oh my God," the mother cries.

"Don't look at that."

"They are starting from the head," the boy says slowly, transfixed. "Then they move inside."

While throngs climb on oversized Princess phones and peer into dollhouse windows at the Boston Children's Museum, this family is watching a time-lapse film of a dead mouse being devoured by swarms of insects. The mouse, a dead frog that the curious are invited to touch, and a casket with straw lining exposed are all part of a special show, "Endings: An Exhibit About Death and Loss," running through the close of 1984.

Death and decomposition are depicted in a panoply of physical and metaphysical guises. For the young, cases full of cloth swatches, oatmeal, silk flowers, plastic dolls, lizards, and more are intended to stimulate a discussion of what is alive, what was once alive, and what, in so many words, never quite was. Burial robes and diverse cultures' ritual objects are displayed alongside requiem tracts. An assortment of a theoretical departed's memorabilia stands opposite a discussion of the commemorative impulse that has us name children,

buildings, holidays, and movements after the honored dead.

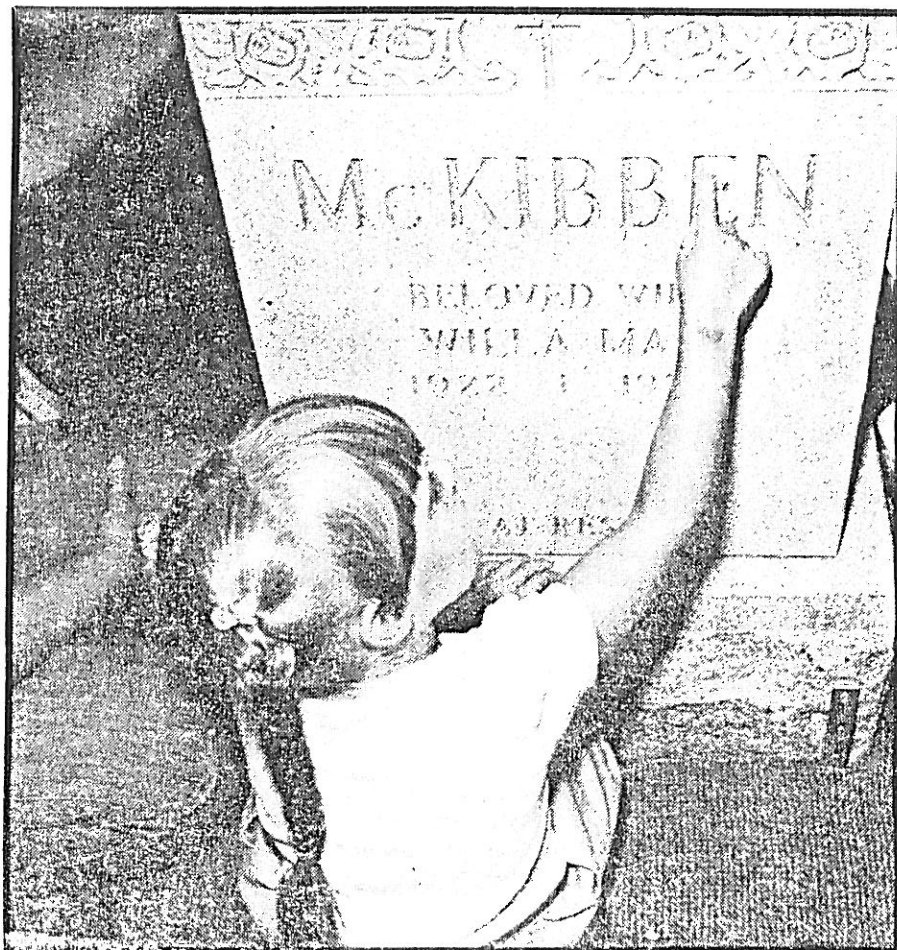
An excellent videotaped puppet show, produced by the Judge Baker Guidance Center, portrays two children's reactions to the death of a best friend in an auto accident; a show-and-tell story, "When Grandpa Died," is a sensitive enactment of how an elder's death affects the young. Also screening, with cautionary warnings about violence, is a brief documentary on the use of "TV blood packs" in cops-and-robbers programs.

A compost heap, a display of embalming chemicals, "A Guide to Funeral Planning," and a wall of euphemisms about death that parents are discouraged from using are gathered into this kaleidoscopic survey.

Exhibit signs attempt to guide parents as well as children through this somewhat rough emotional terrain, and viewer feedback is encouraged. Children can fill out questionnaires on several aspects of death and pin them to bulletin boards. At least one comment eclipsed the dead mice and plastic babies. "I was named for [X]," it read, "who was my father's best friend and died in Vietnam."

*The Children's Museum is on Boston's Museum Wharf. Current exhibit hours are from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.*

— Kathy Hirsch



BY JAY REIDE