Dead Poets

Dan Morey

John Keats, the English poet, died of tuberculosis in Rome at the age of twenty-five. A year later (1822), his friend and fellow poet Percy Bysshe Shelley drowned off the Tuscan coast. He was 29. They're both buried in Rome, at the Protestant Cemetery.

Mother and I went there to pay our respects to the short-lived poets. We found Keats' headstone in a quiet corner of the oldest part of the cemetery. There aren't many graves in the old section—just flowers and trees and the massive Pyramid of Cestius, which Shelley called a "wedge sublime." I sat down in the grass next to Keats and contemplated my mortality, coming to the conclusion that if I had to go, the Protestant Cemetery wouldn't be a bad place to end up. Shelley agreed. "It might make one in love with death," he wrote, "to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place."

It was a warm autumn day, and a scattering of brittle leaves littered the ground. Rome and its squawking din seemed very far away. Someone had left a rose at Keats' grave, with a note that read, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." Mother studied the lyre carved on the headstone, and noticed that some of the strings were missing.

"The instrument is broken," I said. "The poet sings no more."

Stray kittens darted through the grass, pouncing on each other. Two mewling tabbies came up to us, and Mother gave them a thorough petting. After they'd gone, she returned to her tomb-pondering, reading Keats' epitaph aloud: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water."

We made our way to the newer part of the cemetery, where Shelley's ashes are buried. His memorial is a flat stone at the base of the Aurelian wall. The epitaph quotes (quite aptly, considering his watery end) "Ariel's Song" from *The Tempest*: "Nothing of him that doth fade/But doth suffer a sea-change/Into something rich and strange."

Beside it is the grave of Edward Trelawney, the friend who plucked Shelley's heart from the funeral pyre on the beach at Viareggio. It's said that he presented this gory memento to the poet's wife, Mary, who kept it in a heart-shaped box for the remainder of her days.

It had only been a couple years since Father died, and I could tell Mother was thinking of him. He was cremated, like Shelley, and his urn is buried in a Pennsylvania cemetery under an oak tree. There is a bagpiper etched on his octagonal stone, but no epitaph. Father never spoke seriously of things like epitaphs and burials. Even toward the end, when lung cancer was having its way with him, he would puff on a cigarette and say, "Oh, just throw me on the compost pile when I'm dead."

Father's funeral had a bigger turnout than anyone could've expected, including the funeral director, who had to scrounge for extra chairs in the basement. After the service, Father's band, in full Scottish regalia, piped us outside to the burial site. They played "Going Home." I don't know if there is anything sadder than bagpipes at a funeral.

"Dad had a better send-off than Shelley did," I said. "Only three people showed up. Trelawney did the burning, Byron couldn't watch, and Leigh Hunt stayed in his carriage."

Mother looked down at Shelley's memorial, clutching her bag of sandwiches. "Everybody liked your father," she said. "And everybody misses him."

Close by are the graves of American beat poet Gregory Corso and sculptor William Wetmore Story. Story's monument, the "Angel of Grief," is the most exquisite on the grounds. It depicts an angel, limp with despair, draped over a pedestal. Story created the masterpiece for his wife, and later joined her beneath the angel's wings.

The cemetery's newer section is dense with headstones, crypts, statuary and temples. There's a gothic chapel at the end of a cypress allée. Some four thousand people, mostly foreigners, many of them artists and writers, are interred here. You can read their stories wrought in stone. Rosa Bathurst, an English girl, was only sixteen when she drowned in the Tiber. The inscription on her monument, written by her mother, refers to her as the "loveliest flower ever cropt in its bloom."

The new section is nice, but I'm partial to the old side, with its wild grass and weathered tombstones. We ate lunch on a bench near the grave of Percy and Mary Shelley's son, William, who died in 1819, at the age of three. He was the third child lost to Mary, and his passing deeply depressed her. Percy wrote that she'd "gone down a dreary road/That leads to sorrow's most obscure abode." Three years later he was dead, too.

Lunch was a wistful affair, but we weren't alone for long. The breeze wafted the unmistakable odor of tuna sandwiches toward the pyramid, and a menacing phalanx of cats emerged from the moat at its base. We packed up quickly and headed for the exit, leaving a slice of prosciutto on young Shelley's grave.

About the Author: Dan Morey is a freelance writer in Pennsylvania. He's worked as a book critic, nightlife columnist, travel correspondent and outdoor journalist. His writing has appeared in *Hobart, Harpur Palate, McSweeney's Quarterly, decomP* and elsewhere. He was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Find him **here**.