Judges’ Commentary on "Perennials"

by Christopher LaFratte

Third Place Award in the 2013-14 Composition Program Writing Contest

Christopher LaFratte invites readers into his essay "Perennials" with these opening lines:

My father was well into his forties when he began collecting mantras. They were more or less financial slogans adopted from personal finance books, television shows, and blog posts of young but retired computer programmers. “Live below your means,” he’d recite, or, “Don’t ever be a slave to your possessions,” shifting his emphasis from one word to the next with each rehearsal. And it wasn’t long before my mother followed suit. “The world isn’t ready for another credit card,” she’d allege and then add, “and before you get involved with anyone, just remember: their debt will become your debt.”

LaFratte's quirky yet relatable first-person portrayal of family dynamics and values – in multiple senses of the word – is a delight to read, rife with well-pitched dialogue and self-aware reflections delivered by a witty narrator. This narrator is presumably a semi-fictionalized LaFratte, whose essay responded to a prompt asking him to "experiment…with the line between fact and fiction." Self-deprecating realism is a strength of the piece. He writes: "I grew up in a small town, primarily white and middle class with little to no diversity. Likewise, the only adversity I’ve ever faced involved a 30-minute commute to the nearest mall and no air conditioning in the summertime." Recalling his part-time job at CVS, the narrator continues, "People weren’t just throwing their money at you; they were throwing their misery along with it…my time was valued at $7.50/hour."

LaFratte's prose is peppered with wry figurative language throughout – in an apt turn of phrase in one example, "The winters in northeastern Pennsylvania were as unforgiving as Sallie Mae’s interest rates." His essay also succeeds due to a balance achieved between light and dark moments – he reveals how, "In truth, my parents had struggled to climb out of debt…working multiple jobs for which they had developed unadulterated hatred." In brief, haunting similes, he observes how his mother's registered nurse uniform "hung around her shoulders like chains, and my father’s tie felt to him like a noose."

These images foreshadow the final, even darker, territory the reader will be taken to – to the parents' gravesite, where his "mother, who always plans in advance, purchased…grave plots 30 years prior to actually needing them," to commemorate the second year of his father's passing. Even in the solemn occasion, LaFratte's use of humor is consistent:

“Why’d you choose flat gravestones again, mom?”
“The price was right,” she says, smiling, “and because I knew you’d hate them.”
He brings the reader up to date – he is 45 years old now, and claims he hasn't "...ever felt sadness, not even at my father’s funeral. The closest thing I’ve felt to it was vacancy, and vacancy is like his cemetery – although, I’m trying to change that with these daffodils." The logic behind the fitting title of "Perennials" is revealed at last as the narrator and his mother plant daffodils at his father's grave, flowers which "Like my mother and father, me, and even you...will flourish and perish. Come next April, though, they’ll rise from the ground once again, all yellow and jubilant, breathing life back into the graveyard." As they "bury the bulbs into shallow graves of their own," a final piece of dialogue to brings the textured and darkly comic piece full circle and to a close:

“How pretty they’ll be,” she says, tenderly patting soil with her right hand. “What a great investment.”
They’re about 99 cents a bulb.