

the Poetry Wheel
at the Cafe 02/26/08



Janet Kuypers poetry
read live at the Cafe 02/26/08

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Publications

Driving By His House

I know it's pretty pathetic of me, I don't know what I'm trying to prove. I don't even want to see him again. I don't want to have to think about him, I don't want to think about his big eyebrows or the fact that he hunched over a little when he walked or that he hurt me so much.

I know it's pretty pathetic of me, but sometimes when I'm driving I'll take a little detour and drive by his house. I'll just drive by, I won't slow down, I won't stop by, I won't say hello, I won't beat his head in, I won't even cry. I'll just drive by, see a few cars in the driveway, see no signs of life through the windows, and then I'll just keep driving.

I don't know why I do it. He never sees me, and I never see him, although I thought I didn't want to see him anyway. When I first met him I wasn't afraid of him. Now I'm so afraid that I have to drive by his house every once in a while, just to remind myself of the fear. We all like the taste of fear, you know, the thought that there's something out there stronger than us. The thought that there's something out there we can beat, even if we have to fight to the death.

But that can't be it, no, it just can't be, I don't like this fear, I don't like it. I don't want to drive by, I want to be able to just go on with my life, to not think about it. I want to be strong again. I want to be strong.

So today I did it again, I haven't done it for a while, drive by his house, but I did it again today. When I turned on to his street I put on my sunglasses so that in case he saw me he couldn't tell that I was looking. And then I picked up my car phone and acted like I was talking to someone.

And I drove by, holding my car phone, talking to my imaginary friend, trying to unobviously glance at the house on my left. There's a lamppost at the end of his driveway. I always noticed it, the lampshade was a huge glass ball, I always thought it was ugly. This time three cars were there. One of those could have been his. Through the front window, no people, no lights. I drive around a corner, take a turn and get back on the road I was supposed to be on.

One day, when I'm driving by and I get that feeling again, that feeling like death, well then, I just might do it again.

Amber Beads

As the flames engulfed
my worldly possessions
my everything
seemed to disappear.
But I did not cry
for the loss of the money -
I cried for the
photographs,
and the poems,
and the amber beads.

I love you, mother,
and I love the mother
who died while I
rested in your womb.
Sandy tells me stories
of visiting Grandma
and eating pickles.
And I remember
every spring,
every Mother's Day,
you would diligently
plant flowers
around the
Bakutis name.
I have learned
to love her
without ever seeing
her face.

Joseph tells me
that I seem like
my mother
and I only pray to God
that he's right.
For then my existence
would keep the love
and the caring alive
in a kind of living
that no strike of a match
that no burning building
that no mere mortal
could destroy.

Andrew Hettinger

I never really liked you. You never revealed yourself to me and why would you: you, who never had anyone, you, who always had the bad breaks. Everyone looked at you as different. Where would you have learned to trust. Who would you have learned it from.

I never really liked you. I met you through a friend and he explained to me that multiple sclerosis left you with a slight limp and a faint lisp. Faint, under the surface, but there, traces of something no one would ever know of you well enough to fully understand.

I never really liked you. You never revealed yourself to me and I never wanted you to; you scared me too much. You, plagued with physical ailments. You, with a limp in your walk. You, with a patch over your eye. You, who stared at me for always just a bit too long.

They told me the patch was from eye surgery with complications and now you had to cover your shame, cover someone else's mistakes, cover a wrong you didn't commit, cover a problem not of your own doing. The problems were never of your own doing, were they.

I heard these stories and I thought it was sad. I heard these stories and thought you had to be a pillar of strength. And then I saw you drink, straight from the bottle, fifteen-year-old chianti. And I saw you smash your hand into your living room wall. This is how you lived.

The house you lived in was littered with trash. Why bother to clean it up anyway. It detracted you from the holes in the wall, the broken furniture from drunken fits. This was how you reacted to life, to the world. You didn't know any better. This is how you coped.

I never really liked you. You would come home from work, tell us about a woman who was beautiful and smart that liked you, but she wasn't quite smart enough. And I thought: We believe anything if we tell ourselves enough. We weave these fantasies to get through the days.

I never really liked you. Every time you talked to me you always leaned a little too close. So I stayed away from the house, noted that those whom you called friends did the same. I asked my friend why he bothered to stay in touch. And he said to me, "But he has no friends."

This is how I thought of you. A man who was dealt a bad hand. A man who couldn't fight the demons that were handed to him. And with that I put you out of my mind, relegated you to the ranks of the inconsequential. We parted ways. You were reduced to a sliver of my youth.

I received a letter recently, a letter from someone who knew you, someone who wanted me to tell my friend that they read in the newspaper that you hanged yourself. Your brother died in an electrical accident, and after the funeral you went to the train station,

and instead of leaving this town you went to a small room off to the side and you left us forever. Strangers had to find you. The police had to search through records to identify your body. The newspaper described you as having "health problems." But you knew it was more than that.

And I was asked to be the messenger to my friend. The funeral had already passed. You were already in the ground. There was no way he could say goodbye. I shouldn't have been the one to tell him this. No one deserved to tell him. He was the only one who tried to care.

I never really liked you. No one did. But when I had to tell my friend, I knew his pain. I knew he wanted to be better. I knew he thought you were too young to die. I knew he felt guilty for not calling you. He knew it shouldn't have been this way. We all knew it.

I never really liked you. But now I can't get you out of my mind; you haunt me for all the people we've forgotten in our lives. I don't like what you've done. I don't like you quitting. I don't like you dying, not giving us the chance to love you, or hate you, or even ignore you more.

My friend still doesn't know where your grave is. I'd like to find it for him, and take him to you. Let you know you did have a friend out there. Bring you a drink, maybe, a fitting nightcap to mark your departure, to commemorate a life filled with liquor, violence, pain and death.

I never really liked you, but maybe we could get together in some old cemetery, sit on your grave stone, share a drink with the dead, laugh at the injustices of life when we're surrounded by death. Maybe then we'd understand your pain for one brief moment, and remember the moments we'll always regret.

Anything for the Liquor Fix

We've known people
liked to have a bottle of wine
with friends in the evenings,
and we've known people
who liked to go out for beers
almost every night of the week.
We've even known men in
Illinois, where it's illegal
to have open containers of
alcohol in the car with them,
who would leave a case of
cheap beer at the passenger-
side floor, so they could have
a can of Milwaukee's Best
while driving, and then toss
the crushed can on the floor
so they could throw it away
when they got around to it.
And we've known these people
to want to save money
on their wine, on their beer,
on their hard liquors, so they
would buy the cheapest liquor
they could. We had even heard
of a fad in Finland where teen girls
soak their tampons in vodka,
because the alcohol is absorbed
into their system for intoxication
without them drinking. Can you
imagine teenage girls in Finland,
getting drunk while in school?

But the most drastic news story
came to us when we read of a
young Canadian man, wanting
to get drunk with no money,
decided to mix gasoline with milk.
This combination made him sick,
where he then vomited. However,
it appears that this milk-and-gas
drink must have intoxicated him
enough to not let him realize
that he shouldn't have vomited
into his fireplace in his house.
The resulting explosion from his
vomit and his fireplace fire
burned his house down,
killing both him and his sister.

Death

when he was a child, a little boy, he
would walk through the living room

over and over again
he would see the book on the shelf

a science book, a volume
from a set: a book about

how the world works

once he looked through the pages
found a drawing about the life

of planet earth, how it was
formed, how eventually the

temperature would rise, all life
on earth would eventually die

and reading that it was
millions of years away didn't help

with the fear, the instant panic:
so he took the book, hid the

one volume from the rest,
so he wouldn't have to see it

when he walked through his
own living room

Children, Churches, and Daddies

And the little girl said to me,
“I thought only daddies drank
beer.” And I found myself

trying to make excuses for the can
in my hand. I remember being
in the church, a guest at a

wedding of two people
I didn't know. My date pointed
out two little boys

walking to their seats in
front of us. In little suits and
cowboy boots, this is what

is central Illinois. And my date
said he was sure those boys
would grow up to be gay. And

the worst part was their father
was the coach of the high school
football team. I think I

laughed, but I hesitated.
I remember being in the
church, it was Christmas

Eve, my date's family went up
for communion, and all I could think
was that singing the hymns was

hard enough, I don't know the
words, what am I doing here,
what am I supposed to do? And I

stayed seated, and everyone else
slowly walked to the front of the
church. Little soldiers in a

little line, the little children
in their little dresses walking
behind their mommies and

daddies. And the little girl
said, “I thought only daddies
drank beer.” And I found myself

trying to make excuses.

Chess Game Again

we all watched the case on the news
together, the case where a man on a
subway train opened fire on passengers
in the car. nine people dead, i think.

they caught the man, they had their
trial, and by right he could have a lawyer
appointed to him. but no, he wanted
to act as his own attorney. so every

day he would come into the courtroom
in his suit, looking professional, and
he would question each of the witnesses,
the people that survived his shooting

spree and now had to look him in the
eye and answer his questions. "so what
happened then?" he would ask, and a
woman would answer, "i saw you push

the woman to the ground, put your knee
to her back and shoot her in the back
of the head." "can you point out the
man that did this?" he would ask, and

a man would respond, "it was you." some
of the witnesses broke down under the
emotional strain. and finally he had no
further questions and the judge dismissed

the jury to arrive at a verdict. they found
him guilty, and when the judge asked the
defendant if he had any last words for
the jury, he kept stressing his innocence,

and never apologized. the judge told him
he was disgusted. he saw no remorse in
the killer's eyes. and of all the violence
we see in the media, all the court trials

that are fed to us through our television
sets, our boxes of american dreams, i
don't think any of us were prepared for
this. how did those people feel, when

faced with the man that has brought them
so much pain, how did they feel when they
had to quietly sit there and answer his
questions, when he didn't even say he was

sorry? most of them sat there trying to
keep their composure when faced with a
man who lost all control. this twisted tale.
they were a pawn in his chess game again.

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