

A little introduction:

My mom (or Athena, whatever you feel comfortable with) is sad not to be here today to share this poem with you. I'm Anika Kildegaard, her daughter. Mom thanks David Fluegel and the Center for Small Towns for requesting this poem—writing it is a great honor and pleasure. Athena grew up in St. Peter, MN, where she has been for a couple weeks writing. This poem has grown, in part, out of that experience.

Everything Changes, Everything Stays the Same
A Meditation on Going Back to My Home Town

On a Sunday morning early
a few weeks after school started
when the sun was already three fingers
into the sky, but the people slept,
except perhaps a preacher at his desk
studying verses of Second Corinthians,
or a waitress tying on her checkered apron,
I rode straight down the middle of main street,
the two lights blinking caution, I rode
no hands, my arms straight out
as if the morning were entirely mine.

Today there's traffic day and night
and the lights change no matter the hour.

The stack of Sunday papers sat on the pavement
in front of the Nicollet Hotel, even then
not a hotel, but now not even the bar
it used to be, instead a chain store
with garish colors on its vain sign.

Then borne down by revelations of wiretapping
and promises of missile readiness, I'd make my way
down Third, business to business, tossing the papers
I'd rolled into plastic sleeves up the sidewalk.
Veith's bakery where my brother bought small white
paper bags of lemon drops he'd dole out grudgingly,
a white house where Veith and his family lived
upstairs above ovens and rolling pins, the house long gone
the address now a squat and tacky insurance firm,
the Flame bar now a coffee shop, the post office
still needing paint, Haney's bar stinking of piss
and cheap beer, now gone and paved over,
the frumpy Cat's Away Cafe now tidied up and straight-cornered,
renamed Oodles, the loss of initial consonant
clever maybe but suggesting a failure to finish anything,
like eating ot eef andwiches and still feeling hungry.
Piggly Wiggly now a Dollar General,

even then Karl's art studio—where fleshy and accommodating women
posed naked—was gone too soon, Karl odd and too hairy
for a town of 8000 honest saints, and the stairs leading up the side
of the old Kronberg Hotel even then torn down.
And all the way along, no one to be seen.

Nobody stays in town anymore, a friend from
those Tribune days tells me. The young people, they just leave.
It's the small town refrain.
Nobody stays, nothing changes, what are we doing
here anyway?

An old man, this was almost four decades ago,
parked his '52 Chevy across the street from the old-timer's bar,
not where college kids stepped in for a little fun,
but a narrow, dank and private place. The old man sat there for hours,
watching the patrons stride in the angled door, then stumble out later.
He could see who entered the bank, the post office,
watch school buses pull across Grace Street toward the hill.
Plenty of goings on to keep a person entertained.

He's still there I think, turning on his car from time to time
to crank the heat a little, or rolling the windows down
if it gets too hot. He doesn't have to talk to anyone
or even wave, he's self-contained and content. But
when he sees me coming, all the papers delivered,
riding no hands and homeward bound, he turns
and nods, a subtle tilted nod, enough
to let me know that things are going along just right.