

Third place - Devin Kennedy

'Roadside Remembrances'

Finding myself walking home again, it's the cold that's the real problem; not the wind; not the rain. The cold saps warm life, replacing it with paradoxical simultaneous painful numbness.

The wind and the rain don't help, of course. They're the sycophantic accomplices to the cold's torture. The wind erratically whips the incessant spray in nonsensical directions, finding your face no matter what way you face, like it's got a mind of its own and it's intent on making people miserable. Miserable mizzle.

And here I am, trudging home on this bitter winter night, through this shadowy misery, again, because I missed the last bus, again. I could blame my boss for...I could blame my mother for...On nights like this, spite is the only thing that keeps me going, one step, then another. The wind shifts, lashing the white sheet of wet skirt against my legs, my hood rendered irrelevant as the icy spray finds my freezing face. It was sunny this morning.

Not far ahead of me is a small tree, adorned with wilted cut flowers, faded photographs, and cards printed and written with words of loss. The tree once marked the milestone, or so my grandmother claimed, in the days before road signs. Now, it functions as a gravestone. Her voice is echoing now, in some deep recess of my memory, nagging me, telling me I should never walk roads alone at night. But what else am I to do?

Shifting wind blasts me with freezing rain. The roar of the wind and the hiss of the rain on the road mask the sound of an oncoming car, but not its headlights. The first car I've seen in some time. A pseudo-warmth fills me as the golden light climbs up my back, some primitive part of my mind associating light with heat. A moment later my back is in icy shadow while my face is dazzled by the red rear lights of the rapidly departing car, likely on their way to a warm home somewhere. I know from the presence of the tree that there is still some indeterminate stretch of time before I reach my destination. A sigh escapes me, a crescendo of disappointment and frustration. In an instant

disappointment turns to concern as there is no cloud of warm breath escaping me through exhalation. Am I so cold that my own breath...? My brain works as fast as it can through cold-induced lethargy. Has the cold gotten in too deep? Am I...what's the word...beginning with H...hyp...the word slips away from me like a sled down a snowy hill. My pace increases to a march, then to a jog, trying to get some blood pumping throughout my cold form. I lock my arms around my chest, trying to keep any warmth locked in. But as I try to move faster, numb-pain reverberates up my legs, biting ice-air hurts my chest. I slow again to a walk; try to concentrate on breathing, try to cling to warm life.

The road and the rain are illuminated by another car. The silvery-white of modern lights doesn't fool that old part of my mind. Instead of climbing up my back, this light slithers around my ankles and calves. Instead of flying past me, this car rolls to a creep alongside me. I already know it's a man. *That* primordial part of my mind knows. The odd whir of a window sliding down followed by a man's voice bellowing sends a jolt through me. I can't quite hear him over the wind and rain. I'm not quite sure I want to hear him. He yells now, and my arms clench tighter. I hear him over the wind and rain now, demanding I get in his car and out of the rain. Into the warmth and out of the cold. The car stops but I don't. I keep walking. He roars now, insistent, otherwise it'll be the death of me. His voice freezes me more than the cold ever could. Yet, I acquiesce. I yield. I get in. A towel between me and fancy leather heated rear seating; the heat does not permeate my form, rigid from fear or cold, I can't tell.

He apologises for yelling; something about headphones or the storm. He introduces himself, trying to assure as we move off, gaining speed. He asks about my destination and name. My mouth feels frozen, sealed shut. He turns to face me. Seeing my face for the first time. His eyes are frozen, locked open.

Locked on my cold, breathless, lifeless face.

I see the turn in the road. He does not.

Another bundle of flowers at the foot of the tree.

Finding myself walking home again, it's the heat that's the real problem; not the stillness; not the dry. The heat saps...