

The Philosopher of the Lone Star State

POETRY

Ngoc Cao, Grade 10, Dana Hall School, Wellesley, MA.
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for Uncle Keith

You were the most American American
I ever knew.

We lived in a red brick house
on Arbor Gate Drive
where I blew bubbles in the backyard
and danced to singing summer cicadas
under the supervision of the setting sun.

An electric guitar playing,
gold chain wearing Odysseus
with long blonde hair dyed pink,
you were an 80's rockstar turned trucker
who sailed state to state searching for stories.

Before that tired metaphor unraveled within you,
you sat on the porch whistling folk tunes
for the crowd of ladybugs on leaves,
a purple freeze pop in hand
because you gave the last red one to me.

My mind an eroding memorial,
I am trying to recall the exact color
of your southern drawl,
but time has taken from me my memories
and worn you down to a distant echo.

If the Constitution protects
life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,
why did it not step in to put out
the level five wildfire
blazing in your lungs?

You were Keith the Great
who spoke in peculiar English idioms
and greeted strangers like old friends,

who breathed in struggle
and exhaled out strength.

You were Keith the Great
who made sure I lived
amongst the evergreens,
and you had no place
in that hungry hospital room.

The day the doctors told Aunt Vanessa
there was nothing left they could do,
I wore armor to school and sat
in Ms. Womble's ELA class
bracing for the impact,

but it never came—not for a while,
you see, grief arrived
more like the slow roll
of an ocean tide
and knocked on my heart

like the pendulum of incense
the priest with his rosary
swung back and forth,
back and forth,
back and forth.

I crossed the wooden bridge that separated
the parish from the columbarium
and stood before your niche,
but I knew the man who lived life
with his windows rolled down rested elsewhere.

Six years ago,
the red brick house grew quiet:
its faucets thirsty,
its doors motionless,
its curtains drawn.

Forgetting once felt easier
than remembering,
but I now want nothing more
than to hear the rumble of your laughter
break the silence of a late spring night.

You kept my picture day photo in your wallet,
and I keep our last image together on the desk
where I got into private school,
where I realized I wanted to write,
where the dreams you once pushed me to achieve

became reality.
Your love for 90's detective shows,
the small things,
and slow moving Sunday mornings
survives in me.

On a tree-lined road
in the northeast
of a tranquil Texas town,
there lived a great philosopher

who rose before I could say goodbye. ■