

PhiladelphiaStories

Cultivating a community of writers, artists, and readers across the Delaware Valley

WINTER / 2019 / FREE



NIGHT WALKS SHANNA MERCERON / **SITZ-I-ZEN** BIM ANGST / **LOST NOVELLA** STEPHEN ST. FRANCIS DECKY

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ART



Towards the Light by Nancy Kress

For many years, Nancy Kress studied landscape painting, working realistically, en plein air. Today, her figurative work and landscapes combine realism with abstraction. Kress is a member of the Da Vinci Art Alliance, Philadelphia/Tri-State Artists Equity and Inliquid. Her work has been included in exhibits throughout the Philadelphia area including the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, Art in City Hall, Goggle Works Center for the Arts, 3rd Street Gallery and Pleiades Gallery in NYC.

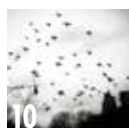


Moving Thru by Nancy Kress



Safe Passage by Marge Feldman

Marge Feldman, a Philadelphia native, is a formally schooled professional artist with a BFA from Syracuse University and a Teaching Certificate from Towson University. Marge has lived in seven different states and traveled extensively on 5 other continents. This rich experience is reflected in her work. She creates surrealscapes to describe the contradictions of our perplexing universe, using camera, computer and acrylic paint. Visit www.margfeldmanart.com.



Release by Danielle Hark

Danielle Hark is a writer, photographer, and mental health advocate living and creating in New Jersey. Hark's work has been published by the Huffington Post, Upworthy, Dr. Oz's You Beauty, The Mighty, Sweatpants and Coffee, Beliefnet, and Scary Mommy. In 2012 Hark founded the non-profit Broken Light Collective to empower people with mental illness using photography. She's been featured on NBC, BBC, NY

Times, Huffington Post, and WordPress. Hark's lectures and workshops include a 2016 TEDx talk. Visit Hark at www.daniellehark.com and on Instagram and Twitter @daniellehark.



When You Reach a Fork in the Road, Take It by Bill Sweeney

Bill Sweeney lives in Chadds Ford and has been painting since 1981. His work has been exhibited in juried shows at The State Museum of Pennsylvania, West Chester University, Widener University, and various community arts centers. His works have won awards in the Philadelphia Watercolor International Exhibit of Works on Paper, The Artist's Equity Members' Exhibitions, and several art centers' exhibits. He is a signature member of the Philadelphia Watercolor Society.



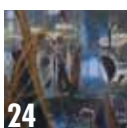
Cutting Edge by Arvid Bloom

Arvid J. Bloom looks for unusual angles and perspectives in common situations. His photographic intentions spring from a calling to help expand his viewers' mindfulness through awareness of beauty, patterns, and connections that surround them. When he is out with a group of photographers, he likes to aim his camera where others aren't looking.



Roadside Attraction 2015 by Anne Leith

Anne Leith spends her time painting nature and places, both in the plein air tradition and in the studio. With an MFA from the University of Pennsylvania and an MA in Contemporary Art History, she credits other artists as her teachers and inspiration. She also works like a fiend to achieve the same top-level results in her own paintings. Leith is a professor of art in several colleges and art centers in the Philadelphia area and creates video documentaries and oral histories. www.anneleith.com



Spirits in Istanbul by Rosalind Bloom

Rosalind Bloom is a graduate of PAFA and has an MA in art history from Columbia University. She taught at Villanova University and Rosemont College. Bloom exhibits regularly in one person and group shows in a variety of venues. Her work is in public and private collections. She is a founding member of Assemblage Artists Collective, a member of Inliquid, and active with the Women's Caucus for Art, and DaVinci Art Alliance. Visit rosalindbloom.net. and [Instagram@rosalind.bloom](https://www.instagram.com/rosalind.bloom).

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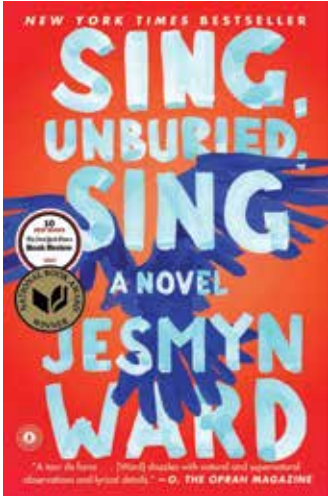
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Philadelphia Stories, founded in 2004, is a non-profit literary magazine that publishes the finest literary fiction, poetry, and art from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware and distributes free of charge to a wide demographic throughout the region. The mission of *Philadelphia Stories* is to cultivate a community of writers, artists, and readers in the Greater Philadelphia Area. *Philadelphia Stories* is a 501(c)(3). To support *Philadelphia Stories* and the local arts, please visit www.philadelphiastories.org to become a member today!



SUPPORT PROVIDED IN PART BY THE PHILADELPHIA CULTURAL FUND.

Sing, Philadelphia, Sing



Hello! This gorgeous issue marks the second collaboration between *Philadelphia Stories* and the Free Library's annual *One Book, One Philadelphia* program.

Last year, writers and artists submitted pieces exploring the theme of "music" that runs throughout the 2018 *One Book* featured selection, *Another Brooklyn*. That issue came into being as a chorus of voices in concert with one another, bound with the cover image of a painting of a saxophonist in Rittenhouse Square.

This year, with (we hope!) all of Philadelphia reading the 2019 featured *One Book* selection *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward, *PS* put out a call for work that illustrates and expounds upon the theme of "journeys" found in Ward's novel.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, a family is taking a road-trip north from their Gulf Coast farm through Mississippi, toward the notorious state penitentiary. As they're met with the danger and difficulty of the present, they encounter a ghost of the prison's past, and their journey goes beyond the geography of the South to cross time and generations. In this lyrical and layered 2017 National Book Award winner, Ward also draws on the framework of classic journeys such as *The Odyssey* and Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.

In the pages of this magazine are stories of all sorts of journeys. These are a few of the many threads in a larger conversation about *Sing, Unburied, Sing* taking place across the city and exploring other themes in the book, including mass incarceration, whole-family wellness, and the natural world.

For the past 17 years, *One Book, One Philadelphia* has sought to bring folks of all backgrounds together through reading and discussing a single book. From January 16 to March 13, 2019, more than 125 *One Book* programs will encourage dialogue citywide—including panel discussions, film screenings, arts workshops for all ages, performances, and more—starting with a live discussion featuring *Sing, Unburied, Sing* author Jesmyn Ward and WURD President and CEO Sara Lomax-Reese at the *One Book* Kickoff event on January 16 (Parkway Central Library, 7:30 p.m.). For a full calendar of events, visit freelibrary.org/onebook.

Philadelphia Stories and *One Book* share a cornerstone in our missions to cultivate accessibility and community for readers and writers. Endless gratitude goes to the *PS* editors and staff working to shine light on local talent, and to the featured writers and artists for their voices.

We hope you enjoy reading this amazing issue, as well as *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, both of which you can find at the Free Library's 54 locations throughout Philadelphia.

Brittanie Sterner,
Director of Programming, *One Book, One Philadelphia*

Philadelphia Stories Winter 2019 Issue Launch & Art Opening

Wednesday, February 13, 5:30 p.m. Reception and Art Opening | 6:30 p.m. Reading
Philadelphia City Institute, 1905 Locust Street

Join us to learn more about *One Book, One Philadelphia* and celebrate the launch of the winter 2019 issue of *Philadelphia Stories*, with readings and artwork exploring the theme of "journeys," on February 13. The art exhibition will be open for viewing at select times at Philadelphia City Institute from February 4 to February 28.

Please inquire at the reference desk for details.



Night Walks

Shanna Merceron

Sometimes I feel like someone's going to shoot me, right between my shoulder blades, when I'm walking alone at night. It's just me, the sidewalk, and the occasional dog shit most of the time, but other times I get the sense that someone is focusing right in that space on my spine. I try not to turn around and look, but I can't help myself; I want to catch the person in the act. I've only ever caught ghosts though. Just phantoms who kissed my neck and left. No one follows me.

I like to walk alone at night. I like to walk uphill, feel the burn in my calves, and wonder who takes their eyes off the road to look at me as they drive past. When cars move only in a blur, I turn my body into their speed, letting their wind ruffle my hair and spray the scent of gasoline in my face. I breathe in deep.

I wonder if, when you are shot, your body registers the sound of the bullet flying towards your spine first, or your body isn't listening at all, but instead dropping to its knees as a hot flash of blood spreads in the space between your shoulder bones. Eyes were there first, but now a bullet lies there. It has wiggled its way into your skin, buried its head and tucked its knees in for a good slumber. Your blood is a blanket. Your unconsciousness signals its takeover.

My Aunt Cheryl used to say I'm always looking over my shoulder because I let trouble follow me. I was walking alone, on the night he called me over. I've entertained the idea that I look like a madam or a whore. I've got long hair to grab onto and a shape to beg on your knees to touch. *Dangerous*. I won't change my shoes of the day for my nightly walks. Working at an art gallery called for stiff skirts and standing on sticks all day, and I never bothered to change, never bothered to throw on a jacket. Shouldn't my confidence be intimidating? *I am invincible*.

It didn't surprise me when I got whistles and men clicked their teeth at me from the steps of their houses and offered me a cigarette and other ways for them to blow off steam. But I just walked past them. Sometimes that's when the spot on my back feels the sharpest; that's when I think the shot is going to happen.

He pulled alongside me in his car and drove real slow, his wheels crunching the beer-bottle glass littered on the side of the road.

"What's your story?" he asked. I tried not to look at him and just kept on with my walk, but his eyes were on my throat and I wanted to move them to my face. I turned to him and

stopped walking. He stopped driving. I leaned my forearms on his rolled down window, shoving my hands into the space in his car where hot air blew right onto my fingertips. I smiled at him, and I prepared my accent—the one where I sounded like Aunt Cheryl—and wished I had gum in my mouth. Aunt Cheryl always had gum.

"Fifty dollas for whatevas in my pocket," I said. I would have smacked a bubble right then. I gave him a wink. My pockets were empty.

"I don't want what you've got in your pockets," he said. I was too close. I could only see his mouth. It was a good mouth, plump dark pink lips and a jaw that hadn't been shaved for three days. The game is harder when they're pretty.

I pulled my hands out of his car. I kept on with my walk. He drove over more beer glass.

"I asked you for your story," he said.

"Just because ya ask doesn't mean I have ta give it to ya," I almost forgot to channel Aunt Cheryl; my words were weak. It had been too long since I lived on the shore. It didn't matter now anyways; Aunt Cheryl was dead.

I stopped walking. He drove too far past me, so he reversed, one tire ending up on the curb. I glanced up and down the dark residential street. I stayed closer to the lights, closer to the road. Farther from the steps of the houses and metal grates designed to ensnare the heels of my shoes.

"My story is whateva's in my pockets." I put my hands on my hips. "That's all I have for ya tonight," I said. He leaned his body to the window and shoved a fifty dollar bill my way. I took it. He smiled. I tucked it into my bra and then pulled out the insides of my pockets.

"I've got nothing," I said. His face heated and a muscle feathered in his jaw. I stepped back before he could say anything. I kept walking.

He drove past me again the next night. I was wearing my favorite dress; it was covered in black sequins that took on the amber color of the streetlights. But I had on the same bra from the other night, it laced up in the back. Another layer of protection. He didn't come in slow this time but instead pulled his car right up to me and stopped. The halt of the car caused the crystals on string hanging from his rearview mirror to jingle and clank together.

"What's your name?" he said, attempting friendliness. I



admired the effort. He didn't scare me, this man, with his questions and his money and his five o'clock shadow. He should have, like the men usually do, but his eyes didn't linger and sizzle my skin. When his car was next to me, the target on my back was gone. I felt relieved; I could focus on the threat of him rather than an omniscient one. *He's not dangerous.*

I tucked a piece of hair behind my ear and looked at the ground when I drawled, "Annabelle."

"The fuck it is," he said. He looked like he wanted to spit. Men like to spit on the ground, and sometimes you can tell it's been too long since they last entertained the impulse. He pursed his dark pink lips like spit wanted to fly out. Instead he said, "Annabellies don't walk alone at night and pretend to sell drugs. Annabellies go on dates at ice cream parlors and never cut their hair."

"You're right," I said. "The name's Rita." I puffed out my chest and rolled my rs, tried for a saucy wink. If he wanted to play, we could play.

He leaned over and opened his passenger side door. "Get in," he said. I felt a rush of heat roll through me. Game on.

I got in.

Aunt Cheryl was killed in her own home. It was a robbery, the man wanted the Christmas presents under the tree. Taking out her gun to shoot him, Aunt Cheryl told me to leave the house. I heard the shots fire. *She was dangerous.* I went back into the house. Two guns fired, two bodies dead. *She wasn't invincible.* I always knew Aunt Cheryl would die at home. She had agoraphobia; she only left the house for church. I walked out of the house that night and I'm still walking.

His car was very clean. I wish I knew what kind of car it was, but I couldn't tell the difference between anything but a truck and a sedan and a blue one and red one. His car was black. His license plate had three zeros in it. Maybe a five. I reached up to touch the crystals, but he smacked my hand and told me not to fuck with them.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Why, Annabelle Rita, we are going to get ice cream." He kept his eyes on the road. I rolled the knob to turn on the radio and kept hitting the seek button until smooth jazz filled the car. I felt a small smile curve my lips. He couldn't kill me if smooth jazz was playing; that would be ridiculous. My stomach churned with hunger and anticipation. Ice cream was harmless, I guessed. I wished I was walking. It was stifling in the car. I tried to unroll my window but he had them locked.

He pulled into the parking lot of an all-night diner, and he was out of the car before I undid my seatbelt. The heels of my boots fell onto gravel as I slipped out of his car and trudged up to the front of the diner. I realized that I could run away. I could turn around and walk back to my house and I wouldn't know what would happen with this man, but maybe it was for the best. That was the problem, though; I wouldn't know the outcome if I left. I had to keep playing. He went into the diner and I was alone in the parking lot. I felt a chill spread in goose pimples on my thighs and the spot between my shoulders grew hot. I turned around but no one was there. The lot was empty save two trucks and the car I came in, the crystals glinting in the light from the neon diner sign. I hurried inside.

He sat in a booth in the back of the restaurant, his back against the wall, watching me as I walked over to him. He looked like he belonged in that painting, the one with the men with hats and the women in the diner in the dark. His un-brushed hair was wild and his dark eyes flashed a puzzle I wanted to piece together. Why hadn't I noticed he was wearing a suit? He had four rings on each hand, and they were tightly gripping the sides of his arms. I suddenly wondered if I had made the right choice. I felt cagey and my eyes darted to the woman working behind the counter. She was probably seventy years old, but she weighed two times what he did and I could use her as a shield if I had to. I waved at her, catching her attention over the milkshake glasses she had lined up on the countertop. Her mouth opened but her expression didn't change.

"Chocolate or vanilla?" he said.

"Strawberry," I said as I slid into the booth. I realized that all I could see was him, and the peeling yellow wallpaper behind him with a framed photograph of some local celebrity.

"Switch seats with me," I said.

"Why?" He was running his eyes all over my face, like little ants they were, trying to find something worthwhile.

"I gotta face the door," I said. Aunt Cheryl always kept her eyes on the door. I got out of the booth. I hovered over him with my arms crossed. I debated tapping my foot but then decided that would be too much.

He gazed up at me, meeting my eyes this time, and I could see my face in his pupils. I looked pale and angry. My eyeliner was smudged on my right eye. I swiped at it and gestured for him to move with my other hand.

"I like to see the door too," he said.

"Why?" I said.

"Safety." *Dangerous.*

"Me too." My spine began to itch in an uncomfortable way. I felt the urge to shudder and try to work it out. I slid into the booth next to him, forcing him into the corner.

"Now we can both see the door," I said. He grunted. We sat in silence, watching the door until the old lady came over to our table.

"What will it be?" she said. She didn't seem tired or bothered by our presence. I wondered if time existed differently for her.

"Two cups of strawberry ice cream, please," he said.

"Strawberry? We still have some chocolate, Knox." The woman almost smiled.

He shook his head. "No, thank you. Her choice," he said.

The woman walked away and I realized I had never asked him for his name. "Knox. That's your name?" I said. He looked uncomfortable. He twisted the ring on his thumb.

"I go by Knox, yes."

I took him in. His hair was black like oil and it curled around his face. His eyes were dark too, shadowed by thick eyebrows and eyelashes. But there was still warmth in his face. He was thirty, maybe; I wasn't good with numbers. He either hadn't shaved in days, or he purposely kept his face like that. His suit was gray; it was well-made and well-worn. His rings were all silver. One of them had a purple crystal in it. I liked him, I decided, dangerous or not. Was he dangerous? I wanted to find out. Did I want him to be dangerous? I twisted the taste of that thought in my mouth for a moment.

"What are you doing?" he said. He muttered his thanks

when the old lady gave us our ice cream and then shuffled back behind the counter. She watched us, clutching a towel in her hands. Was she worried for me or him? I debated giving her a wink.

Knox picked up his spoon and pushed back his sleeve, making sure not to stain it strawberry. I kept my spoon on the table and ran a fingernail along the cold steel. "You don't look like a Knox," I said.

"Oh?" He took a bite that was basically his entire scoop of ice cream. I watched his tongue flick to the corner of his mouth and clean up the cream that was stuck there.

"I imagine Knox is a redneck who steals from gas stations, or a skinny nerd who hacks computers," I said. My accent was long gone at this point. Aunt Cheryl said I spoke like how my momma used to, without any salt or pepper. "Both of those examples were criminals," he said. He put his spoon back into the empty bowl.

"Are you a criminal?" I asked. He could be. He gave me money for imaginary drugs. Would he have kidnapped me if I didn't get into the car? He could have a gun. I thought about pressing up against him to check for one. Maybe he thought I was a prostitute and this was our pre-coital meal. I once walked to a convenience store with a man because he said he would buy me a Slurpee but then he wanted a blowjob in the bathroom.

"No," he said. He motioned for me to eat. I took a bite of the ice cream. I hated strawberry.

"You know my name. Tell me yours. For real this time," he said.

"Why are names so important anyways? Call me woman, call me Person A. I'm just another human sharing the same space as you." *Bullshit.*

"It's important that I know your name."

I forced down another bite of ice cream. "Angela," I said. I wanted to say Cheryl. I wanted to be Aunt Cheryl, but Aunt Cheryl didn't lie every time her mouth opened and Aunt Cheryl didn't risk her life for entertainment, and Aunt Cheryl didn't have voices in her head.

"Nope."

"Claire." I tried for a thin-lipped smile.

"No."

"Edna." I clanked my spoon back in the bowl. He pushed himself further in the corner of the booth to get a better look at me. The old lady came over to get our dishes. I caught the name on her nametag. *Edna.*

"Oops," I said. Knox frowned. He wasn't as pretty when he frowned. I put my hands over his on the tabletop. "What do you want to call me? Pick a name and you can call me that." I was earnest and sincere, like a Cassandra, maybe. But he held his frown.

I gazed into Knox's eyes and forced a smile. His expression was unreadable. *Is he dangerous? Is he dangerous?*

Edna came over with the check. She handed it to Knox but he jabbed his thumb at me and said, "She's got it." I gulped back my shock and took the bill.

"I thought you were treating me," I said.

"I am." Knox reached over and put his hand on my shoulder. He slid his hand down and into the collar of my dress, reaching for the fifty-dollar bill still tucked under my bra strap. He put the money on the table and shoved me out of the

booth. I was chilled. How did he know the money was still there? *Dangerous.*

Knox led the way out of the diner and back to his car. He turned to me before unlocking it. Before he could speak I said, "It's Makenna. My name is Makenna," Maybe my honesty would throw him; I wasn't going to back down.

But Knox just nodded and unlocked the car. "Kinda weird," he said.

"Your name is Knox!" I shouted, but he shut his door on my words.

Once I was in the car, he sped out of the lot. It could have been my imagination, but I thought I saw the diner sign flicker off behind us.

"What do you do for a living?" Knox asked me. He put on his blinker and merged to go onto the highway. "Are you old enough to have a job?"

I sucked a sticky stain of ice cream off my finger. When my parents died and I went to Aunt Cheryl, she forgot to enroll me in pre-school because she didn't think I was old enough. It seems I've kept my youthful glow. "I'm old enough," I said. "I take a lot of walks. I like to walk."

"That's what you do? You walk?" he said. He thought I was crazy.

"I'm not a streetwalker, if that's what you're asking. I'm just telling you something about myself. I like to take walks."

"At night? Alone? Dressed like that?"

"Aw, I'm going to adopt you as my dad." I tried to pinch his cheek, but he swatted my hand away. He was right hand dominant; I remembered to check. Aunt Cheryl always told me to check. I looked at his suit again. His jacket was tucked behind

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the seat belt clicker and I could see his silk shirt. No holster, no gun. His hand left the wheel to briefly scratch his belly. *He's not dangerous.*

I settled into my seat more. I put my feet up on the dashboard, my boots sprinkling some gravel onto the carpet. "It's my call of the wild," I said, "I feel like I have to walk, even if I don't want to, but I like to do it. The air is better at night. The sounds are different, and I'm alone. I can listen to myself." I spoke like it was bullshit, but it was truth.

Knox got off at an exit. "You're kind of crazy," he said.

"You picked me up off the street."

"You got in."

We let that sit.

We came to a red light and Knox ran a hand through his hair, disturbing one of the curls that perfectly wound around the curve of his ear. I tore my eyes away from that disaster and watched as the light turned green. Did I like this man?

"Why did you talk like you were from up north earlier?" he asked, looking at me, looking at my own ears maybe.

"The light is green," I said.

"Are you from up north?" The light turned yellow.

"Jersey," I said. I didn't miss New Jersey. Too many people where I lived. They overcrowded the sidewalks. *Aunt Cheryl is dead. Aunt Cheryl is dead.*

"Huh." Knox wrapped his fingers around the steering wheel, gripping it so tight his knuckles turned white. Then he let it go. The light turned red.

"Accent wasn't bad. Nice and subtle," he said.

"The light is green again, aren't you gonna go?" I looked in the rearview. No one was behind us.

"We're talking," he said. "I'm in no rush."



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We sat through three more light changes. I thought I saw a car pull up behind us, and I turned around in my seat. Nothing was there.

"Do you ever feel like you're being watched?" I asked.

Knox stiffened, but he kept his eyes on the changing lights. "Sure," he said, "who doesn't?" He reached up and tapped one of his hanging crystals.

"I always feel like I'm being watched." I felt like I was religious again and I was in confessional. Aunt Cheryl used to take me to church, saying it would tame my wild ways. She told me I danced with the devil too much. I told her the devil was in my head.

Knox turned his body to face me. "You do?" he asked. I nodded. He drove through the red light, driving fast, and he took us to a children's park, a place usually busy in the day, but desolate at night. *Dangerous.*

The light of the street lamps shone on the candy-slick red of the super slide situated next to rows of monkey bars and a climbing wall lined with knotted rope. I used to walk to a park on the weekends from Aunt Cheryl's house. She couldn't go with me, so I went alone. But when a little girl went missing she forbade me to go again.

Not meaning to say it out loud, I said, "You're going to murder me." I glanced up at him, as he turned off the car. "You're going to kill me." My stomach fell to the floor. I was sweating everywhere, even between my fingers. My shoulders started to ache. *How could I be so stupid?* Somewhere Aunt Cheryl was laughing.

"Stop, I'm not going to kill you, geez." Knox twisted off the ring with the purple crystal on it. He held it up to me, the light from the street lamps breaking through the car window. "This is a raw amethyst. It will help with your intuition. It will bring you clarity, stability, and inner peace." He dropped the ring into my hand. "I want you to have it," he said.

My panic was replaced with comforting confusion. "Does this mean we're engaged?" I said. Knox closed his eyes, probably in frustration.

"Ask me what I do for a living," he said.

"What do you do for a living?" I tried on the ring but it was too big for all my fingers. I tucked it into my bra for safekeeping.

"I like to go for drives. I like to drive, usually at night, because at night there are fewer things happening but more to see. Things are easier to notice. My crystals guide me. Usually I am an observer, but sometimes I choose to intervene."

"Cool, so you have a job like mine. I thought you were going to say you were Buddha."

Knox sighed. "Makenna, I saw someone following you."

You're not invincible.

The panic came roaring in. My back caught fire, my shoulders aching with pain, the target, the bullseye on my back burning into my skin. "Did they have a gun?" I asked.

Knox shook his head. "No," he said. My spine iced.

"Oh," I said, "alright." I rolled my neck and shoulders, tried to shake away my sinking feeling. My heart was pounding like organ keys at church and my mind was stomping its feet on my skull. *I knew it! I knew it!*

"Who was it? Why were they following me? Why did you follow me too? Do I collect stalkers?" I said. I thought about getting out of the car. My hysteria needed more space. I tried





RELEASE BY DANIELLE HARK

the handle. He had the damn child lock still on.

"I've seen you walking for a long time, but I never thought much of you. But the past few nights I saw this man get up and trail after you. That's why I pulled my car over the other night. It scared him off."

"This is weird," I said.

"I know," he said.

"I always had a feeling, I've always felt like someone was there," I said. *You're going to get shot, you're going to get shot. Someone is going to shoot you —*

Knox tapped my chest, right where I put the ring. "Let it guide you," he said.

"Can you take me back to where you picked me up? I want to walk home." My head was spinning. Maybe it was his damn crystals. I still didn't know if I could trust Knox, or who he was, really, but he did what I asked. The drive was short and silent. I was upset, yet a hot rush of anticipation was rolling through me again. The game was still on.

I got out of the car and slammed the door. "Thank ya for the ride, hun!" I waved like Aunt Cheryl would. Knox nodded, or at least I thought he did. I could only see his mouth again from my vantage point on the sidewalk. He drove away. I walked home.

At work, I would watch the sun set through the wide windows of the gallery, watch as the coming of night distorted the faces of the figures in the paintings once I turned off the accent lights. I didn't stop my walks. I wore what I wanted. I traversed the streets as if they were my own, because in a way, they were. I started wearing a jacket, though; Aunt Cheryl always told me I could tease Satan without inviting him inside.

I've made it this far, I thought to myself, a week after the encounter with Knox, as I trudged up one of my favorite hills, the rise showcasing the lights of the city behind the residential street. I felt the burn in my legs again and savored the feeling. If I'm going to be shot, I'll be shot. *You're invincible*. I tried to rationalize away my feeling of unsettlement. Aunt Cheryl never got out much and she died having done and having seen noth-

ing. But I'm going to walk and see it all. *You're dangerous*.

I almost miss-stepped and ruined the heel of my shoe. I wore the crystal ring on a chain around my neck like a trophy. I felt it get hot, searing into my chest, the way I would feel between my shoulders. I turned around and I saw him.

Knox was leaning against a lamppost, trying to pull a cigarette out of his pocket like he had been there for a while. I knew better. I strode over to him, the decline of the hill making my steps louder and harsher. *You're dangerous*. Knox gave up his charade with the cigarettes and threw the box down on the ground. He met me in my descent. I could smell whisky on his suit. He said, "What's your story?"

I stopped walking. A spider worked its way down my spine. He moved toward me, slinking his body around me, fitting it where it didn't belong. "What's your name?" he said. His breath smelled like strawberry. He splayed his hand on my chest, the rings glinting under the streetlight. I shoved him off. He came at me again, and I hooked my foot behind his right leg and took him down. His head hit the ground with a crack, causing his curls to bounce around his face. He smiled at me as if he felt no pain. *Dangerous*. I wanted a gun. I wanted to roll him over, and fire, right between his shoulder blades. Watch blood swallow him whole. I would roll my neck, shake my shoulders; call myself *Free*. But Knox was still smiling at me, and I was still standing there, empty handed. *You're not invincible, you're not—*

A car pulled up, its tires hitting the curb. The locks unclicked. A man rolled down the passenger window. His face was in shadow and he said, "Get in."

Shanna Merceron is a fiction writer born on the Jersey Shore but raised on the East coast of Florida. No one believes her when she says she's from "Flah-rida." She is in the second year of her MFA at Hollins University, currently at work on a story collection thesis that explores the darker aspects of humanity and pushes the boundaries of the strange. When not writing she is an English language teacher and photographer. Her work has been featured in the Florida Times Union and the Hollins Critic. This is her first fiction publication.

Oh This Route–Not 66

Poem by B.E. Kahn

A chauffeured Jaguar, white, awaits.
For now I tend my own modest rose.
Poems at the door, early, late, gather.
A dream ladder climbs. Ten wishes rise.

The plain open road of life
crosses this country. Green hills shelter
song-filled home, walls all red and gold.
Sky windows

into my prayers. Two soft chairs
tea cups, tango moon, garden path.



A Pushcart Prize nominee, recipient of a CBE, Pew funded grant & other prizes; author of three chapbooks, the latest, *Nightspark: The Zoe Poems*. She has led poetry groups: interfaith, women's, various others. Her work appears in many fine reviews. (Visit www.bekahn.com)

Philadelphia

Poem by Amy Small-McKinney

Beauty was hard for me to find on a spare cot or in the back
of a truck, when I had no home. & then I did,

when beauty had bars on its windows & a Coleus sat on my sill
with its purple hearts & old Tony sold me necessities
& came to know my name & the butcher without a thumb brought a Thanksgiving turkey
to my front door & young Tony upstairs lost a finger in some war, or so he said.
I was happy to hike the flight of stairs to sit with him and talk.
He borrowed a glass vase, nothing more, &

at the nearby market, startled pigs & cheeses hung on racks,
women peddled chestnuts & nutmeg, their voices ancient pigeons promising no hunger.

A Vietnamese restaurant, the place for cheap soup with long noodles & airy leaves floating.
A boat, I could sit for hours & row away from loneliness.

No one knew what they meant to me then.
The green leafy soup stars or the nine-fingered butcher,
his attentiveness filled me like a luxurious meal.

To tell you I was hungry is beside the point, very young,
left home, no choice, love rationed like air.

Now I think I know beauty,
look up at stars, some have names,
are gifts for birthdays.
What I want to say: how little I know of anyone's life.

We are a country, a world, a universe of division.

We imagine *this* must be beauty:

Doesn't everyone love Evie's homemade *Nduja*, her hair pulled back in a chignon?
Or this: A woman drinks morning coffee, mistrusts newly leveled fields,
worries for her seed beds.

Or: Summer & a man sits beside the stoop of his sweltering house playing checkers, waits
at least five minutes to move his piece.

& I have found it, at times, when the train rumbles under my window,
its constancy a parliament of beautiful owls, returning.



Amy Small-McKinney won The Kithara Book Prize 2016 (Glass Lyre Press) for her second full-length collection of poems, *Walking Toward Cranes*. Most recently, her poems have appeared in *Connotation Press: An Online Artifact* and are forthcoming in *The Indianapolis Review*. She facilitates poetry workshops and offers independent study in Philadelphia.

The Oldest Daughter Flies to Dublin

Poem by Ellen Stone

Over northern Canada she may feel most alone,
although it is the longest day of the year

and the sun (diffuse or beacon-like, depending)
will follow her over those low-slung mountains

that go on and on reminding her how big the world
is—boreal forest of larch, spruce, birch spreading

into bogs, fens, black marshy sponge reflecting sky—
pinprick of silver plane, no more than a sliver, really

like the germ of an idea. She will look out the plane
window & think of who lives down there, what girl,

like her, is not sure, but goes on through her days
anyway—maybe surrounded by trees like woodland

caribou, shy & sturdy—who everyone will likely
one day depend upon. But for now, the other self,

the one her body houses now, full of this nebulous
wonder. I hope she feels like cloud then, weightless,

unformed, with what she sees below—that spread
of nubby canopy—at once, both factual & dreamlike.

While she, full at the same time, of doubt & precision,
a shaft of thin sharp air, knifes her way through.



Ellen Stone was raised in northeastern Pennsylvania. Her poems have appeared in *Passages North*, *The Collagist*, *The Museum of Americana*, and *Fifth Wednesday*. She's the author of *The Solid Living World* (Michigan Writers' Cooperative Press, 2013). Ellen's poems have been nominated for a Pushcart prize and Best of the Net.



SITZ-i-zen

Bim Angst

The child was dead before Irina Putavich plunged her hands into the scalding water and lifted him startled-faced to the air. The baby was limp. As his round nose and fat cheeks rose above the shining scrim of clear water, he did not open his small heart-shaped mouth to suck in air. His head flopped back as Irina lifted him, the skin of her hands reddening around his waist as she drew him to her bony chest. *Misha Misha Misha* she whispered, as if she were trying to wake him.

It was the smell of Irina's hair smoldering that brought her mother, Vlada, trundling to the kitchen, where Irina knelt on the floor, the heat from the cast iron of the stove searing the loose ends of her hair. Vlada slid her felted feet across the new linoleum rug to peer over her 16-year-old daughter's shoulder. The beatific face of her grandson was losing its startling russet color. Crystalline droplets from the few golden curls at the back of his head broke ripples in the washtub from which still rose fingers of steam.

At the drowning of his son, Laszlo Putavich was not called from the mine. Instead, he returned home at the normal hour. The bricks of the alley walkway were wet, as he might have expected, but no trousers hung on the clothesline, and the washtub was tilted against the arbor as if it had been thrown. Laszlo entered the quiet kitchen to see his wife rocking in the big chair near the stove. Irina was wrapped in a sheet, her chin on her chest as if she were asleep, yet, softly, she moaned.

On the kitchen table sat the laundry basket, one wicker handle hanging loose. Laszlo did not detect the odor of the lye soap Irina used to scrub the miners' frayed clothes. Neither did the kitchen smell of lard or onions as it should have, but instead of hot metal and something that burned his nostrils and made his windpipe catch, something like the torching off of the last fur on a hide.

From deep within the house came the drone of prayer and a muffled half-sob. In the far room, Vlada was on her knees—how did she get down, he marveled, how would she haul her great bulk up? Vlada's oxen shoulders heaved. Beside her knelt Father Yspecky, the prayer for the departed on his lips in Russian.

It was then that Laszlo turned to the basket, where he saw the face of his swaddled son.

She had not been a beautiful bride, nor eager, but Irina had done her best to please Laszlo in the year and eleven months in

which they had lain as husband and wife. It was not Irina's fault, Laszlo pondered, that Vlada was of the old country and treated Irina as if she were an ignorant serf. The new version of serfdom as Franz Josef's conscript was exactly why Laszlo Putavich's parents had sent their sons from the vineyards of Uzhhorod Raion, why, in the company of his older brother, Laszlo had trudged across Europe to Hamburg wearing three layers of clothing, a pair of too-big shoes, and an uncle's overcoat.

Irina was, Laszlo knew, his best chance to avoid becoming the lost soul of a man without a country, a man without a family, a man who prayed but did not worship, who worked hard but lost his pay in the bottle. And so, when his friend Mykhail Kruchevich was crushed by a coal car that broke loose when the pillars were robbed in the Number 9 Clareville mine, Laszlo took old Misha's lunch pail to the home of his wife and daughter and sat with them through the wailing and banging of pots that followed. Two days later, in his embroidered shirt, Laszlo Putavich entered the blue-domed Russian Orthodox church for old Misha's funeral, not only to smooth the pall and bear Misha's poor coffin but to return from the graveyard with the dimpled hand of Misha's rotund widow tucked in his elbow and the offer of her remaining daughter in marriage pouring like oil into his ear. Before the month was out, Laszlo had an American-born wife and Vlada had a strong-bodied wage-earner under her roof.

At fourteen, Irina knew hard work and laundry. She rose to make her father breakfast, to pack his lunch into the metal pail while her mother slept, Vlada's rheumatism and bad heart swelling her limbs and giving her reason to lay abed. Irina's hands were raw and the texture of burlap. Yet Irina's narrow fingers worked nimbly, and she could starch and press flat the fine seams and lace edging of the table linens in the big houses of the English families to whom Vlada farmed her out. Irina was of America and knew both how to pinch the edges of pierogi and how to slice vegetables into the ridiculous shapes of budding flowers. Irina was of two worlds and knew both how to season halupki and how to braise a rack of lamb not big enough to simmer a broth. Before wax in a kistka hardened, Irina could draw a layer of design on an eggshell as had Christian women in the old country, and yet as a woman in this new place she could with a needle reattach a fancy mother-of-pearl button without a prick to the neck of the squirming boy still wearing the shirt. What Irina did not know of either world, Laszlo would gladly have taught her, if he had known any more than she.



All Laszlo brought with him from the old country, beyond the poor clothes, were sunflower seeds and rootstock from the four varieties of grape his parents tended for the owner of the Slavic land on which the family had lived longer than anyone could recount. The night before her sons' leave-taking, Laszlo's mother pulled up a hot stone with a poker and withdrew a small jar of coins from the pit below. These few she had split into two pitiful stacks, sewing each coin and cuttings from the grapes into pockets she had fashioned in the hems of the threadbare overcoats she gave to Laszlo and his brother, Vasyli. Laszlo kissed his parents and sisters and the next morning followed Vasyli's back, scraping seeds from the dead heads of his mother's *sonyashnyki* into his pocket as they passed. The boys settled into the feel of wearing shoes as they shuffled through the fields to a dirt road Laszlo had never seen before, the light of the known world burning up in the Carpathians behind them. One at a time, Laszlo ground the sunflower seeds of home in his teeth, flicking shell off his tongue to the dirt as Vasyli talked, talked, talked, and the two of them walked, walked, walked. Eventually, they met the ocean. Vasyli cut the coins from the hems of their coats and paid their steerage across.

The boys were like so many others on the far side. So many families. So many young men. Vasyli followed a braggart shipmate and his vodka bottle to a Hunky settlement in Canada. Laszlo drew from his pocket a worn slip of finger-softened paper on which his mother had with the help of the priest carefully written in ink and capital English letters the name of the town to which his father's friend's cousin's eldest son had emigrated in

the New World: CLAREVILLE. Beneath, in script, she or Father Grigori had penned *Pennsylvania*. Somehow, he did not remember how, Laszlo had arrived.

He had also been taken in, all three Orthodox churches welcoming him as yet another son of the motherland. After nights of sleeping on a storeroom floor, after days of eating red-beet eggs offered from a jar in the barroom he was allowed to sweep, Laszlo located countryman Stanis Shandrushavich and, for a time, shared a boarding house bed with this pal who could vouch for him when he made the rounds, using his most important new and difficult-to-pronounce word: *work*.

By the time he was invited to join the company of men smoking and sharing a bottle in the payday shade of Mykhail Kruchevich's back porch, Laszlo Putavich had through polite deference and the showing of adequate American cash secured his own bed and meals in the house of Baba Smolnyki, kitchen matron of Saint Michael the Archangel Russian Orthodox Church. Laszlo was not only well fed but adopted by the church's murder of crow-garbed babas, who were alarmed that he approached the age of 20 without a wife. This, along with the amount of coal he could shovel into a lokie car, assured that Laszlo's days as a man without family or roots would not last long. His name was mentioned more than once to Mykhail and Vlada Kruchevich.

Of Mykhail Kruchevich's five children—all daughters—only spindly Irina, age fourteen, remained at home. Irina caught no one's eye. Behind Irina, the babushka-ed Vlada loomed, casting a dark shadow on any thought a young man might entertain about the wraithlike girl. Even had Irina flesh and sway to spare,

the men of Clareville who could speak English would have diverted their gaze to the sky or the frayed tips of their hand-me-down shoes had Irina drifted into view.

And drift Irina did. The child was, to all appearances, without a mind of her own. Some mistook this for stupidity, but Irina's quiet obedience to Vlada's barked commands shielded her not only from confrontation with the quick-to-slap matriarch but nurtured the fragile shoots of Irina's dreams. In her mind, Irina ranged widely. Sent beyond the confines of their yard to purchase butter or deliver laundry, Irina peered into yards and windows, walking fast enough to avoid Vlada's wrath. Irina saw that not all gardens grew cabbages. Beyond the patch, the windows were covered by lace—and in lamplight, the walls beyond the fine curtains were papered with colorful cloth and hung with gleaming mirrors. These led her to believe: She might, God willing, one day live a different life.

And then Laszlo happened onto the porch of the patch house Irina called home.

The morning before the afternoon Laszlo and Irina stood together hands on a Bible in the priest's wife's parlor, Vlada hauled herself up the sagging stairs to the second floor. She directed Irina to gather her church dress and bundle of nightgown, bloomers, and summer and winter stockings from the back bedroom she had shared with her sisters. Then, Vlada led Irina to the larger front bedroom dominated by the imposing headboard of what had been Vlada and Mykhail's marriage bed. On the coverlet, Vlada laid a gossamer white nightgown with smocked bodice. After the keg in the church hall smoker foamed its end, Laszlo appeared at the kitchen door with a paper sack of belongings. Vlada, who had been waiting in the rocker, led Laszlo on his first visit to the second floor, where the door to the front room was open, a lamp was lit, and Irina was curled under the quilt. Vlada laughed as she closed the door.

Laszlo set the sack on the floor and hung his jacket. He smiled shyly at Irina before he sat on the edge of the bed and removed his shoes. And then Laszlo Putavich, still wearing his new American-made shirt and trousers, stretched out on the felt mattress, nestled his beer-brained head into a pillow whose feathers still bore the scent of Mykhail Kruchevich's oiled hair, slung his arm over Irina, and fell drunk asleep.

The next morning, Laszlo Putavich presented Irina for the first time with the only fully mature and functioning male member she would ever encounter. The sound of a heavy stream in the night-pot woke Irina as dawn greyed at the windows. Irina had, of course, seen male privates in the snail- and grub-like forms they took on the small boys her duties required her to prepare for school or naps. But the member that her new husband Laszlo shook over the pot was as big as the spigot of a water pump. Laszlo had stepped out of his trousers and knee-length drawers, the hard globes of his tallow-white behind glowing. Still wearing his new shirt and white socks, Laszlo turned, his part in his palm. Seeing Irina awake, Laszlo grinned, and the thing in his hand stiffened.

Laszlo climbed back into the bed and lay gazing sweetly at Irina. Irina pulled the covers to her chin. Laszlo's thing stretched the sheet, pointing toward the ceiling with persistent rigidity. Once she had seen it, Irina could not take her wide eyes away from the spot where the dark tip pressed a bit of wetness onto the sheet. As the sun rose and Irina became more visible, Laszlo began to believe he was married and that there was now a

woman next to him—and that she was his wife and would not refuse him.

Except refuse him she did. When Laszlo reached to embrace her, Irina slapped his face and bolted down the hall shrieking about Laszlo's *deformity*. His member not yet calmed, Laszlo was struggling into his pants when Irina reached the stairs, where Vlada blocked the retreat and commanded Irina to return to her marriage bed and attend to her wifely duty.

Laszlo let his trousers drop.

After a few weeks, female wailing and whimpering ceased to seep around the door and out the windows of the front bedroom of the house that had been Mykhail Kruchevich's. Irina's cheeks grew rosy. Laszlo whistled as he walked.

He brought her chocolates and cherries. She fried for him the biggest piece of meat and at the kitchen sink scrubbed his back with a brush. She burnished his getting-married shoes with melted candle wax and, when his barked knuckles split and festered, she salved his cuts with rendered chicken fat, wrapping his hands in clean strips of old sheets.

It was Vlada who pronounced the pregnancy. Watching her daughter throw laundry over the lines strung across the kitchen, Vlada gestured from the rocker for the girl to come close. Vlada's gnarled fingers cupped Irina's belly.

"Before the green leaves go red," she announced to Laszlo, who beamed.

Irina pondered how the baby had come to be in her belly, but Laszlo, his head on her shoulder as they lay in the big bed, thrust an index finger in and out of the circle he'd made with the other hand. Irina's eyebrows lifted in surprise, Laszlo imitated her, and they fell on each other laughing.

When baby Misha arrived, he brought with him the strings and clots of Irina's insides, washed from Vlada's slippery fingers after she pulled him from her screaming daughter the dark Sunday he was born. Misha's birth stained permanently the bed on which he had been conceived. Misha thrived, and Irina survived the fever, but the stitches with which the old doctor days later closed the bleeding chasm between Irina's legs healed into a scar half the size of a towrope and just as taut.

Relations for Laszlo and Irina changed.

In the weeks following little Misha's death, Irina Kruchevich Putavich returned to the back bedroom and curled like a potato bug to a ball. Morning and night, Laszlo touched her shoulder, which had no warmth. He bent to hear her breath and kissed her forehead when the brief breeze at her nostrils revealed her yet alive.

Grief, worry, and loneliness forced Laszlo Putavich to drink, and drink returned him to the company of Stanis Shandrushavich, his pal of boarding house days. Drink, however, especially whiskey, which they gulped with a slap of the thick-bottomed shot glass on the bar, led the normally sweet-tempered, happy-go-lucky Stanis to a state of mean-mouthed pushiness. But Stanis was known to produce, as if by magic, small goods and oddments—lengths of lokie rails his neighbors used to support their porches, metal piping and jointures used, alas, in their stills, along with lumber that mysteriously appeared beside their doors as they found need to repair the cladding of their outhouses. However, Stanis's material benefactions could not prevent those on the receiving end of his insults from sometimes punching his drunken, smirking maw.



Laszlo Putavich stood beside Stanis when Tador Milzewkevski missed his aim and stumbled, mashing his nose on the hard brass of the foot rail at Yushko's Bar. Tador's head slid off the rail in blood running as wide and thick as the stream at the butcher's drain. They let Tador lie.

Tador lay so long that Buzzy Lukavuch rolled him over with a foot, and the men at the bar, Stanis included, peered down at him, beer glasses in their hands. Someone threw water on Tador's face. He did not stir.

That night, it took five Cossacks of the Coal and Iron Police to pummel Stanis to the floor of his rented room while furniture broke and Baba Smolnyki, wailing in her nightgown, covered her eyes. Stanis was wearing only the union suit he slept in as he was dragged through the front door. The trial was swift, the verdict predictable. His name could not be found in the records, and illiterate Stanis could produce no document, consign no property, which would convince a lawyer to take his case. With sadness, Laszlo Putavich, himself possessing no document save the slip of paper on which his mother had written his American destination, held the roll of Stanis's clothes as Baba Smolnyki bound it with the knot-mended laces of his boots. Said bundle she pressed into the hands of Dorcas McElhenny, the Mick girl who peeled potatoes and onions for boarding house meals, with instruction to send it with her half-idiot brother William, whose lilting tenor could be heard blocks before he arrived to deliver ice at the county jail.

Stanis's name, like Laszlo's, was recorded nowhere but at the port of entry and in the Cyrillic script of St. Michael's church ledger, the pages of which Father Yspecky held in one hand as he gathered the hem of his cassock to mount the marble steps to the courthouse and plead for Stanis with Judge Hargrave Ellicot. Before he took the trolley back to Clareville, Father Yspecky knelt to say the benediction with the blubbering Stanis in his cell. Before the month was out, Stanis was on the train to Philadelphia under Coal and Iron guard, and no one in Clareville, not even Masha Trushkonic, who in shame bore his child seven months later, heard from or of Stanis Shandrushavich again.

Mykhail Putavich son of—Laszlo knew it proclaimed as his fingertips traced the English letters of their names, carved in stone only in Amer-EE-ka. Laszlo's grief burned into a desire for the recognition that would establish him as head of his American family, more real to him than any before. Laszlo prayed to become a SITZ-i-zen.

Irina had finished third grade. When she satisfied Vlada that she could read and reckon well enough not to be cheated by butchers, farmers, tinkers, sheenies, and the ragman, Irina was no longer sent to school. No decent, hard-working man would marry a woman who might confuse him with fancy words or waste time on reading. A good wife could cook, sew, bear healthy babies, raise respectful children, run a clean and pious household, and without a hitch wring the neck of any chicken she raised. If she could grind and season kielbasa, so much the better. Fair looks were not to be prized above these wifely skills. An educated girl was a ruined woman. She guaranteed that even a good husband would, eventually, be driven to drink, may the saints forgive him. Mykhail's hosting of the Saturday bottle-passing and uneducated Vlada's wiles and sharp tongue were never discussed—though what these might suggest was sometimes pondered.

Laszlo himself read in Ukrainian and Russian and could reckon well enough to track in his head and to the penny what his

pay should be for the lokie cars he'd loaded and the total he ran for shovelheads and cowhide gloves, but he could neither write his name in English nor read the documents which might secure him a place in this new country of America.

On a little tablet, Irina penciled her few purchases—most recently green thread matching the voluminous plaid skirt she had taken from the rubbish at the home of her Tuesday-Friday English employer, cloth Irina had carried home to make a winter jacket and two pairs of jumpers for poor, then-growing Misha. They had lost the child, and although God had secured their bond, Laszlo would see that American law kept him with Irina. The salvaged length of plaid wool was spread across Irina's knees, and she held the wooden spool of thread. Laszlo opened the fabric, stacked Misha's garments and diapers, and rolled them into the wool along with the spool. He kissed Irina's head and set the bundle in the empty dresser drawer. Laszlo would take the test for citizenship in the United States of America. He would have his papers.

Before Laszlo returned to sit beside Irina, he took her tablet and pencil from the top of the dresser, along with the McGuffey's primer that she had slipped from a shelf and dropped in the deep pocket of her skirt while dusting the bedroom of sickly, sissy Luther Hathaway. Laszlo adjusted the pillows against the headboard and helped Irina slip off her shoes. He opened to a page marked with a prayer card, set Irina's finger on a line, and urged her to say the letters. Laszlo, looking first to the book, watched her mouth intently, pronouncing the sounds he thought she'd made. Each time Irina pointed to her mouth, signaling him to watch how the American sounds were shaped by lips and tongue, Laszlo wanted to kiss her but refrained.

Within a few weeks, Laszlo had filed his declaration of intent and could recognize the letters of the alphabet large and small, delighting Irina when he correctly identified all the capital letters of *SELF-RISING FLOUR*, and the small script o, c, l, and a in *Coca Cola*. Irina began to run her finger along a whole word, and Laszlo sought to move those words from his mouth, though they emerged sometimes as if they were shards of glass or tangled lengths of string. The J of June and July fell out of his lips as a halted breath, his Slavic tongue resting low in the channel of his mouth. The H in Heinz arrived accompanied by a back-of-the-throat growl Laszlo could not suppress, and inevitably, wherever the letter occurred, he rolled the R. The vowels were deep and released with the mouth open. *Work* was *wahrrk* and *over* was *ovair*. Some sounds were followed, inexplicably, by a sound similar to a soft, plosive E, not fully a sound of its own but more the halting of the tongue at the back of the teeth. And yet Laszlo caressed the words in his mouth and began to *rrEEdeh*. Each time he spoke a word in English, the words spelled *United States of America*.

Laszlo and Irina sat together on the overstuffed parlor sofa, the McGuffey's *Third Level Reader* across their adjacent knees. Laszlo followed Irina's finger and read word-by-word, his understanding keen, but the mechanisms of his tongue and teeth, his lips and breath, tumbling like stones at first but then dancing a heavy-footed mazurka that real Americans, if they listened carefully, might almost understand.

From the rocker, Vlada listened to the lessons in the parlor, her block-like feet pushing the old chair into the train-like rhythm with which she had for one year, two months, and fourteen days lulled and cooed Misha to sleep. Laszlo rested his hand on top of Irina's hand. Several evenings later, Laszlo's hand progressed



to Irina's thigh. And then, one night, holding the primer, Irina settled not only onto the sofa but into the arm Laszlo slid around her shoulders. Vlada's fat fingers rolled the beads of her rosary and she prayed.

After the birth of Misha, Irina had lain with her back to Laszlo, who folded his muscled arms around the spikes of her ribs and shoulders, the back of her frail skull resting against his chest. She could hear his heart. He could smell the sweat and Ivory Soap in her hair. In the six months Misha had been with God, Irina had learned to force her body to rise, and she busied herself with chores and laundry. When Laszlo returned from the mine, the bricks in the alley had been swept and the air was heavy with the scent of frying onions. As Laszlo left his dirty boots at the door, Irina met him, and from the top step that made them even, she wiped the coal dirt from his face and kissed him. Though Vlada dozed in the rocker, Laszlo stripped to his drawers, washing not like a peasant from a bucket in the yard but like an American, at the kitchen sink.

The scar that roped the opening of Irina's private parts had diminished. Finding the scar no longer froze the air in Irina's lungs, and though she held her breath sitting down, all she felt there now was a numbness that grew in her groin and belly to a hard, Misha-sized heat. She missed the child, the loss a great gaping space inside her. She had, as all mothers must, she felt, come to think of the child not as the sun around which the earth moved but as sun and stars themselves, as heaven and earth

combined. Misha had clung to her, crying to be lifted, his tears when finally she held him sparkling on his cheeks like drops of dew and summer rain on the petals of flowers. Misha had nuzzled in Irina's neck, played with her hair, and purred in her ear. Irina ached to feel that shape of love again.

And so, one evening Irina closed the book of American history passed down to her by Baba Smolnyki, whose current boarders were not fit for reading, and took Laszlo's hand. His head tilted, and in answer, Irina led Laszlo to the bedroom, where she unpinned her hair and set his hands to the button at her nape.

At noon, the 19th day of February, 1920, Laszlo Putavich, born most likely in 1894, a son of Zakarpattya Oblast in what was by then Czechoslovakia, stood with 20 others in the cavernous, oak-paneled courtroom of the Anthracite County Courthouse, kissed the last of the foreign coins his mother had sewn in his coat, and took the oath of American citizenship. Behind him as he signed each round letter of his name in English stood his wife, Irina, her cheeks filled out, her hair shining, her belly showing a definite roundness under the green plaid of the shawl draped over the shoulders of her winter coat.

"SITZ-i-zen" is from a manuscript of linked stories titled *At the Surface of the Mine*, set in the anthracite area. Bim Angst lives in Saint Clair, Schuylkill County.

Clawing

Poem by Holiday Campanella

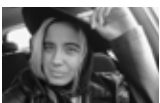
8/19/2017 - Greensburg, Indiana

I'm surrounded by you, Indiana.
You're heavy in the trees tonight.
The black asphalt,
back roads through corn fields, unlit—
the broad shouldered men,
blond and square-headed.

There are two boys
hanging around the claw machine
at the "Indiana-only" Pizza King.
They could have been you, once.
I ask them how much it is—
give them a dollar.
"Here," I tell them, "play."
They laugh, inserting the money
into the slot.
They could have been ours.

My pizza is ready.
"Bye," I tell the boys.
"Happy birthday!" one says.
"Adios," says the other.

I sit in my car in the parking lot,
more me than a moment before.
Tomorrow I'll be in St. Louis
leaving you with them
in loose metal grips,
suspended.



Holiday Noel Campanella was born and raised in South Philadelphia, where she still resides. She attended the University of Pennsylvania and PAFA, where she studied painting and creative writing. While her art has been sold and exhibited at the Smithsonian, Anthropologie, The Clay Studio, and The Philadelphia Sculpture Gym, this is her first poetry publication.

The Epic of Senge

Poem by John Wall Barger

We moved to Philadelphia from an Indian village
& shipped our big old tomcat, Senge.
We tried to keep him inside our row house,
tempting him with toys & snacks,
but he longed for village life:
fighting cats, hunting rats, walking the roofs
of the huts. He cried his lungs out:
"Freedom!" he cried. "Liberty!"
Sleepless, defeated, we opened the door:
Senge padded out in triumph.
He walked the sidewalks of West Philly,
manifesting all the lavish beauty
& violence of the village. Every day
he got lost. Today Tiina & I comb
the misty late-summer streets, searching.
Tiina—whose love for that cat
is fugitive & powerful—is so worried
she can't talk. As we step into Clark Park
I joke, "Maybe he caught a boat
back to India!" She emits a small,
dry laugh. We scan the park.
Dogs: fourteen. Cats: zero.
But it's nice. We sit in the damp grass.
Someone strums a woozy guitar.
Soft, distant singing. The sky, opening.
Under a maple tree: a pile, a form,
it is a body, an opossum. Twisted, seeping,
torn like a bag of rice. I say nothing.
Everything is wet. Record rain this year.
Even the kindness hovering in the high branches
is wet, glittering, pretty. Almost unbearable.
And *familiar*. The peaceful men
playing chess on fold-out tables.
The children blowing bubbles of light.
Like attending a warmhearted funeral,
which just happens to be your own.



John Wall Barger's poems appear in *American Poetry Review*, *Rattle*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, and *Best of the Best Canadian Poetry*. His fourth book, *The Mean Game*, is coming out with Palimpsest Press, spring 2019. He lives in West Philadelphia and is an editor for *Painted Bride Quarterly*.

Isaiah 54:5 (A Self-Portrait)

Poem by Kari Ann Ebert

He packed up the years in one suitcase
at summer's bloom left everything undone
I stood still & wooden in the empty yard
exhausted by the sudden drought

The grass is too high now
Midsummer sun paints its lacquer
on my temples on my lip and neck
I've waited until tall blades bare their teeth
snap at my kneecaps
The *anyone-can-do-it-*
just-start-her-up-and-go instructions he left
fester under my tongue like vinegar
I turn the key flinch at its growl

The rider all rusty & rife with demons
lurches down the lawn chews out a row
so straight so sure of itself
until the sputter & grind wind down to a stop
refuse to budge another inch
The heat rises overwhelms me with its tide
Fury crawls up my spine I take a swing at the sky

My Maker My Creator
You promised to be my holy husband in his stead
yet it is I alone who pulls at the sludge wrestles with the ancient blade
slices my finger open like his mother's cherry cheesecake
You promised to redeem the time to make it mine once more
yet the moth and locusts return each harvest
all that remain are weeds & serpents' nests
all that remains is this rage

Hearing no response I fall to the ground
Clippings & sweat form a sheen cover my skin like jade
I sit in the lotus position as still as stone
listen as the breeze rustles across the short path I made



Winner of the 2018 Gigantic Sequins Poetry Contest, Kari Ann Ebert's poetry appeared or is forthcoming in *Mojave River Review*, *Gravel*, *The Broadkill Review*, and *Gargoyle* among others. She is working on her first poetry collection, *Alphabet of Mo(u)rning*. Kari lives in Delaware and has two children who also write.



Lost Novella

Stephen St. Francis Decky

In 2004 I stopped reading books. I had just stopped smoking. I'd stopped smoking because I'd nearly completed writing a novella when my laptop sputtered and died. The data, despite some effort, was unrecoverable. I grieved like someone dear had died.

I'd been smoking since I was a Junior in high school. At that time, I was homeless; In a rare fit of mercy, my dad had kicked me out of his house that summer. Which left me free. But homeless. I spent the first night in a blur in the woods with a fire and some people I didn't know. I was free, and lost, and after a week, going through some sort of withdrawal from the anti-depression meds I'd left home without. That home had become a pressure-cooker of threats and hostility. There was no going back.

Instead, I stopped at a convenience store in Woodbury, New Jersey and for the first time in my life bought a pack of cigarettes. I lit one up outside. The jitters and withdrawal pangs softened in seconds; the relief was immediate and palpable. As the fog of anxiety faded, I sat down on the curb, opened a notebook, and began to write.

I smoked for 19 years. I'd been writing stories and painting and drawing since I was a child. But the smoking was to my fiction like canned spinach to Popeye: instant confidence and focus. I wrote obsessively, I made it a habit. I smoked upwards of 2 packs a day.

Later I published a couple short stories. They went nowhere but it didn't matter because I hadn't written my best piece yet. That one was still coming, and when it came, at the height of its formation - mid-delivery - it vanished.

Smoking did little to numb the despair. I'd begun seeing its effects in the mirror as well: I looked very *mid-30's, smoker*. This visual prompted me to take a day off from smoking. In the 19 years I'd been smoking I'd never gone an entire day without a cigarette. But I was going to take a day off. 24 hours. Instead of smoking I would eat cookies and ice cream and drink martinis and pretty much devour anything I craved except cigarettes.

That night I drank 4 and a half martinis. I woke up the next morning on the floor beside my bed. I felt bludgeoned but ecstatic: I'd just gone an entire day without a cigarette. I figured I'd wait a few hours and then have a smoke and a cup of coffee and resume my life. But mid-afternoon passed and evening arrived and I wondered what would happen if I somehow found the audacity to try the martini trick again.

It worked: I woke up the next day in my underwear on the porch, 48 hours smoke-free. It felt like the fabric of my life had

been ripped. That's how I quit smoking.

Eight months later, the pack I'd been working on when I quit was still in my backpack - a subconscious *Emergency Kit* - with 11 unsmoked cigarettes inside. I remembered this as I was leaving a convenience store on King Street in Northampton, Massachusetts. Embarrassed, I pulled the pack - Marlboro Reds, the ultimate sellout - out of my bag and tossed it into a trash can.

During the aforementioned 8-month contingency period, I climbed Mt. Washington in less than 2 hours, did upwards of 300 push-ups daily, and started painting with renewed energy. I'd never painted with a purpose or audience but I could feel the possibility of one forming. Images began replacing text in my creative workflow. My written output dwindled until I was left with little more than Beckett-like, self-subsuming paragraphs of anti-fiction. The great novella was lost, and in its wake, my writing had become the literary equivalent of autolyzed yeast.

A side-effect of *not writing* was a burgeoning inability to read long-form works, i.e. books. The two processes had somehow been intertwined, and I was finding it impossible to focus on either. It was deeply worrisome, as I'd been a voracious reader for many years, and a battle at the intersection of inspiration and creativity seemed to be waging inside me.

At a bookstore in Philadelphia, I found and purchased a copy of Albert Camus' *L'Etranger* in the original French. I'd studied French in high school and retained some knowledge with occasional tutors, but reading literature *en français* was a new and suddenly necessary challenge: It forced me to concentrate at a level that had become second-nature in English, and the constant need to check my stack of French-English dictionaries satisfied - albeit faintly - the now-missing physical and gestural aspect of smoking.

I finished *L'Etranger*, some grossly pretentious Sartre plays, then *le Deuxieme Sexe*, all with a slowly increasing sense of ease. Later that year I travelled to France and found a copy of *Le Tour de la France par Deux Enfants* in Lyon, a Marivaux compendium in Chamonix, something by Nathalie Sarraute in Nice. I could understand Molière and Colette but couldn't keep up with anything modern: My comprehensive abilities were antiquated, and I developed a ready-made excuse in my perpetually-lagging conversational French:

- *Je parle comme un enfant parce'que je pense comme un enfant en français*

(I speak like a kid 'cuz I think like a kid in French)

Over the next 12 years, the only books I read in English were



SPIRITS IN ISTANBUL BY ROSALIND BLOOM

Houellebecq translations and systematically timed re-readings of Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. I read Marguerite Duras, Radiguet, La Fontaine and others in the original French, but with the sense I'd been trapped in a Robbe-Grillet loop of limited literary mobility.

Early in 2017, while recovering from surgery - and as if loosed from a longstanding fog - I began writing again: Mostly short and spastic stories and eruptions, but enough to open the door to reading in English again. It started with Marc Augé's *Everyone Dies Young*, then Ariel Goldberg's *The Estrangement Principle*. I re-discovered Nawel El-Sawaadi's *Woman at Point Zero*, then the suddenly/weirdly inspirational Cicero, then old favorites like Angela Carter, Mohammed Mrabet, Zora Neale Thurston, etc.

I started listening to audiobooks as well. While they were clunky and rare in 2004, they've become both accessible and abundant in the interim, often reaching true eloquence. Listening to Ta-Nehisi Coates reading his own *Between the World and Me* after the chorus of voices reciting George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* was deeply revelatory.

Still, there's nothing like the presence of a book, and that physicality lingers *in perpetuity*: I can almost feel the de Beauvoir text I bought in Geneva early last summer and lost on the Broad Street Line in Philly; that copy of *Le Tour de la France* from Lyon still rests on my desk, ever-visible from the corner of my eye.

It's been nearly 15 years since I quit smoking. I stopped taking prescription anti-anxiety and depression medications soon after. At that time, I felt - *fleetingly* - freed from the narcosis of short, long-term, and acceptable addictions. A slow-building ecstasy of heightened mental clarity whisked away many of the fears and worries that had been stifling my confidence since my earliest years. It was obvious, though, even as it was coursing through me, that the ecstasy wouldn't last; The feeling itself was strained by an array of side-effects, but like the addictions - and later, the literary anomalies - these eventually subsided, shifting from the harrowing insistence of the present to the fading but temporal archive of memory.

The novella is now but a blip in a long line of lost plans and ideas, but its influence on my story has been manifold. The future may have changed many times over, but I've learned that the potential for new creative prospects - even if temporarily obscured - is always there in some way, shape or form.

Stephen St. Francis Decky is a multi-media artist and writer whose paintings and films have appeared in festivals, collections, and museums both nationally and internationally, including The New Britain Museum of American Art and The Museum of Fine Arts, Nagoya, Japan. He has taught Animation and Digital Media classes at several schools, including Tufts University, Moore College of Art and Design, and Lycoming College. As a technical consultant and collaborator, he has worked on multi-channel video installations in Boston, New York City and Montana. Stephen received his MFA from Tufts University and The School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and currently lives and works in Philadelphia, PA.

A Turn in the Path

Poem by Kari Ann Ebert

I leave you standing on the curb
step over the border of river rocks—

so much like my mother's inukshuk
built with care by my father.

Once it stood tall and strong—
arms wide calling to the sun.

I used to sit quiet in its shade
examine that inukshuk,

wonder what trail it marked for her
why she had to see it built—

that pile of grey stones like a harbinger
on the edge of her suburban lawn.

Now, years later, it leans to one side.
Its body weakened by a burden unknown

Heavy with its own secret weight
like the smooth warm weight of your hand

on the back of my neck.
I stop. Pick up three rocks,

memorize their size and heft
drop them into my pocket.



Winner of the 2018 Gigantic Sequins Poetry Contest, Kari Ann Ebert's poetry appeared or is forthcoming in *Mojave River Review*, *Gravel*, *The Broadkill Review*, and *Gargoyle* among others. She is working on her first poetry collection, *Alphabet of Mo(u)rning*. Kari lives in Delaware and has two children who also write.

Barefoot

Poem by Leonard Kress

When I was younger, I was always leaving my shoes
behind, always, though, with a good excuse.
One time, the March on Washington to protest
the bombing of Cambodia, Kent State, after settling down
for the night in a church loft, awakened
from sleep to romp on the Capitol lawn to play hide

and seek by the Doric columns, someone had hidden
my things. For the entire weekend I went shoe-
less. The grassy mall, Joan Baez—we had awakened
the planet's consciousness, it seemed, the Pentagon had no excuse
not to implode, its walls tumbling down,
its frayed-suit denizens joining the earnest frolic in protest

of themselves and their deeds. An idea they'd surely protest.
It happened so often my soles resembled hides,
thick, calloused, impenetrable. So it was easy to amble down
the chunk gravel path by the Wissahicken without shoes,
side-stepping horseshit with friends, excused
from their lack of hardiness, though clearly awake

to the chance I might be on to something, in the wake
of others who'd gone barefoot before. They don't protest
as we pay homage to Chief Tedyuscung's statue, poor excuse
for heroic sculpture, the last of his tribe, nowhere to hide,
gazing west and chiseled naked, not even shoes
for protection—from smashed beer bottles flung down

from the summit. Once when I felt the need to calm down
ready for some sort of awakening
I found a huge zazen session, removed my shoes
and entered the campus gym, ignoring protesting
locked-out gymnasts. I tried to hide
The fire blazing in my knees, having to excuse

myself, barefoot again, for what seemed an excuse
of a counseling session. Winter was bearing down,
and the smug, bored psychologist could not hide
her diagnosis. When YAHWEH woke
up Moses to propose his mission, wary Moses protested,
but still approached sacred ground, removing first his shoes.



Leonard Kress published poetry and fiction in *Missouri Review*, *Iowa Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Harvard Review*. Recent collections: *The Orpheus Complex*, and *Walk Like Bo Diddley*. *Living in the Candy Store and Other Poems* and his translation of the Polish Romantic epic, *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz published in 2018.

Peace Is a Dream

Poem by Martin Wiley

Pete was thin,
just muscle, dark skin and anger,
stuffed inside an ancient Iron Maiden *The Number of the Beast* t-shirt,

and he lived on the far side of town, in the apartments
for people who cleaned the big houses where
people like me lived. He led us through
shadows and into the park
—we would have followed him anywhere—
officially it was closed for the night, but that only meant
no one would notice we were there.

Harsh outlines from streetlamps, everything unfocused but
edges sharp—we headed for the swing-set, which had become,
for decades, the place for teenagers
out late. It was cleaned regularly
but the weeds along the fence were
a breeding ground

for broken glass,
used condoms, tiny vials,
plastic baggies. Then Pete nodded
to Danny, who pulled his flask
from his back pocket.

We drank while Pete rolled joints, the only sound
the creaking of those rusted swings.

On nights like these, when the air
teased the ability to become free and clear, when we
could spot the night sky if not
the stars, our future seemed fluid and visible, and we
could still dream
of connections
that mattered.



As a mixed-race child of the 80's, Martin Wiley grew up both confronting and embracing a world that was as jumbled and confused as he was. His current work is an attempt to examine what it was to search for manhood in that time and place. A long-time poet and spoken word artist, for the past few years he had labeled himself a "recovering poet." His children's love of words has dragged him, mostly happily, off the wagon. After receiving his MFA from Rutgers-Camden, he remained in Philadelphia, working at Project HOME, being a dad and husband, and finding time, when possible, to write.

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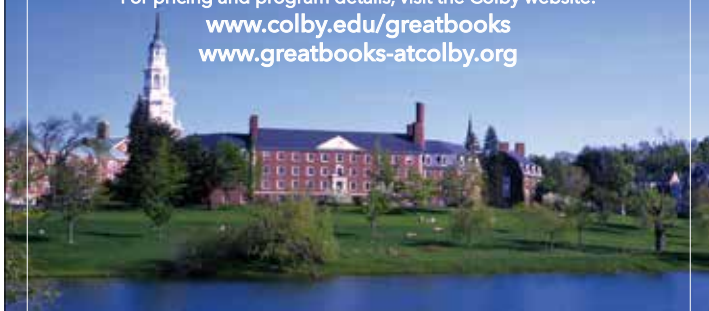
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