
POETRY | FALL 2016

Tense

By Annie Vinsel

Past present tense.

I still want to speak of you in present tense,
or future but you are past,
loam now and
the little creatures of the forest play in your hair,
scratching into the fluid and soapy wax that was you,
having your guts for garters.

Butterflies light on the tiny patch of ground by your headstone
that the cemetery keeps bare for the mowers.
White cabbages and painted ladies.
Birds read your liver and fly
around me screeching the results.

I will not tense anymore,
turning my head when I hear steps on the stairs,
or catch the scent of Marlboros,
or when my dog who is too young to have known you
pricks his ears.
It's probably just the coyote he has a crush on
slinking down the street.

I know what is left of you now:
I was raised in a funeral home.
If you are lucky, you are loam,
dark and rich and home to woodland tiny insects,
walked on by songbirds,
zoomed by honeybees.
If your family spent the maximum,
you are fluid and soap,
rag bones and hank of thick hair,
isolated in a nest of boxes,
like a souvenir doll from Ukraine.

I am not normally tense,
but when I think of you

or hear you in my head
or see a back that curves like yours did
I do tense because you are past, past imperfect tense
forever now.

Annie Vinsel's day job is at a large academic hospital, doing residency troubleshooting and surgical photography. I began writing poetry in 2013 when a congenital joint problem made it impossible to paint large scale, and have had poetry and short stories published in Glimmer Train, Pulse, and COG. I wrote Tense on the tenth anniversary of my guy's sudden death. For a long time after he died, I had the common problem of speaking about him in the present tense, and I was interested in the two meanings of the word. Having been raised in a funeral home family, I have a pretty good idea of what things are like with his body now. It has always interested me that exhumations of people who were buried cheaply are much more pleasant than of those who received the full hermetically sealed package.

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