



Fall 2013

The View from the Front

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Gittings, Kathryn M., "The View from the Front" (2013). *Student Publications*. 194.
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Abstract

A creative piece detailing the personal and public history of a small Pennsylvania town, specifically dealing with its crimes and their effect on the collective memory and atmosphere of the area.

Keywords

creative writing, travel writing, public history, memory, crime, Pennsylvania

Disciplines

Creative Writing | English Language and Literature | History

Comments

Second place winner of the 2014 Virginia Woolf Essay Prize

The View from the Front

By Kathryn Gittings

Before I could walk to high school, I sat in the front of the bus. Not the back seat, traditionally defined as the cool part of the bus despite the fact that there really *is* no cool part of a large, mustard-yellow vehicle designed specifically for the mass transportation of children, who begin their lives as small, mess-making machines and only get worse with age. No, I sat in the very first seat of the very first row, directly behind the driver, Frank. A retired U.S. army private, Frank had a penchant for Charms lollipops and driving over curbs he found to be “in the wrong dadgum place” as if they didn’t exist. Frank was in his sixties and talkative in the extreme, offering advice on everything from why the army isn’t the ideal career path (“It’s lonely, and the food looks like road kill. Tastes like it, too.”) to alternative ways for me to befriend the public school kids, with whom I had no desire to share air space.

My decision to sit near Frank was born of self-preservation instincts. From the instant I stepped onto the bus, I became a target for ridicule. Stick thin, with uniform knee high socks wilting around my ankles and a backpack stuffed to bursting, adding a certain Quasimodo-esque lurch to my step, I provided entertainment just by being. In addition, I often failed not only in self-assertion, but in general verbal communication; I stopped talking almost completely in the sixth grade, responding only to direct questions from teachers and the friends from kindergarten I’d somehow managed to retain. In a tiny Catholic school where everyone knows everyone, this was not a disadvantage to my social life: I floated between groups, listening to the masses declare their love for Ross Reber. I struggled to adjust to this recent perception of him as a swoon-inducing basketball star, unable to remember Ross as anything besides the kid who had gotten puked on twice in a five minute span by Eddie McKeon in the second grade. In the world

at large, however, being selectively mute was a massive social impediment. Because American teenagers share more genetic material with rabid wolverines than other humans, the rest of the bus honed in on this particular weakness effortlessly, transforming what was, in reality, only a thirty minute bus ride into what felt like the length of time it would take to hike from Pottstown, Pennsylvania to Alaska, through several feet of molten lava.

Perhaps because of this, I found remarkably few positive qualities regarding the public school kids. They were, in my opinion, mentally deficient, godless heathens who had unnatural hair colors, too many piercings and uncontrollable, violent tendencies. When my dad attended Pottstown High School, he'd watched with the rest of the staff and student body while one of his friends chewed the head off of a live chicken; human teeth grinding against flesh, bone and sinew to the increasingly desperate screams of an animal coming to the excruciating realization that this would be the last scene captured by its panic-stricken mind. The chicken stopped fighting long before its head was completely severed. The school hadn't improved much in the years since.

As violent as Pottstown High School was, I'd never given any thought to the fact that the town itself provided an expansive breeding ground for crime; that the school was merely a bubble encapsulating a larger, much more pervasive issue. I had long ago accepted the fact that Pottstown is not what anyone with higher brain function than a sea cucumber would equate with the ideal American small town. The highest-class establishment the town's primary road boasts of is a Wawa, and the only building worth visiting in the once-dignified downtown now wrought with poverty and drug-addled minds is The Very Best Weiner Shop. I had buried it beneath the daily events of my life, often forgetting that the streets I walked to and from high school every day, accompanied by my younger and smaller sister Megan, could be defined as "ghetto-

fabulous”; that is, until the day the cheerleading squad decided to walk to Burger King before practice.

My cheerleading profession lasted approximately a month, and was born not of any particular fondness for the sport (I never quite forgave them for beginning an offensive cheer during a defensive football play, a sacrilege in the heart of any football fan), but because Megan had achieved a position equally feared and coveted within the squad: she was now a flyer, the smallest girl on the top of the pyramid, and after being dropped one too many times on the hardwood gym floor, she had begged me to be her base. I took pity on her, only to be left wondering about my life and choices. This particular squad could have spawned every negative stereotype ever to exist about cheerleaders: they were blonde, vapid bitches, and at 5’1” and 120.3 pounds, I was the largest girl there. Needless to say, I was unenthused about a group bonding trip to an establishment that would only serve to further increase my false sense of obesity, but found myself even more irritated when Erin Cox, whose last name had been a source of much humor since the puberty talk in fourth grade, declared “If we’re going to do that, I better turn my John McCain shirt inside-out. I don’t want to be shot.”

Erin was not a particularly great mind. We had known each other since kindergarten, when she requested that I pull the purple block from the base of her tower which, naturally, collapsed, prompting her to burst into hysterical tears. She had once, in the eleventh grade and after a substantial amount of struggle, pronounced the word *chicanery* as “Sean Connery”. With this in mind, I made the assumption that this fear of cold-blooded murder on the streets of Pottstown was merely another instance of Erin proudly flying her blonde bimbo flag, and proceeded to utterly ignore her insistence that we were all going to be [insert violent crime here]. Later, I began to wonder if maybe she had a point.

In 2012, the *Threatcore Project* released a series of data detailing the safest cities in the country; Pottstown was proven to have one of the highest crime rates in America as compared to all communities of all sizes, beating out Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York and Compton. The project warned that 93 percent of American cities were safer than my little town. Again, I scoffed, wondering about its credentials. But then I began reflecting on the various happenings within the town, infamous for being just ludicrous enough to be CSI spinoff material; famous for being one hundred percent true.

The first of these involved the Esposito family, selectively remembered for their pizza business as opposed to their family business. In 1870, the first known Sicilian Mafia member to emigrate to the United States, Giuseppe Esposito, fled to New York after murdering eleven wealthy landowners, including the chancellor and vice chancellor of a Sicilian province. Although the various generations of Esposito men failed in behaving congenially towards one another, each remained heavily involved in the Italian mafia, resulting in familial disputes rather more explosive in nature than the average American's. Baggio Esposito (whom everyone called Benny, because *Baggio* just reminded us of the long bread they sell at Thriftway, dubbed baguettes in an effort to make Pottstown appear cultured) and his nephews, Sergio and Frankie, own the Little Italy Pizzeria in town, which has been bombed by an unidentified member of the Italian mafia three times since the first explosion on October 22nd, 1975. The first bomb went off at two in the morning, just after the last of the staff had left for their brief night's sleep. The restaurant burned to the ground. Three streets away, my thirteen year old father struggled to convince his schizophrenic mother that the impossible sound and the flames now climbing into the air hadn't signified the Second Coming of Christ; in her fear, she tried to make martyrs of her

children. He had woken to the sound and found her hovering over him, a lit match caressing his bed sheets.

Less than ten years later, the pizzeria bombings were forgotten as the murder of Richard Griest's wife and unborn child by his own hand consumed local minds. Just four hours after twenty-seven year old Griest chatted with neighbors outside his home, arm wrapped around his pregnant wife, he emerged from the residence his family shared with his mother and brother covered in blood. Using a screwdriver, Griest had murdered his pregnant wife, cost his six year old daughter her left eye, and left his own mother in critical condition after stabbing her in the neck and chest. Griest surrendered to police and was taken into custody in an inconsolable state. Friends of the family were unable to reconcile the incident with their previously established knowledge of Griest; Micheal Parvinski stated "the last time I saw him there was no idea that anything like this would happen. It just doesn't make sense". Those closest to Griest believed he may have been unsettled as a result of losing his job at Pennhurst Asylum, a hospital for the mentally challenged, autistic and insane, which had recently been shut down by the federal court for patient abuse and conditions so dire that they were considered a violation of the patients' constitutional rights. It is now considered among the top ten most haunted facilities in America.

Neither the Mafia bombings nor the Griest murder affected the sort of intrigue shrouding the life and death of Dave Swinehart. Swinehart was a prominent businessman, his face woven into the social and political fabric of the town; most often spotted cruising the streets with an air of elite purposelessness in a Cadillac Eldorado, a flamboyant vehicle with a red and white exterior and Rolls Royce rims. Married to a striking woman and the father of four children, Swinehart had achieved all the material aspects of the American dream.

On January 15, 1982, Swinehart was attacked in the driveway of his Pottstown mansion by four men: his nephews Tommy and Jeffery DeBlase, Terry Lee Maute and Arthur Hall, who descended upon the house after receiving an anonymous call in a local bar, which has since closed after being implicated in a second conspiratorial murder. Police found Swinehart's corpse three days later, brutally beaten, stabbed fourteen times and frozen solid, in the trunk of a car in a snow-choked alley behind Sunrise Lane, my grandmother's address. My Uncle Rob, who was nine at the time, discovered the car, partially disguised by the incredible amount of snow and ice it had accumulated while sitting, exposed, during a winter storm. He cleared off the license plate and turned the numbers in to the police, assuming it had been stolen. Had he cleared off the backseat windows, he would have seen Swinehart lying on the floorboards, face disfigured and frozen blood adhering stiffly to his once-white sweater. Eleven years later, Tommy DeBlase was convicted of the murder; he had been having an affair with his aunt, and slaughtered his uncle for love and money. Patty Swinehart's role in her husband's demise was never proven in court.

These were things I had only heard of, stories passed on by others long before my time, and so they had very little effect on my consciousness. But there are things that should not have disappeared from memory that somehow managed to submerge themselves beneath my waking hours, dredged up only in the light of Erin's preposterous statement. During an early October recess in the first grade, the majority of our class had watched as a man on the corner of Beech and Chestnut was executed as part of a drug-trafficking ring, shot from a moving car that never slowed down. The teachers, in a moment of truly blind panic, opened the door to the school and shouted the word "CANDY" repeatedly. It took less than three minutes for the staff to get the entirety of the first and second grades back inside the building and seated, faster than any end-of-recess ritual at St. Aloysius Elementary School to date.

There was also a time my friend Danny's older brother Corey brought a gun to school. The eighth graders were in a different building at that time, and so nobody in the second grade knew what had happened; not really. All we knew was that one day Danny was in school, and the next he'd transferred to St. Eleanor's and we only got to see him once a year, on Field Day. We never asked him why he left; our parents had told us not to, and we never saw his brother again. But when we transferred to the Old Building in the fifth grade, almost three years later, we all saw the dents in the thick glass windows near the bathrooms, indented circles with sharpened points around which flared spidery filaments of cracked glass. This was where Corey, angry and hurt by his parents' divorce, had brought the gun he'd stolen from his soon-to-be step-father's top drawer, extracting it from balled up socks, battered paperbacks and unused odds and ends. Their parents left for work before the boys walked to school. No one but Danny saw Corey smuggling the gun into his backpack, slipping it between the folds of his religion project; and Danny hadn't said a word. The gun never trained its metal Cyclops eye on a person; instead, Corey had used it to shoot at the door's glass panels again and again, an S.O.S call emitted from a wounded teenage mind that had not yet reached maturity and could find no other way to express itself. He had never hurt anyone, but he spent the rest of his childhood in a juvenile detention center; a victim of a culture where guns can be stolen from dressers as easily as one dollar bills, and are of equal abundance.

These, too, I had erased from memory, being young, insufferably happy and quite unable to realize the magnitude of the violence and innocent suffering I had witnessed. I had no concept of the permanence of death. For me, the culmination of Pottstown's cycle of brutality came on November 27th, 2010, less than a week after Thanksgiving during my freshman year at Gettysburg. I had spent the last day of break with my friend Matthew, driving aimlessly through

the sun-drenched hills of shady maple. The day had acquired the effect of the Midas touch, ordinary trees, downed branches, and rusted metal glittering with a golden hue. Inside of Matthew's mother's house, however, the scene was quite different. Christine Johnson, just forty years old, had swallowed entire bottles of prescription medication in our absence, curling herself into a ball on the bathroom tile and waiting for the blackness of everlasting sleep to overtake her. When it didn't, and she became sick, she sliced her wrists vertically with a blade pried from a bright blue Venus razor. She was dead long before we returned from our driving expedition, her body small and empty, dark curls coated in blood and vomit. Pottstown had suffocated her, and because the Catholic Church teaches that "we are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of", she never escaped it. There was no priest at Mrs. Johnson's funeral. For her, there was no Heaven.

The rending of the bus crowd into two distinct factions – them and me – had nothing to do with my own moral superiority. It was true that I wore a uniform and knew that the X on my kilt was not an X but the Roman numeral ten for Pope Pius X, and that I labored beneath the weight of my backpack while the Pottstown High School crowd didn't need to carry one, and was given demerits for earrings larger than a quarter while both boys and girls from the public school flaunted enough metal studs in their bodies to furnish a jewelry store. But inherently, we were the same. We had all been taught the fifth commandment, "Thou shall not kill", albeit by different people, and in different ways. We suffered as a collective from the dampening spirits of Pottstown, weaving its history into the brilliant fabric of a scarlet end. It isn't the front or the back of the bus that counts, or whether your class wears identical uniforms or matching pink mohawks; it's the bullet-riddled history of Pottstown, the gothic backdrop for the cancerous clouds smothering us all.