

PhiladelphiaStories

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

WINTER / 2020 / FREE



COMEDIANS SARAH WESTBROOK / HEAD ON BILL HEMMIG / MCPHERSON SQUARE SHARON CHRISTNER

CONTENTS

FEATURES

- 4** COMEDIANS (fiction).....SARAH WESTBROOK
12 HEAD ON (fiction).....BILL HEMMIG
18 MCPHERSON SQUARE (nonfiction).....SHARON CHRISTNER

POETRY

- 9** ODE TO GLIDERS.....KATHLEEN SHAW
10 FOOLING THE ANGEL.....KEN FIFER
11 KIRKMAN'S SCHOOLGIRL PROBLEM.....LEONARD KRESS
14 THE JOURNALIST.....ANN E. MICHAEL
16 IMPERMANENCE ALIGHT.....RISA PAPPAS
21 MOMMA HOUSE.....YVONNE
21 WILLA ON NORTH BROAD STREET.....YVONNE

ART



Budding Patriarch by Dmitry Borshch

Dmitry Borshch was born in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, studied in Moscow, and currently lives in New Jersey. International exhibitions of Borshch's drawings and sculptures include shows at Saint Petersburg's State Russian Museum and in New York at The National Arts Club, The Brecht Forum and the ISE Cultural Foundation.



Blue Architects by Dmitry Borshch



Fish and Wine by Stacie Speer Scott

The arts community of New Hope, Pennsylvania has been home base for collage and mixed media artist Stacie Speer Scott since 1985. Scott has exhibited widely in the Delaware Valley, New Jersey, New York and Jerome, Arizona. She teaches art workshops and has been an Art on the Move teacher for the Michener Museum and a teaching artist for Philadelphia and Bucks County public schools. *Fish and Wine* celebrates the bounty of the holiday table. staciespeerscott.com.



Summer Afternoon by Rinal Parikh

Rinal Parikh's art reflects the heritage and vibrant culture of her native India. A biochemist by education and artist by passion, she draws on a childhood fascination with color and composition, portraying spontaneity and energy with saturated color in various mediums as a self-taught artist. Parikh's work is held in numerous private collections and she is involved with many Philadelphia-area arts organizations including CAC, MCGOPA and Philadelphia Tri-State Artists Equity. www.rinalparikh.com.



Philadelphia City Hall Detail XVII by John A. Benigno

John A. Benigno was recently awarded a grant from the Luminous Endowment for Photographers to continue working on his Adobe Church Project in New Mexico. Benigno's work is held in many collections including the State Museum of Pennsylvania, and his award-winning work has appeared in numerous exhibits throughout the United States. He teaches at the Main Line Art Center in Haverford, PA. Visit: www.photographicimages.us



Ladies' Night by Cathleen Cohen

Cathleen Cohen is a poet, painter and teacher who founded ArtWell's "We the Poets" program. She is Montgomery County's poet laureate for 2019-20. Her artwork is currently represented by Cerulean Arts Gallery. *Ladies' Night* is part of a community arts project through Inliquid and the People's Paper Co-op. Visit cathleencohenart.com.



Welcome to America by Constance Culpepper

Philadelphia based artist Constance Culpepper received her B.A. from Southern Methodist University and an M.A. from Bryn Mawr College. She depicts heavily patterned interior scenes with vibrantly colored objects that she uses as a framework for conveying emotion. Featured in galleries and museums throughout the United States, her paintings can currently be found at Jim Kempner Fine Art in Chelsea, New York. Culpepper is Director Emeritus of 3rd Street Gallery, in Old City, Philadelphia. constanceculpepper.com



Orphans by Sarah Barr

Sarah Barr, a multimedia artist in the Philadelphia area, earned her BFA from Rosemont College and her MFA in Visual Arts from Lesley University's School of Art and Design. Exhibitions of Barr's work include The Griffin Museum of Photography, The State Museum of Pennsylvania, Delaware Center for Contemporary Arts and The Biggs Museum of American Art. The wooden organ toes in *Orphans* were salvaged from a pipe organ in the now demolished Saint Boniface Church in West Kensington, Philadelphia.

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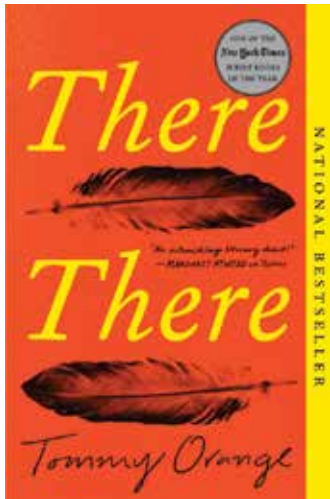
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Philadelphia Stories, founded in 2004, is a non-profit literary magazine that publishes the finest literary fiction, poetry, and art from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware and distributes free of charge to a wide demographic throughout the region. 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.

Community & Tradition in *There There*



The annual collaboration between *Philadelphia Stories* and *One Book, One Philadelphia* celebrates the symbiotic relationship between reading and creating. When we read we gain grist for the mill that produces new work. We find connections between our experiences and those of another.

This issue of *PS* holds iterations of the themes of community and tradition found in Tommy Orange's novel, *There There*, the 2020 *One Book, One Philadelphia* featured selection. *One Book* is a Free Library program that fosters citywide civic dialogue by encouraging everyone in Philadelphia to read the same novel—you can find a copy of *There There* at any neighborhood library, and from January to March, attend one of dozens of discussions and programs diving into the book. Talk about why it knocked you down, talk about what surprised you, talk about what you found difficult—just talk about it. And listen about it.

A Cheyenne-Arapaho novelist, Tommy Orange writes polyphonically in the voices of 12 Native characters living in present day Oakland, California. Their communities in many ways are fractured, split open by the U.S. government's historical violence against Indigenous peoples. The modern impacts of the campaign to erase the original inhabitants of this land, including choking resources and attempting to ban religious and cultural traditions, echo throughout the characters' lives.

And yet the message of Tommy Orange's novel is crystalline. His characters say: *we are still here*. Across the gentrified city of Oakland, they find one another. They tell their stories. They drop deep, deep into themselves to find the traditions that have been passed down to them, and they live. They live in ways that are new and complex and digital and ancient and together.

This book evokes big questions about community and tradition: how do they stay alive in the face of violence? How do they evolve over time, and how are they perceived by others? How are legacy and inheritance—learning about one's own community traditions—a privilege? How do history and the present interact?

I imagine those questions are different for each person, depending on who their community is and what its traditions are. I'm excited for the responses that unfold through the pages of this magazine, with each writer and artist contributing their own sense of belonging and of what has been passed on to them, what they want to pass on.

Brittanie Sterner

Director of Programming, *One Book, One Philadelphia*
The Free Library of Philadelphia

Philadelphia Stories Winter Issue Launch: Community & Traditions

Monday, February 24, 5:30 p.m. Exhibition Opens | 6:00 p.m. Reading
Walnut Street West Library, 201 S. 40th St., 215.685.7671

Celebrate the launch of the One Book-themed issue of *Philadelphia Stories* magazine with readings by local writers and a pop-up show of visual works featured in the issue.



Comedians

Sarah Westbrook

Standing before a group of strangers is the closest thing Angela has to achieving her dreams or making her mark on the world. She seesaws her arm, delivers a joke about a merman who pools his money with a sea urchin to get a triton.

As part of the deal for getting a regular slot, Angela closes the bar down, mopping the sticky puddles off the floor, thinking they look like amoebas, now tritons, now clouds. The crowds at her shows have been meager. Live performances can't compete with the larger-than-life entertainment programming available at the fingertips of every person with a mastery portal.

When she decided to pursue comedy full time, she faced consternation from each person she told. "No really, I'm happy," Angela said, her face taking on the earnest insistence of a preacher, a believer. The friends, but mostly the family, looked back bewildered.

"But you make money by telling stories about yourself on-stage," her mother said, perplexed. "Honey, why don't you tell us some of those stories instead of parading them around to strangers?"

"Maaahm," she said playfully. She and her mother had never understood each other. What's the deal with all the people related to you being so vastly different from you? "They're not just stories," she said. "They're funny stories."

"What makes you think they're so funny?" her mother said, and Angela could only think of the moments at home when she was young when everything was still and the lamp by her mother's chair was on as they sat silently at their solitary projects—her mother sewing, her father reading a book, and she drawing in the margins of newspapers—and how only with years passing was it possible to see anything humorous there at all.

On the walk home, the wind blows straight through her jacket, infiltrating her skin, her muscles, until it reaches her organs, dancing low in her kidneys. The deep cold always unearths the questions settled in her gut. Like, can you do something just because it's good? And, what are the masses of the collective good things you've done in your lifetime, how much do they weigh, and would you be willing to part with them? The questions are like stale beer—they sit wrong on the tongue but settle in the bloodstream.

"You can take off your shoes," the nurse says, "and then step up on the scale."

Angela obediently removes her boots. She is on the scale, her body and her goodness being added in, although she guesses that goodness would be so light, so particular, that it would vanish if you tried to capture it.

"How do these things usually go?" she asks the nurse once she has stepped off the scale and is zipping up her boots. The light in the room illuminates everything, the dark circles under both of their eyes echoing each other like tidal moons.

"Now that I've gotten your vitals, I'll finish entering them into our system, and the doctor will look them over and be in with you—"

"No," Angela says, shaking her head. "I don't mean that. I mean This." She gestures at her left-side chest.

"It's very simple," the nurse says, snapping her chart closed. "As you know, the heart is not adequate for modern life. The stresses of interacting with the mastery portal, high-demand jobs, and the implementation of the extended work week made it just too unsafe *not* to intervene. The heart is fragile. But with this surgery, we plant an electro-synthetic bolstering mechanism around it, increasing the average life span by at least ten percent. The full procedure takes a little more than two hours, plus an overnight in the hospital for recovery time."

"Just one night?" Angela asks. That seemed fast to be back out in the world after having your chest cut open.

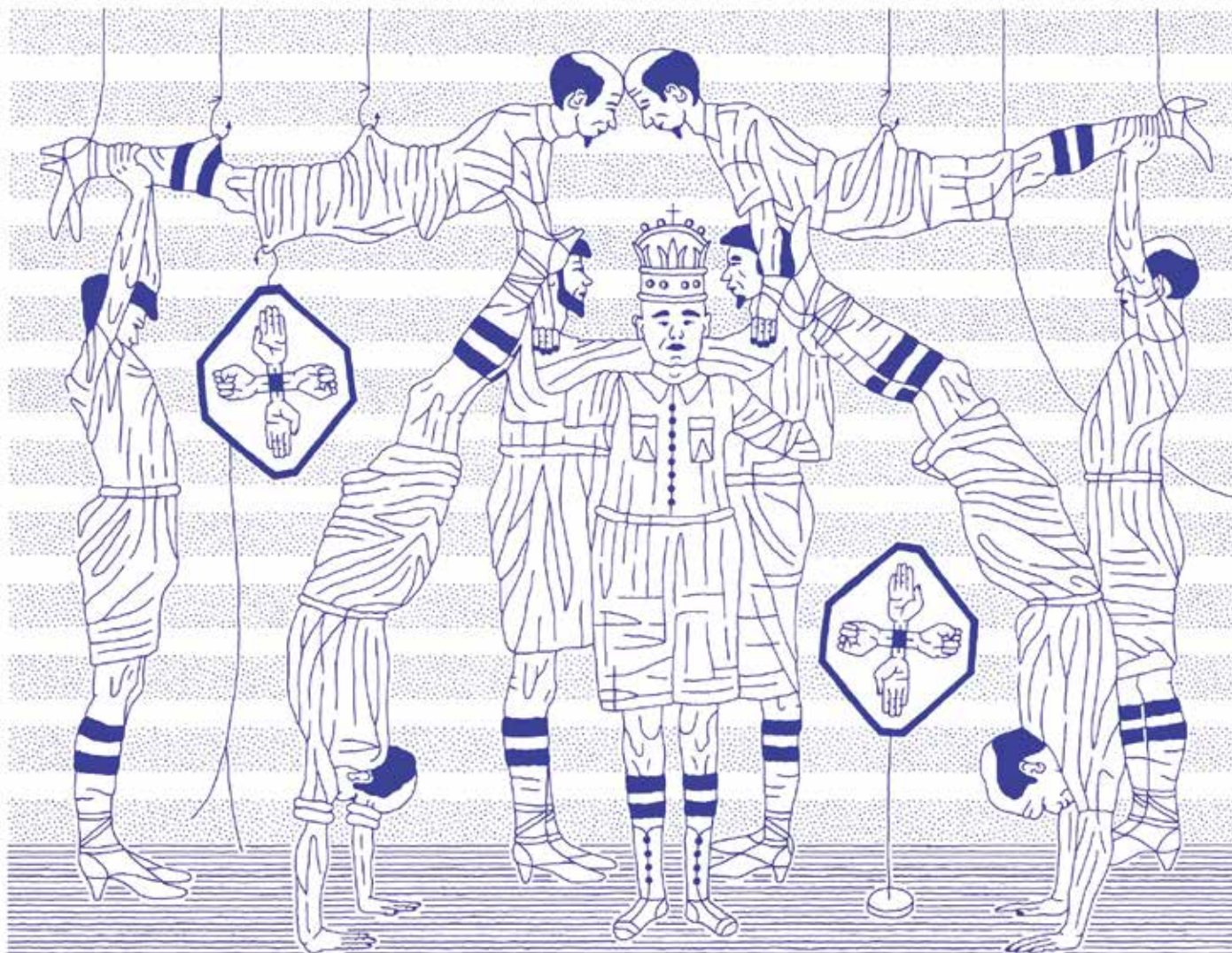
"Yes," the nurse says briskly. "It's a marvel of modern medicine."

Outside is bitter, the clouds hanging low and close to the buildings, everything dingy in the grey afternoon. In front of the clinic, a few people are passing out pamphlets from a small stand. How wild, Angela thinks, that we are not all deeply religious in such a terrifying world.

She takes a pamphlet as she walks by, but just because she feels sorry for them. Fringe groups, these odd preachers that sprang up a few years ago, yet no one can place them—they have no doctrine to sell, no real name. They seemed interested in awe, in the unnoticed beauty of experiences, and maybe this alone made them awkward, unmanageable, improperly located in the world.

As she enters her apartment, Angela realizes she has begun to feel safer knowing that she—that her heart—will be protected soon. Her building is one of the tallest at fifteen stories, and the





windows in the kitchen peer out over the sweep of city and water. This is why she chose the apartment: for the view, the sense of her own smallness.

The pamphlet springs open when she sets it on the coffee table, where she eats and keeps her mastery portal. The portal stores electronic books and projects her to-do list onto the wall every morning, the blue letters sitting immovable, impersonal as they halo out onto the plaster.

She turns the portal light off and examines the pamphlet more closely. Do they want money? Always the first concern. But no, it didn't appear so. There was a quote from a Sister Bernadette. Were they reclaiming something old, something Catholic, something so out of style it was now back in style? Sister Bernadette said, "If you regard the world as a work of art, it helps you understand things. The world is filled with a creative beauty, employing only a few principles to make elaborate structures. This is something we can choose to do: to use beauty as litmus test."

But a litmus test for what?

Sometimes if she is nervous onstage, she plays a trick where she tries focusing on a random variable. The weather is popular. The order you buttoned the clasps on your shirt. The name your parents picked for you. From the stage, everyone is hard to make out. Her adrenaline is usually pumping so quickly that she can't focus enough to see details. Her eyes sweep over faces, blobs

without lips, lips without voices. She thinks of them taking her in from their end of things, everything about her highlighted in the too-bright stage lights. Every curl of her hair drawn up like a singularity, small nose on a delicate face, the rich brown of her eyes impossible to see unless you are close, like you are going to kiss her or tell her a secret thing about you. Pick one of these things and you'll see that you can't pick just one, that they can be followed into each other, like wormholes, tunnels into a different time and then back again.

Sister Bernadette from the pamphlet also says this: Making a discovery is more than just stumbling into a revelation. Real discovery takes recognition of what you've found and a desire to pursue a world that is more beautiful.

And Angela has a new project that has crept up on her. She has decided that she wants to write a commencement address. Or something like it. No one's going to read this one from a podium looking out at a field of shining, upturned faces. Could it still be a commencement address if it never made it to a commencement ceremony?

She liked the feeling of having done something, if not the doing itself, which maybe made the commencement address her perfect medium. The ultimate retrospective, doling out advice one did not necessarily have to have taken. She is not sure if she'll use it as material for her show yet, if it will be funny enough. But

there is also something to be said for stumbling into things, trying them on, giving them a whirl, throwing caution away for the irrepressible what-ifs. Sister Bernadette would doubtless agree.

"I understand, I really do," Angela says, her throat tight. Her free hand flies up to touch her heart.

"Uh-huh. No, it's no problem. Okay. Thank you. Bye." The cell phone lies leaden in her palm. How typical of her to thank them for her show's rejection. Another waste of time with who knows how many nights spent hunched over the coffee table, drafting humor from life's encounters. Nothing to show for it. She slides the phone into her back pocket and wipes at the bottom of her eyes. So. There would be no further auditions for her comedy show—the executives had decided that it wouldn't work on any of the networks, that portal audiences didn't want comedy; they wanted drama and suspense. High emotion, crying or gasping only. Angela could picture the other people in her building, and in hundreds of apartment buildings just like hers, absorbed in a show projected by their mastery portals, sunk into their couches, watching shadows fall in love or lose their lives or have children. She sat for a second on the too-soft couch cushions, blinking.

First, no heart implant. And what were the odds of that? They'd not even called her but left an automated voice report at her apartment, the mechanical voice echoing against the windowpanes. Everyone got approved for it. It was supposed to be a gesture toward equality. Or at least of standardization. They had told her that less than one percent of people were ineligible. God. Speaking of which, what would Sister Bernadette say about this?

"I want it gone," Angela says.

"All of it?" The barber looks uncertain, her fingers sifting through the long layers that reach Angela's lower back. But Angela only nods her head yes.

The barber cuts Angela's hair short and blunt, across her neck and above her eyes. Angela wants to let something about herself start over, to watch it grow from its roots like something stricken and shorn, an unexpected comeback, the plant you have forgotten to water for months suddenly flourishing in a beam of sunlight that had been out of reach—forgotten rotations, shifting hemispheres.

"Aren't you relieved?" His face is fierce and open, long cheeks that have always reminded her of windowpanes. But he does not open like windows do.

She makes a face at him. "No, I wouldn't really say that was my first reaction. Disbelief? Disappointment? Any of those might fit a little better."

"All right, all right," he says, shaking his head. "I'm saying you should be relieved." He sips his coffee. Half milk, no sugar, too much like watery mud for Angela's taste. "Or could be," he adds, seeing the way she's staring at him, not altogether friendly.

"Well that's just great. I'll make a note: 'Could be relieved.' Nice to have options."

"Fine. I'm just saying that it might not be the worst thing in the world not to have the implant. There are risks."

"Everything has risks," she says, drawing her lips together. He is a sometime lover from after college, the period when she was desperately trying to make it, hustling to get a few minutes of stage time at some club or another. Desperately trying, too,

to feel less alone. He was the technical stage manager for one of her first shows, a guy uncomfortable with attention, preferring to turn the volume up on other people. These days they drift toward and away from one another, months of quiet preoccupation floating between them. But they have eventually returned to one another in some form.

He seems about to say something, his mouth chewing a phrase over, but he meets her eyes and stays quiet.

"What?" she says. She can't always read him, but he seems softer than last time.

"You wanna get outta here?"

She thinks of a bit of poetry as they walk. Part of her feels so tenderly toward him that she wants to take him in her arms and keep him close enough that they can hear each other's hearts beating as if they are contained in one another. But he cannot erase her loneliness.

What was it some poet had said? Or was it her doctor? She couldn't remember. She did know that it had been something about going out onto her heart. As onto a vast plain.

A month passes, cold days that dissipate as the sun sets and seem to turn the world more bitter. Trees dotting the city intersections darken and drop all their leaves. I guess we're all giving up, Angela thinks, standing at her window and watching the wind ripple across the river.

On Saturday, she drags herself out of the apartment for one reason: on the back of the pamphlet she'd taken from the preachers was information about a support group for people who are ineligible for the heart implant.

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Her recent disappointments feel like they have come at great cost, perhaps even the price of her future. Yet, Angela forces herself to look harder at what else might be there. She thinks this is what Sister Bernadette might suggest. Which is how she finds herself in the half-submerged bottom floor of a community center that is in seriously bad shape. Dislodged tiles expose the dirt underneath the floor, paint peels in irregular strips from the doorframes, and water damage pocks the ceilings.

Taxes go to mastery portal efficiencies and entertainment shows. That's where voters had decided the money should go, not community buildings. The last library near her had closed three years ago, and Angela is surprised this center still exists and hasn't been transformed into one of those nightclubs where people can watch everything on camera from their portals without attending in person.

Angela takes in the crowd milling around the deteriorating room. She starts for the table with the paper cups and the coffee urn, and then she sees him adding cream to his cup of coffee that she already knows is diluted beyond any acceptable coffee-to-milk ratio.

"Oh my god, what are you doing here?" she whispers, tugging him away from the group.

"I'm just getting a coffee," he says, ripping open yet another creamer and smiling at her like this is actually funny.

"What? So now you're stalking me?"

He laughs. "No. But I do want to support you."

"Yeah, that's why I came to this support group. For support."

He sighs through his nose, and he seems about to reach for her hand, but he's still holding the coffee. "I haven't heard from you in weeks. Besides, I really wanted to hear your commencement address."

"How did you even know—"

"I didn't. I come here sometimes myself," he says, ducking his head a little and sipping.

Angela's stomach knots. "You do? Why?"

"I never went through the process of going to the appointments and getting approval for the implant and all that, and I don't intend to. Like I told you, I think it has risks. And those risks aren't worth it to me."

She stares at him. He seems completely unknown to her. "Why didn't you say anything?"

He shrugs. "I don't say a lot of things that I should. But I'm saying it now. And I hope you don't mind that I'm here because I would hate to miss this mediocre coffee and the chance to hear the wisdom you've committed to paper in your commencement address."

Angela's heart thrums and the voices in the room mingle in a hymn of life going on. She closes her eyes, feels everything coursing through her like she is the conduit to another universe, like she is the real portal. But maybe that's not quite right, she thinks. Maybe we all are.

When she opens her eyes, he's standing there, looking a little concerned. "Okay," she says. "But you're the one who's going to have to live with my devastatingly impactful speech possibly changing everything about your life."

"Deal." He grins, and they make their way back over to the circle of people.

The group has gathered some fold-out chairs, and a woman with cropped hair is speaking.

"I declined to receive the implant when I turned thirty and

it came time for my procedure. I just got really scared, and I thought, why go through all that? I don't need to live ten percent longer or whatever they promised. I'm like, why am I not just spending my time doing the things I already want to do, instead of taking artificial steps to supposedly prolong everything? What's there to prolong if I'm not doing things I really care about? You know, they never even did that many studies about the implant or its effectiveness. And here we are, having our bodies sliced open for a surgery that promises things that have never even been proven." She shakes her head and runs her hand over her face.

"I just don't want that kind of life. That's all. I want to find my own way to the things that matter." There's a gentleness in the room, a waiting for someone else to share.

One man talks about how he started going through the process of getting the implant, but then his doctor told him he'd only be eligible if he first got plastic surgery to fit the standardized body size requirement. An older woman shares that her daughter was one of the first to get the implant and died of complications. After that, she didn't want anything to do with it, even as they were phasing in later generations.

The circle of speakers continues. No one has the heart implant, and no one wants it.

It's Angela's turn. She reaches into her back pocket and unfolds a square of paper she salvaged from the wrapping around her egg carton. This is where she wrote her commencement address, added beauty to the world where nothing before had been articulated.

Her heart is pounding, the song of her body unrelenting as the wind outside undulates the water around the city. The people sitting before her shift and murmur in their seats.

This is what she has, and it is real. And so, she speaks.

Sarah Westbrook is a writer from New Hope, Pennsylvania. She received her B.A. in English and Creative Writing from Oberlin College. She is an editor at an organization that researches social policy.



SAVE
THE
DATE

LitLife
Conference

SATURDAY
APRIL 4, 2020

Ode to Gliders

Poem by Kathleen Shaw

1950's turquoise totems
escape providers on countless
porches, not grandmotherly
like rockers, more kinetic
than lawn chairs, gliding
hypnotically, going nowhere
on cricket-studded summer
nights. Where did you end up?
Rusting silently in far-off
dumps, next to train sets
and Spam cans, as obsolete
as the clothes we wore
and the things we used to
believe.



Kathleen Shaw is retired from teaching at Montgomery County Community College. She now works as a writing tutor there. Her poems have been published online as well as in *Anthology*, *Derailed*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, and various other journals.

Fooling the Angel

Poem by Ken Fifer

When my grandmother was sick
her parents changed her name
in order to fool the Angel of Death.
They gave her an orange,
not to cure her, but to let her taste
light and warmth once
before the Angel returned.
And as she ate, her parents said,
Oh how worthless girl children are,
trying to avoid the Evil Eye.
Then they sent her to New York,
near Yankee Stadium, a place
an Angel might not look right away.
In her first American photos,
two weeks off the boat, she paid
to pose with a buffalo herd
and teepees painted on a screen
behind her. The fringed buckskin,
the beadwork boots,
the cowgirl hat and leather chaps
seemed to her, at sixteen,
neither wasteful nor strange,
but a necessary expense,
her most likely defense,
better than the rental's
white-handled pistols.
She returned to Houston Street
a buckaroo, no longer a green horn.
just another Yankee with two names,
one for real and one to say,
hoping to find Miss Liberty, too,
while trying to evade an Angel's gaze.



Ken Fifer's poetry collections include *After Fire* (March Street Press) and *Falling Man* (Ithaca House); he has edited three anthologies of poems by children. His poems and translations have appeared in *Barrow Street*, *New Letters*, *Ploughshares*, *The Literary Review*, and other fine journals. He has a Ph.D. in English Language and Literature from The University of Michigan. He was a 2019 finalist for the Gunpowder Press Book Contest.

Kirkman's Schoolgirl Problem

Poem by Leonard Kress

If fifteen young ladies in a school
walk three abreast for seven days
in succession, how would you

arrange them each day so that none
would walk twice abreast?
This problem of combinatorics

was first proposed by Thomas Kirkman
in 1850, in his *query number VI*
in *Ladies and Gentleman's Diary*.

If you want to know the answer
you should ask the middle aged man
in the front of room playing Bach

on the baroque flute. He solved it
120 years later, a Caltech undergrad
to great career-making acclaim.

Ask him, too, if he can he come up
with an equation to graph the movements
of the Philadelphia Hallahan Catholic

girls on their last day of school
lined-up in the halls three abreast, who
when the bell rings its dismissal

'
break free and surge into the streets,
bolting across the Parkway to swarm
The Love Fountain downtown.

They leap over the mid-day smokers,
noshers and sun-soaking secretaries
into the warm water, screeching.

They splash and shove, topple and dunk
each other, until their loosened hair
and shabby uniforms are thoroughly
soaked.

And then, as they emerge onto the hot
concrete plaza, leave perfect dark droplets
in glomerations of 16th notes.



Leonard Kress has published in *Missouri Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Iowa Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Harvard Review*, etc. Recent collections are *The Orpheus Complex* and *Walk Like Bo Diddley*. *Living in the Candy Store and Other Poems*, and *Craniotomy* as well as his new verse translation of the Polish Romantic epic, *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz. He lived in Philadelphia for the first 40 years of life.



HEAD ON

Bill Hemmig

The construction truck in the opposing lane, exceeding the speed limit, careers into my lane and right at me. I am immobile, staring, my hand not getting the signal to blast the horn. I might manage to dive onto the shoulder but the truck's driver stops doing whatever distracted him and sees me and, with two car lengths between us, slides back into the correct lane. We pass each other and continue as we were.

This was a country road long before my lifetime and it is now a two-lane route number winding through suburb after suburb with too many vehicles, too many traffic lights, and too many vehicles making left turns where there are no traffic lights. I find that I am oddly tranquil. Everything moves as if it's all choreographed, anticipated, unfolding in accordance with some plan. Only the careering construction truck felt real. Nothing since.

It strikes me that perhaps nothing since the construction truck has been real. The human brain is capable of breathtaking deceptions. Immanuel Kant wrote that our experience of the world is created entirely in our minds. What if none of this is real? Did the truck driver remain distracted? Was there a head-on collision back there? Am I now smashed and contorted between my dashboard and the seat, the steering wheel in my chest, the air bag smashed flat, left in unimaginable, unendurable pain? If so, my mind has shut my senses down and has chosen as a frantic grasp at endurance to put up a world around me in which I am driving home on this two-lane route number with too many suburbs and too many traffic lights and left-turning vehicles, and all of it choreographed and anticipated and tranquil.

Am I in shock, deluding myself in an extreme form of anaesthetic?

I think forward. My next turn is coming up. I will take my place behind a half-dozen or so others waiting for the light to change. The light will change and a few of the cars ahead will wait to turn left after the oncoming traffic has passed. The rest of us will snake around them and I will turn right. I will accelerate to forty-five miles per hour unless the cars before and after me want to go faster in which case I will oblige them. A concealed police car will not pull the middle car over for speeding. I will chuckle at the monumental pillars on my left flanking the entrance to a driveway leading to a modest house.

I take my place behind one two three four five six seven eight others and we wait for the light to change. The light changes. The first, third and fourth cars have their left turn

signals on waiting for oncoming traffic to pass. The rest of us snake around them. The sixth car turns right and I follow. No one follows me. The sixth car accelerates to fifty at least but with no one behind me I could be the one pulled over and so I accelerate only to forty-five and am soon traveling alone. I chuckle condescendingly at the monumental pillars and the modest house.

I arrive at home. Everything is familiar and unsurprising and I enter the house as if in a recurring dream. Appropriately, and as usual, Amina's sleepwalking aria from *La Somnambula* drifts into the background of my mind. I remember it's Thursday and one of Laura's gym evenings, which means she will be home around seven with takeout Thai food. I deposit the mail on the front hall table and hang my blazer in the closet where I also leave my shoes. I can't remember why we all started leaving our shoes in the front hall closet many years ago, but it's what we do. I wonder when, if, I'm going to return to reality, and how great the pain will be when, if, I do, and Amina is interrupted by that Radiohead song with the persistent lyric to the effect that what we experience isn't necessarily true. I wonder again if the front man for Radiohead, whose name I can never remember but always try to, ever read Kant. I wonder if help has yet arrived.

I find the morning newspaper in the living room on the coffee table where Laura always leaves it and where I never have time to look at it in the morning. Settling onto the couch, I notice the sideboard across the room and consider fixing myself a whiskey and as I always do, having already sat down, decide against it. Radiohead is interrupted by the unsurprising sound of gunshots from upstairs. Alexander is lying on his bed, having been home from work for the past hour, binge-watching a true-crime program. Twenty-six years old and this is his life: works menially and without interest, arrives at his parents' home by five-fifteen, goes to his room, and binge-watches true-crime programs on television. Laura will come home around seven and she will have green curry chicken because it's Thursday and she brought home vegetable pad Thai the last time. Alexander will pause the television and then the three of us will sit at the dining table and repeat the usual predictable banalities between silences and then Alexander will return to his room and unpause the television until bed time. (At his age, I will silently note as I always do, I was cramming for the bar exam and dating my future wife.) And then my wife and I will unpack



our laptops and sit on opposing sides of the living room listening to public radio and catching up on our work email without urgency or conversation until bed time.

I must still be trapped in my car. I suppose that if I continue to, as I do, once again, without plan or motive, sit on this couch in stocking feet perusing the newspaper without interest listening to gunshots upstairs, followed by sirens—or are they the sirens rushing to my crushed M5?—and it all does not just stop, I suppose that means I haven't died. It means as well that living remains unendurable.

As always I pause to consider getting up to get a whiskey, or to set the table for dinner, or to climb upstairs to talk sense to Alexander, but I don't. Because that's never what happens.

None of this is happening. I am waiting for someone to pull me from the wreckage.

Bill Hemmig spent the first 25 years of his life in Pennsylvania and recently moved back after 23 years living in New Jersey. He has twice been named a finalist in the New Millennium Writing Awards (43rd and 47th). He has been published in the online journal *Children, Churches & Daddies* and in *The World Takes*, an anthology of writings about New Jersey. He is also the Dean of Learning Resources at Bucks County Community College in Pennsylvania.

The Journalist

Poem by Ann E. Michael

What is it you observe? Maybe traffic
because you are in your car so often
it's an extension of self, a familiar
surround, while you keep an eye on
the blue Subaru creeping up on your
right and you know the light will change
at about the time that rental truck
reaches it, so you move into the left
lane. But what do you notice, beyond
what must be noticed? Do you register
a wedge of geese struggling against
headwinds or a paper wasp nest in a
poplar's bare bough? What about
those small events in the cosmos
beneath notice? You notice them.
Not on the screens which scream *look look*
but through your eyes: plastic bag, empty,
pirouettes across a lawn, and you don't
know who lives in that house but likely
they have children—swing, slide, tricycles.
And here, streets littered with walnuts,
the black walnuts of your childhood, so
that now what you observe is yourself
in recall mode and thinking of a winter
many years ago, the only time in your life
you ever saw a snowy owl in the wild—
the shock of admiration that pushed out-
ward from your chest cavity, outward
and into the wholly brilliant world
where you walked, trying not to twist
an ankle, on the bitter shells of walnuts.



Ann E. Michael resides in PA's Lehigh Valley. Her previous books include *Water-Rites* and *The Capable Heart*. Her forthcoming chapbook, *Barefoot Girls*, will appear early in 2020 from Prolific Press. Website & blog: www.annemichael.wordpress.com



Impermanence Alight

Poem by Risa Pappas

The little church that is the morning
the stillness that allows (at least)
for breathing—we are to be alive
and Holy and pour forth into the day
of trials both as the fire punching
birds into the sky and as the water
to make of the world a cleansed
nest once more. Almost cruelty
each day in dawning a sermon
of hope cresting the trees and we
by breakfast cleft into apostle
and disciple. Even the doves
can only hold aloft for so long.
By sundown we roost into one again
united by the exhaustion of both
wings beating.



Risa Pappas is a poet, filmmaker, writer, editor, audiobook narrator, and public speaker. She has most recently been published in *bluntly magazine* and *Black Fox Literary Magazine* and is a senior editor at Tolsun Books. Risa received her MFA in creative writing at Fairleigh Dickinson University. She currently resides near Philadelphia.





McPherson Square

Sharon Christner

A tiny girl cupped her eyes against a tree and yelled numbers as fast as she could remember them. "Fifteen... sixteen... seventeen..."

Seven kids screamed and scattered in seven directions. Seeing nowhere else to go, they huddled together behind the large white trailer marked 'Police Mobile Command.'

"Ready or not, here I come!"

The park was theirs again. That summer McPherson Square had been cleared of squatters and, largely, of heroin use. 'Needle Park' was still littered with weeds and trash, but no longer with bodies or needles. Users had been forced elsewhere.

The McPherson Square Library crowned the center of the square. Its Ionic columns and vaulted central rotunda distinguished it from the cramped rowhomes facing into the park. The path to the library steps was lined with slanted benches where people once blacked out. Now three homeless men sat and shared a benign cigar. A prostitute waited at the Kensington Avenue edge of the park and accepted a sandwich from a church outreach volunteer. Across the street, another prostitute stared her down. Every six minutes the El screeched by.

Father Murphy and Father Devlin, dressed in lay clothes, set up a folding table for an altar between the police van and playground. Sister Anne brought over a box holding the elements of communion, holding it aloft to keep fifty curious fingers from appropriating the chalice and hosts inside. Two men in the brown robes of Franciscan friars sauntered up the lawn, unstrapped guitars from their backs and began to play softly while a volunteer fiddled with microphones.

The ever-growing throng of kids swarmed a volunteer named Judy as she set out water bottles and a Philly Pretzel Factory box in the back of the lawn. When Judy mentioned summer bible camp, 9-year-old Imani became serious. "I saw Jesus before," she said, mouth full of pretzel. "He was walking downtown. He had one of them cane things."

No one had the heart to tell her about the renowned street performer, Philly Jesus.

The kids plopped down on the clover-filled lawn. The younger ones, still leery of the grass at Needle Park, sat on towels and bags and shoes.

A man decked out in Phillies garb came by on his bike. "What's going on?"

"Mass," said the kid on the Trader Joes bag.

"What they givin' out, pretzels or something?"

The kids nodded in unison. "Imma be here," he said, taking off again. He stopped and looked back at the little congregation. "Not for pretzels, but for the Lord."

Small groups of abuelas came up the lawn armed with beach chairs and besos for everyone. They shuffled over to the table and made sure everyone had a pretzel in hand. A couple of grandmothers from the suburbs came too, a little older and a little quieter. This wasn't their neighborhood, but their sons or grandsons had come to Kensington to get high and never came home. They waved away gnats and nestled into their lawn chairs under a large maple. Addiction specialists, volunteer musicians, and recovering folks chatted like old friends. Imani carefully wrote "JEASUS LOVE YOU" on sticky notes and handed them to strangers.

Father Murphy, Father Devlin, and a deacon reappeared in their green and white vestments. It was a gracious September afternoon, and rustling oaks and sycamores forgave some of the park's less appealing features. A single couch cushion rested on the path at the edge of the green, not far from an unexplained pile of meatballs and spaghetti sauce. The grass still held thousands of orange needle caps, each one a reminder of syringes past. But everyone talked and laughed freely; everyone was at ease. It had more the atmosphere of an outdoor wedding than of a mass for those affected by addiction.

Father Devlin staked the wooden crucifix into the ground behind the altar. "Okay we're getting close guys," Judy whispered-shouted to the squirming kids. "We're getting ready for the quiet time."

Mass began. The microphone popped on and off as Father Devlin led the opening prayer, but the little congregation still knew when to respond with "Christ have mercy." As Father Devlin read from Ezekiel and Romans, an irreverent ice cream truck bleeped out a shrill melody from a block away. This was countered with an upbeat 'Alleluia,' and the bassist friar rocked out with a subtle head-bang.

Cackling erupted from behind a fence across Clearfield Street. A group of young men were coming in and out of a rowhome and adjacent lot, openly exchanging cash and small packages on the sidewalk. Two slick black cars with tinted windows were parked outside. An old man in worn clothes shuffled past them, blasting "Ahora Dice" from a portable stereo.

When the rap faded, Father Devlin read from the Gospel of Matthew. "... if two of you on earth agree about anything they



ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

Father Murphy began the homily by referencing an *Inquirer* article by Mike Newall, who had covered opioids in Kensington all summer. There was a murmur of approval at the mention of St. Mike, who had become more involved in the community than any other reporter. Mike's brother John died of a heroin overdose in 1999. Father Murphy relayed the "detox, rehab, soft love, hard love" that Mike's parents had tried to pour into their oldest son. As he described the familiar, draining life of an addict's family, the grandmothers and the abuelas seemed to age a few years. A middle-aged couple in matching tan polos stood, his hands on her shoulders, staring vacantly into the trees behind Father Murphy's head.

"Mike saw his brother not as an addict but as a person, a brother. That, and the love his parents showed-- that sums up completely the readings for today."

Neighborhood kids were shrieking on the playground now, climbing the chain link fence that surrounded the rear of the library. Behind them, the rowhomes on E street had their doors wide open, and matronly figures leaned on doorposts to watch their wards on the jungle gym while the mass in front of them reached the height of its homily.

"If we're going to love like Jesus, sometimes love is going to have to be really practical and concrete and tough. But it's always with love, and it's always with a purpose of bringing a brother or sister back to the fullness of love." The ice cream truck returned and accompanied Father Murphy with the Mister Soft-ee Jingle. "This is Recovery Awareness Month," he concluded.

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"We're here because we have hope."

The musicians sang a peaceful communion song in English and Spanish. Father Murphy prayed over the bread and the wine, lifting them up toward the police trailer as if invoking a saint inside. Meanwhile, ten teenagers from the park descended on the unmanned pretzel table behind the congregation. At some point during the homily, a photographer from the *Inquirer* had arrived and was now aggressively snapping close-ups of congregants receiving the holy sacrament.

The kids sitting with Judy had gotten bored and squirmed away. Five of them were chucking extra water bottles at the front of the library building, trying to balance them on top of the door-frame. The priests' words were punctuated by the sound of bottles exploding on the brick terrace. "The body of Christ." *Kssh.*

Father Murphy invited a man forward to speak. His navy suit jacket and pristine silver wristwatch made him stand out among the hoodies and cargo pants of McPherson Square. He was Bernie Parent, a Flyers retiree, NHL Hall of Famer, and longtime recovering alcoholic. The audience instinctively clapped and whooped at the mention of a Philly sports team despite the heavy topic at hand.

Bernie called alcohol "the little *bastard* on my shoulder" with a glance at Father Murphy. It had driven him from the NHL Championships to rock bottom. He impressed on his listeners that "it takes a team to recover" and thanked them for being that team for the addict they love. Then, what everyone was waiting for: "It's been 37 years." The crowd erupted with applause.

As the priests came forward to conclude the mass, a shirtless man appeared at the park edge. He had a joint tucked behind each ear, and dozens of needle-welts in each arm. He stumbled past without accepting a pretzel or a prayer.

"The Lord be with you, go in peace."

Kssh.

Sharon Christner was born and raised in Lancaster County, PA. She recently graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, is currently earning her MFA in Creative Writing before medical school, and has been missing Philadelphia terribly. She writes on human lives, the mundane and the eternal, and sometimes dumpster diving. Her work appears in *The Philadelphia Citizen*.

Momma House*

from *Rosetta on the Bus*

Poem by Yvonne

Touring is a kind of homelessness,
The price the body pays as the soul takes wing.
Fans brought to their feet, the faithful to their knees!
Yet meals on a tray in her lap left its sting.
Under the spinning stars on a midnight bus
Sleep came and washed away the heaviness
Of the heart. Sleep and the wisdom of dreams.
Miracle child with flowers in her voice
And in her fingertips unquenchable flames—
Did she ever have a choice?
Echoes awake and bend laggard legendary.
Momma, beloved Marie, a far galaxy.
The end of the line. Everybody's got one.
Same old same old. For decades, no tombstone.

*In 2011 a marker at the corner of 11th and Master Streets in the Yorktown section of North Philadelphia was set to commemorate where Sister Rosetta Tharpe lived in a modest rowhouse from the mid-Sixties until her death in 1973. She is buried in Northwood Cemetery.

Willa On North Broad Street*

from *The School of Clara Ward*

Poem by Yvonne

Who made beauty, I ask you. God or the devil?
When I first touched a piano, the keys twinkled
Like heavenly stars. All over me they sprinkled
Some kind of thrill. Just a child, I was no rebel.
But Mother got down on her knees and swept
The stardust up—from every corner, every bed—
Pulled me out of school—Fearing what filth I read?
She stuffed her pockets with stardust and wept.
Mine is an old humble house with good solid bones.
Such weeping and laughing! The still of nights and dawns!
I chose my own voice and wore my own gowns.
They threw me out the church! For teen love songs.
I sing. Beauty! God made, but the devil stole it.
Mother vowed to get it all back. Every little bit.

*Aretha Franklin's mentor, Clara Ward spawned innovations in singing, composing, and arranging for decades in Gospel music while her sister Willarene sang backup for Bobby Rydell, Chubby Checker, Frankie Avalon, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Dion, Fabian, and her protégé Dee Dee Sharp.



First poetry editor of pioneer feminist magazines, *Aphra* and *Ms.*, Yvonne has received several awards including NEAs for poetry (1974, 1984) and a Leeway (2003) for fiction (as Yvonne Chism-Peace). Recent print publications include: *From the Farther Shore* (Bass River Press), *Home: An Anthology* (Flexible), *Quiet Diamonds* 2019/2018 (Orchard Street).

Philadelphia Stories Celebrates 15 Years!

Philadelphia Stories celebrated its 15th anniversary with a gala event at the Cheltenham Center For the Arts. The Festivities included a cocktail reception, live auction, art opening, and the release of The Best of Philadelphia Stories, 15th Anniversary Edition anthology. (Photos by Pam McClean-Parker)



Carlos Perez Samano and Jessica Sitek assist at the registration table.



Philadelphia Stories Founders, Carla Spataro and Christine Weiser (middle) are joined by their editorial team: (left to right) Pam McClean-Parker, Art Editor; Adriana Lecuona, Creative Non-fiction Editor; Yalonda Rice, Managing Editor; Courtney Bambrick, Poetry Editor; and Trish Rodriguez, Fiction Editor.



Alice Dustin, one of the many artists featured in the 15th anniversary art exhibit, stands by her work.



Philadelphia Stories Managing Editor, Yalonda Rice and Philadelphia Stories Contest Coordinator, Nicole Mancuso exchange pleasantries at the 15th anniversary gala.



Philadelphia Stories Board Member Gary Zimmaro and his wife enjoy the exhibit featuring artwork from the last five years of Philadelphia Stories.



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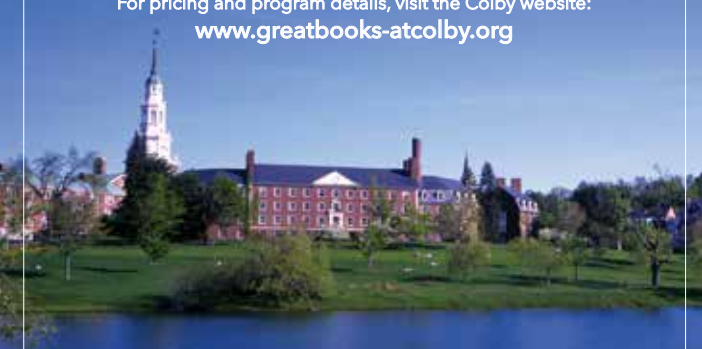
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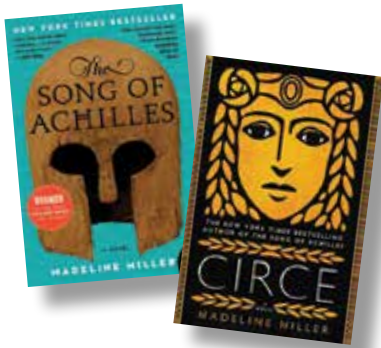
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