

PhiladelphiaStories

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

FALL / 2021 / FREE



FEATURING THE MARGUERITE MCGLINN PRIZE FOR FICTION WINNING STORIES

UNCLE ROBIN LEE LOVELACE / AMEENA GOS TO AMERICA RAHAD ABIR / EXPERIMENTAL TRIALS OLIVIA FANTINI

CONTENTS

THE MARGUERITE MCGLINN PRIZE FOR FICTION IS A NATIONAL SHORT FICTION CONTEST MADE POSSIBLE BY THE GENEROUS SUPPORT OF THE MCGLINN AND HANSMA FAMILIES. CONGRATULATIONS TO THIS YEAR'S WINNERS!

MARGUERITE MCGLINN WINNING STORIES

- 4** UNCLE (first place).....ROBIN LEE LOVELACE
8 AMEENA GOES TO AMERICA (second place).....RAHAD ABIR
16 EXPERIMENTAL TRIALS (third place).....OLIVIA FANTINI

VISIT PHILADELPHIASTORIES.ORG TO READ THE FOLLOWING ONLINE EXCLUSIVE:

- UPS & DOWNS.....SHELBY WARDLAW

FEATURES

- 23** REFLECTIONS ON HEDWIG AND THE TRUTHS WE LEARN (non fiction).....SHANNON FROST GREENSTEIN
26 WRITING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: CORE STRENGTH (column).....JEANNINE COOK

POETRY

- 14** UNDER QUARANTINE.....JOHN SWEEDER
15 SYMPATHETIC MAGIC.....JACK ROMIG
22 BIOPSY.....BARBARA DANIELS

ART



COVER

Falling Into the Pond by Laura Ducceschi

Laura Ducceschi's fine art photography celebrates the magic of life, light, patterns and colors. The recipient of more than 50 awards and honors from local, national and international organizations, her images have been exhibited at The State Museum of PA, Winterthur, Philadelphia's City Hall and many other venues. Laura lives in Pennsylvania, has a master's degree in education from The University of Pennsylvania and teaches photography. www.thrlauraslens.com



5

Cicadian Rhythm by Betz Green

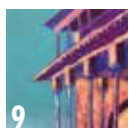
Betz Green's present body of work combines her life-long habit of collecting natural objects with an enduring interest in mixed media. Combining silverpoint with watercolor, pastel pencil and gouache on freely torn collaged papers she creates whimsical still-life portraits. Betz attended Tyler School of Art, then became the original cover illustrator for Montgomery County Living Magazine and co-founded Montgomery County Guild of Professional Artists. Her award-winning work is featured in regional, national and international shows. www.betzgreen.com



6

Axia by Devin Cohen

Devin Cohen is from Philadelphia and is a multi-instrumentalist/multidisciplinary artist, working with experimental abstract visual art, paintings, poetry, sound. Cohen has exhibited and performed in the US, France, Iceland, Germany, Sweden, Mexico, Lithuania, Spain, Japan, Hungary and Greece. His work has been on exhibit at Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Yucatán, Slought Foundation, Barnes Foundation and is currently on exhibit in Centro Estatal de las Artes in Tijuana.



9

Mansion View at Olana by Blanche Levitt Torphy

Blanche Levitt Torphy is a professional visual artist from Bryn Mawr who works in watercolor, soft pastels, acrylics, mixed media and collage. Since retiring from a career as a scientist in 2000, Blanche has been studying painting and collage at local art centers and workshops across the country. She is President and one of the founders of the newly formed Philadelphia Pastel Society. Her pastel paintings are bold and expressive impressionistic landscapes. www.BlancheLevittTorphy.com



11

Bluebird in the Field by Kitty Riley Kono Cobb

Kitty Riley Kono Cobb is an award-winning nature photographer. Her photographs have been published by the National Geographic Society, World Wildlife Fund and the National Wildlife Federation. She has published fourteen books on wildlife photography. She resides in the Philadelphia suburbs and writes a regular blog with new photographs almost every day. All of her work can be found at www.kitykono.com



17

Silent Hug by Christina Tarkoff

Christina Tarkoff's award-winning paintings reflect on the art of being human. Tarkoff's home/studio is located just outside Philadelphia. She studied painting at Temple's Tyler School of Art both in Philadelphia and in Rome, and acknowledges that those studies still inform her work today. Tarkoff's work hangs in private collections in the United States, Canada and Europe. www.christinatarkoff.com



18

UPC by Al Richards

With a degree in Studio Art from Colorado College, Al Richards worked and raised a family while continuing his artistic journey. His medium of choice is pastel though he often works in watercolors and acrylics. Now retired, Richards paints daily both in-studio and in plein air with Land Art Events and other groups. He serves on the boards of the Philadelphia Water Color Society, the Philadelphia Pastel Society and with Land Art Events. www.alrichardsfineart.com



25

Bahiana by Stacia Friedman

A native of Philadelphia, Stacia Friedman is a writer and an artist who tells stories with words and paint. She studied art at UArts, Fleisher Art Memorial and Woodmere Museum. Watercolor is her current medium of choice. Through her work Friedman explores memory, emotion and time. *Bahiana* was inspired by a visit to Bahia and the artist's fascination with their Candomblé religion in which older women serve as priests. www.staciafriedmanartist.com

Publisher/Editorial Director
Carla Spataro

Publisher/Executive Director
Christine Weiser

Managing Editor
Yalonda Rice

Fiction Editor
Trish Rodriguez

Creative Nonfiction Editor
Adriana Lecuona

Poetry Editor
Courtney Bambrick

Art Editor
Pam McLean-Parker

Art Director
Derek Carnegie

Social Media Managers
Taylor Blum
Sarah Minahan
Kasper Boehm

Fiction Contest Coordinator
Trish Rodriguez

Event Director
Lena Van

Board of Directors
Susette Brooks
Alex Husted, President
Daniel Johns, Vice President
Jim Knipp
Carla Spataro
Gary Zimmara, Treasurer
Gia Cavalli

Fiction Board
Ethan Schwartz
Sharon White
Walt Maguire
Elizabeth Greene
Lena Van
Kate Blakinger
Nathan Long

Creative Nonfiction Board
Debbie Fox
Deborah Off
Jacqueline Massaro
Jenny Burkholder
Sarah Bower
Watsuki Harrington

Poetry Board
Peter Baroth
Kathryn Ionaota
David Kozinski
Venita Hall
Phoebe LaMont
Eileen Moeller
Pat Green
Blythe Davenport
Liz Dolan
Donna Keegan
Maria Thaw
Mariah Ghant
Liz Chang
Jamal Goodwin
Mandy Bach

Author honoraria made possible by the generous support of the Conrad Weiser Author Fund

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.



Letter From the Editor

Carla Spataro – Editorial Director, Philadelphia Stories & PS Books

Every year I have the honor of choosing the finalists for the Marguerite McGlinn Prize for Fiction. Over the past few years, I've been doing this in consultation with our Fiction Editor, Trish Rodriguez. As always there were many great stories to choose from this year. Sometimes Trish has to convince me to go back and read something again. Sometimes a second or third reading changes my mind, and sometimes it doesn't. Usually, we end up with a list of either slightly less than or slightly more than 10 stories. If we're on the fence about two or three, we look at the grouping as a whole and do our best to decide which stories will make the strongest connection with our readers. I almost always have a favorite, which is almost always never the same as the judge's favorite – or Trish's. This is why we have a judge, someone from outside the magazine, someone with a different take on the work and a different aesthetic. Judging art of any kind is purely subjective and writers who submit their work to contests, and for publication in general, need to keep that in mind. All it takes for a story to get published is for the author to find the right reader – and sometimes that takes a very long time.

I was so thrilled Rion Amilcar Schott agreed to be this year's judge. When I first read his short story collection, *The World Doesn't Require You*, I knew this was an author I wanted to meet and hoped that I would be able to convince him to come to Philadelphia. Sadly, this year's Push to Publish Conference and events will be online again because of Covid concerns, and Rion Amilcar Schott will not be visiting us in person. However, we will still be hosting all the great readings, events, panels, and workshops that you've come to expect. And we'll be doing it all on Zoom. You will still be able to spend the day with him by taking his short story Master Class, *Dangerous Satires: Writing Ridiculousness for Ridiculous Times*, on Friday, October 8, 2021 – and you'll be able to "meet" the winners of this year's contest and hear them read at our virtual celebration and reception on October 9, 2021. Find more details at www.philadelphiastories.org/push-to-publish-2021.

WINNERS

Here are the winning stories with comments from Rion Scott.

FIRST PLACE:

"Uncle" by Robin Lee Lovelace from Plainfield, Indiana.

"Uncle" manages to be both funny and starkly gut-wrenching. There's a tension that crept up on me and when it broke, left me feeling a real sense of loss.

SECOND PLACE:

"Ameena Goes to America" by Rahad Abir from Nashua, New Hampshire.

In "Ameena Goes to America," physical journeys become emotional journeys across time. The story left me with questions about the limits of love and forgiveness. It's a really beautiful story.

THIRD PLACE:

"Experimental Trials" by Olivia Fantini from Minneapolis, Minnesota.

"Experimental Trials" is one of those stories that manages to be timely and timeless. A new vaccine causes people to float. And of course, there are the believers and the non-believers. Grounded, but with a sprinkling of magic, this story had me thinking about the borders of faith and science.

2021 finalists:

"Goodbye Mr. Lincoln"

by Louise Smith, Arlington, VA

"Winged"

by Natalie Gerich Brabson, Philadelphia, PA

"May All Be Happy"

by Jyotsna Sreenivasan, Columbus, OH

"Ups and Downs"

by Shelby Wardlaw, Jersey City, NJ

"Tejedora"

by Kris Faatz, Parkville, MD

**THE 2022 MARGUERITE MCGLINN CONTEST
OPENS JANUARY 15, 2022**

VISIT WWW.PHILADELPHIASTORIES.ORG FOR DETAILS



Uncle

Robin Lee Lovelace – First Place Contest Winner

Uncle always lived in the other house. By himself. When he was younger, before I was born, he was a truck driver. Then he was a drummer for a while with a band called Texas Red. Then he got married but his wife left him after three years. Then he got sick and had to stay in a looney bin for a while. When he got out, he moved into the other house on Mama's property. Ten miles outside of Glenville, in southern Indiana. He stayed holed up in the other house, most of the time, in his bedroom that smelled like a man's armpit.

When I was in sixth grade, Uncle took me to the pasture where the cows grazed when my Grandpa was still alive and showed me how to shoot his rifle. He taught me how to load in the cartridges and aim and shoot. I pulled the trigger four times before I hit a beer can off the fence post. Uncle whooped and kicked the toe of his boot in the dirt when I did that. He took the gun from me, reloaded it, and handed it back to me.

Smiling he said, "Now shoot me, Stacy."

He thumped himself on the chest and said, "Aim right here baby girl. Shoot me out of my misery."

I laughed at him and I heard Mama calling for me, so I handed him back the gun. I thought he was teasing me. I was sure that first time, he was just teasing. He told me we'd do target practice again sometime, but when I told Mama about it, she said no, no more target practice because she wasn't sure if he was still taking his meds, so we never did.

Sometimes, at night, Uncle would put on his clodhopper boots and light a kerosene lantern and leash up Porter, Mama's hound dog, and take his gun and Porter up into the thirty-seven-acre woods that grew behind Mama's house and partly behind his. Sometimes in the morning, there'd be a raccoon, skinned and cleaned and floating headless, in a big pot of cold salt water on Mama's covered porch. Sometimes he left Porter behind and went up alone. On those times, I could hear him shooting in the woods so late at night that the moon was already to the other side of the sky.

Uncle drank Johnny Walker sometimes and when he was drunk, he didn't want nobody to come to his house. I'm the one who brought him his breakfast. I'd walk it over, set it on the kitchen counter and yell at him to come down for his breakfast. I'd collect the dishes from the morning before, but when he was heavy drinking, he called Mama on the phone and told her not to send no motherfucking eggs and bacon over because he's sick of being poisoned by her cooking and she was just a half-sister

know nothing bitch.

Mama took the breakfast over herself on those days and made him get out of bed and clean his stinky, drunk ass up. I would go with her, trailing behind like a puppy dog, as she marched the loaded tray over to his door. Mama would get his pills out of the bathroom, shake them into her hand and run him a glass of tap water. While he was taking the pills, Mama took the cartridges from his rifle that sat catty-corner by his refrigerator on those days too, because she said she don't want to have to clean Uncle's brains off the greasy walls.

That way of living, that breakfast routine, that coon hunting, went on for a while. From the time I was nine years old until I was thirteen.

One day, Uncle yelled down at me to bring the breakfast up to him and not leave it on the kitchen counter. I never did that before and was a little nervous of what I might find up there in the dark dust at the top of the stairs. I walked it up and left it at the door of his bedroom, then ran down. I feared Uncle because sometimes he yelled cusswords and he had that gun that Mama said she wish he didn't have but if she took it from him, he'd just call his old drinking buddy, Curtis, to drive him to Junior's to buy another one. Uncle got a disability check, and he didn't use it for nothing but to call Curtis to give him a ride to town to buy whiskey and sometimes gave the check to Mama for his groceries or when she needed to pay his phone bill or the property taxes.

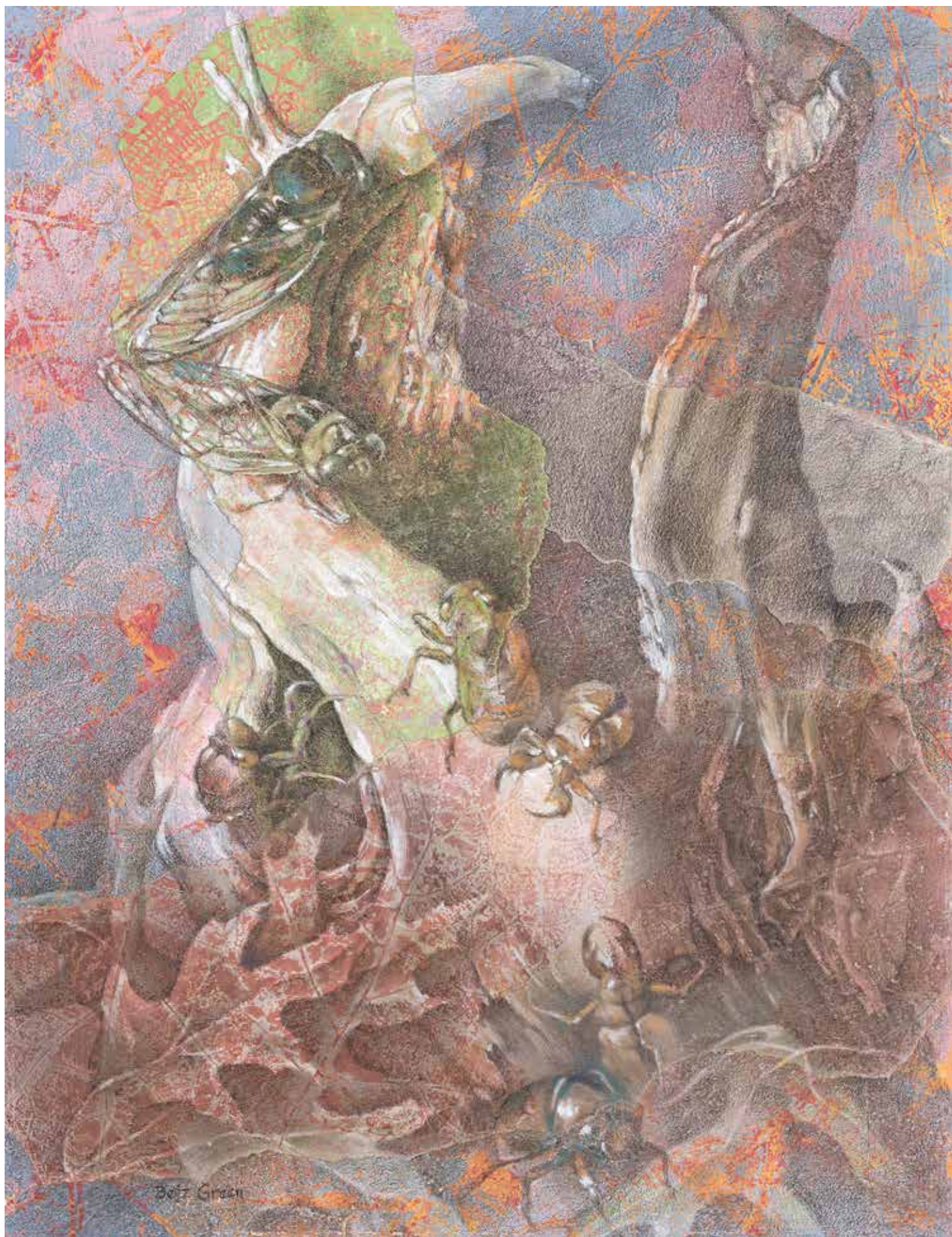
Next morning, Uncle told me to bring the breakfast up to him again. I did, and I was fixing to leave it at the bedroom door when Uncle jerked open the bedroom door and stood there with no shirt on, wearing a pair of old jeans, cut off at the knee. Uncle was pale and skinny, and his chest was curved in a little. Uncle smelled terrible, like he just burped up whiskey and blew his breath into the air.

"Bring that tray on in here Stacy and set it down on the nightstand there."

I wasn't sure if I should, but he was smiling a little and he seemed normal acting. I went on in and set the tray down. I tried not to crinkle up my nose at the stinky smell coming from the bed.

"Look what I did to that microwave, Stacy," Uncle said. He pointed to his broken up dented microwave that was on top of his clothes dresser. I looked at it, nodded and fast-walked out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

When I got to the bottom of the staircase, I yelled up to Un-





cle. "Mama wants you to take your meds."

He shouted down at me. "Tell your Mama I don't need no meds. I ain't crazy. And I taught that coon dog to fly. He can fly now, Stacy. Porter can fly. I'm not dreaming, I taught him. High enough to get in them trees and catch a raccoon. Tell your mom she's got a special dog."

I went to the kitchen and picked up the tray of dishes from the morning before and high tailed it back to Mama's house. I turned to look at Uncle's house just once. Uncle was watching me from out the bedroom window.

Next day, when I brought over his breakfast, he didn't say anything. Didn't yell down the stairs, didn't look out the window when I walked back to Mama's.

The day after that was the same and then the same again. Uncle went hunting that second night and, in the morning, Mama found a raccoon floating in water on the covered porch.

On my thirteenth birthday, Mama called Uncle and asked if he wanted us to bring over a slice of birthday cake. After a long quiet conversation, Uncle must have said yes, because Mama hung up the phone, cut a big slice of chocolate cake and put it

on a paper plate. Mama was crying while she did this. It was a silent cry. Tears but no sobbing.

"Mama," I said. "It's okay. You ain't seen Uncle for a long time now, he'll be happy to see you."

"Yeah, I know. He just makes me sad, though. When I go over there, he always has to argue with me. He's run out of his meds and won't let me take him to the doctor for the refills."

She ran her hand over the top of her head like she was checking to see if it was still there.

"I'll just put the cake in the kitchen and leave."

This was different to me, not the routine. Not different in a good way but I can't figure out why it seemed wrong. It wasn't usually what happened. I usually carried eggs and toast and bacon and coffee in the early morning. Now Mama was carrying birthday cake in the afternoon.

She took the plate of cake and walked on to Uncle's house. I went behind her. I saw a movement at Uncle's window, when I looked up directly, the curtains waved a little like Uncle had been looking and just dropped them back down.

When we got close to the house, Uncle came out naked, with

his man stuff hanging out for us to see. He had his gun.

"Happy Birthday, Stacy," Uncle said, and he grabbed the cake from Mama at the same time he handed me his rifle.

"Reckon you're old enough now. I don't have any presents for you so I'm giving you my rifle. Okay?"

I didn't want his rifle, but I didn't know how to say no to Uncle, so I took it.

Back to Mama he said, "I'm tired of you using your microwave oven to read my thoughts. And... and I know what goes on in them microwaves. You're just trying to get proof to send me back to the looney bin, so you can have all the land and my house. I'm not crazy. And I lost your dog. I'm sorry about that. He just flew away, and I can't find him nowhere."

"Thank you," I said loudly, interrupting his rant. I ran the rifle back to the house, while Mama stood and argued with him.

When she came back, I handed her the rifle and she took out the cartridges and put them in the kitchen drawer, then carried the gun down to the basement. Mama hid it behind a rolled-up carpet in the corner by the meat freezer.

Next thing I know, Mama is calling Uncle and continuing the argument about coming outside with no clothes on and giving a loaded rifle to her daughter. Mama told him there is no way to use a microwave oven to get into his brain and that he needs to get back on his meds. Mama said if he ever does anything crazy like that again, she'll call the sheriff to take him back to the psycho hospital, where he belongs.

In the morning, Mama made him scrambled eggs and biscuits and she took them over herself. Mama said she wanted to apologize for her angry conversation the night before and talk Uncle into letting her take him back to the doctor. Mama only stayed a short time and when she came back, her face was red, and her mouth was in a frown.

Uncle was gone from the house. And Porter was gone too. Mama walked up to the edge of the trees, hoping to see Uncle coming out from the woods. When evening came, Mama waited inside her house, listening all night for a holler from Uncle or a coon dog howl from Porter, and watching out the kitchen window for any sign of Uncle or Porter. When morning came, Mama called the sheriff.

After an hour or so, a brown and tan sheriff's car pulled into the driveway. Sheriff got out and walked around with Mama looking for clues, I guess, or something. Mama walked the sheriff up to Uncle's house. They went inside, and I heard Mama yelling then she screamed, and I heard two shots.

Uncle ran outside naked and came running toward Mama's house. I went quick down to the basement and got my birthday rifle. I ran back up to the kitchen and opened the drawer where Mama hid the cartridges.

By that time, Uncle was on the front porch, with his hand on the door handle. When he opened the door, I raised the rifle. I pointed it straight at his face. Uncle just froze, stood there looking at the end of the rifle, then back at me.

"Shoot me, Stacy, because I just killed your mama and that fat ass sheriff with his own gun."

My hands went weak when I heard that and I wavered for a moment, but I brought the rifle back up and held it firm.

"Come on, do it, baby girl. Shoot me out of my misery."

"Why'd you kill Mama?" I screamed.

"It's your birthday and I wanted to give you something to remember."

He cried then, tears running down his cheeks, face turning red. I was crying too, but I held the rifle aimed steady at his face.

"That's a lie, Stacy. I didn't want to kill nobody, but I don't want to go back to the looney bin. Microwaves are puttin my thoughts out there so everybody can say I'm crazy."

Uncle backed away, ran out the front door. Ran back into his house and came out with a set of keys. Uncle got into the sheriff's brown and tan and backed out of the driveway, squealing tires, and kicking up gravel. I called 911 and soon I see one state police car pull into Mama's driveway and two other police cars speeding on. A helicopter passed above, and I knew they were chasing Uncle.

A moment later, I saw Porter. He was flying behind the helicopter. His long hound ears were flapping like hummingbird wings. He dipped and bumped through the air but stayed dangerously close to the helicopter. I was scared for him. I called for him to come down, but he didn't hear me.

Robin Lee Lovelace is a mixed race writer (urban black, rural white) who was born and raised in Indiana. She won the Etchings Press annual competition for novellas, for Savonne, Not Vonny, and was the second runner-up in Daisy Pettles writer-in-residence competition in May 2020. Robin was named as an honoree in the Emerging Author category for the Indiana Humanities Author's Awards in September 2020 and in June, Robin's story, Savonne, Not Vonny, was named as the Grand Prize Winner for the Chanticleer International Book Awards (CIBA) in the category of short stories, novelettes, and novellas. Robin lives in Plainfield, Indiana with her husband Dan and her dog Amy and her cat Evileena.

Please visit
PhiladelphiaStories.org
to read work from poets

Ellen Skilton, Mark Danowsky,
Peter E. Murphy and
additional poems
from Barbara Daniels
and Jack Romig.

**Visit the website to read reviews
of several poetry collections, too!**



Ameena Goes to America

Rahad Abir – Second Place Contest Winner

A young white officer asks her in heavily accented Bengali, "What's the purpose of your visit?"

"Cancer," Ameena replies in English, standing in front of a glass window. "My husband cancer."

The officer at the American embassy, Dhaka, gives her a sharp look, checks her papers, then abruptly disappears through the side door. When he returns, he types on his computer, and says her visa application has been approved.

Ameena thanks Allah that the man hasn't asked her any complicated questions about her husband. Twenty years ago, when Selim left for America, she was thirty-one, her son was five, and her daughter three.

Selim never returned.

The first few years he called every week and sent enough money that she was contemplating buying a small apartment. Then came the attack on the Twin Towers, and he lost his job at the store in Manhattan. That was when all the trouble began.

Outside the embassy, Ameena catches her son smoking on the street. He drops the cigarette and crushes it underfoot. "Did you get the visa?" he asks.

Ameena nods.

Beside her son in an autorickshaw, her mind wanders back to the early days of her marriage. Selim smoked a pack of Benson & Hedges every day. He loved spending time with friends and talking politics at the neighborhood cafés. He worked buying stock from garment factories and selling them to the local clothing stores.

She thinks of the day Selim took her to a char island. He had heard about this newly deposited expanse of land in the River Meghna. One Friday, they had an early breakfast and took a bus to Narayanganj. From there they had a long but refreshing rickshaw ride on dirt roads through farmlands—mile after mile of mustard fields. The scent of mustard flowers in the spring breeze was intense, intoxicating.

It was a beautiful day. After the boat dropped them off on the island, they wandered about for a few minutes and spotted no sign of human presence anywhere—only a vast, sandy land surrounded by water. Selim pulled her hand and they ran like children. He stopped and gave a Tarzan's jungle call, cupping his hands around his mouth. "Ameena," he shouted, "how about we never go back, and just live here? We'll be the king and queen of this island."

"Yeah, that'd be fantastic!" she said.

They walked side by side, his arm draped over her shoulder. They dipped their feet into the water of the Meghna. Then without warning he picked her up in his arms. She found herself dangling above the water. He rocked her body, saying, "I'm dropping you."

"No!" she screamed.

He laughed and kissed her.

After Selim lost his job in Manhattan, Ameena heard from him less and less. Whenever he phoned, he talked about uncertainties. Illegal immigrants were being detained. He didn't go out much fearing deportation. The other day, he said, a fat white man spat on him in the street, calling him a terrorist, telling him to go back where he came from. That same day, after getting home, Selim shaved off his short black beard.

When he had said this, Ameena had trembled and tears raced down her cheeks. She didn't mention she was having bad dreams about him. Just the night before, she had screamed for help as Selim was dragged into the street and beaten. She woke up panting, soaked in perspiration. When she came to her senses, she clasped her shaking hands together hard and asked Allah to keep her husband safe. Later, in her dawn prayer, she also prayed for the recovery of the Bangladeshi man she'd heard on the news had been shot in the face at a Dallas gas station.

"Please, come back home," she implored Selim. "We don't need American dollars. We will be happy here together."

Selim said he was moving to another state soon. "You know, Ameena, it's a great country to live in, but you need the legal status."

Months after he settled in New Jersey, his friend in New York called to tell her that Selim was living with a Mexican woman.

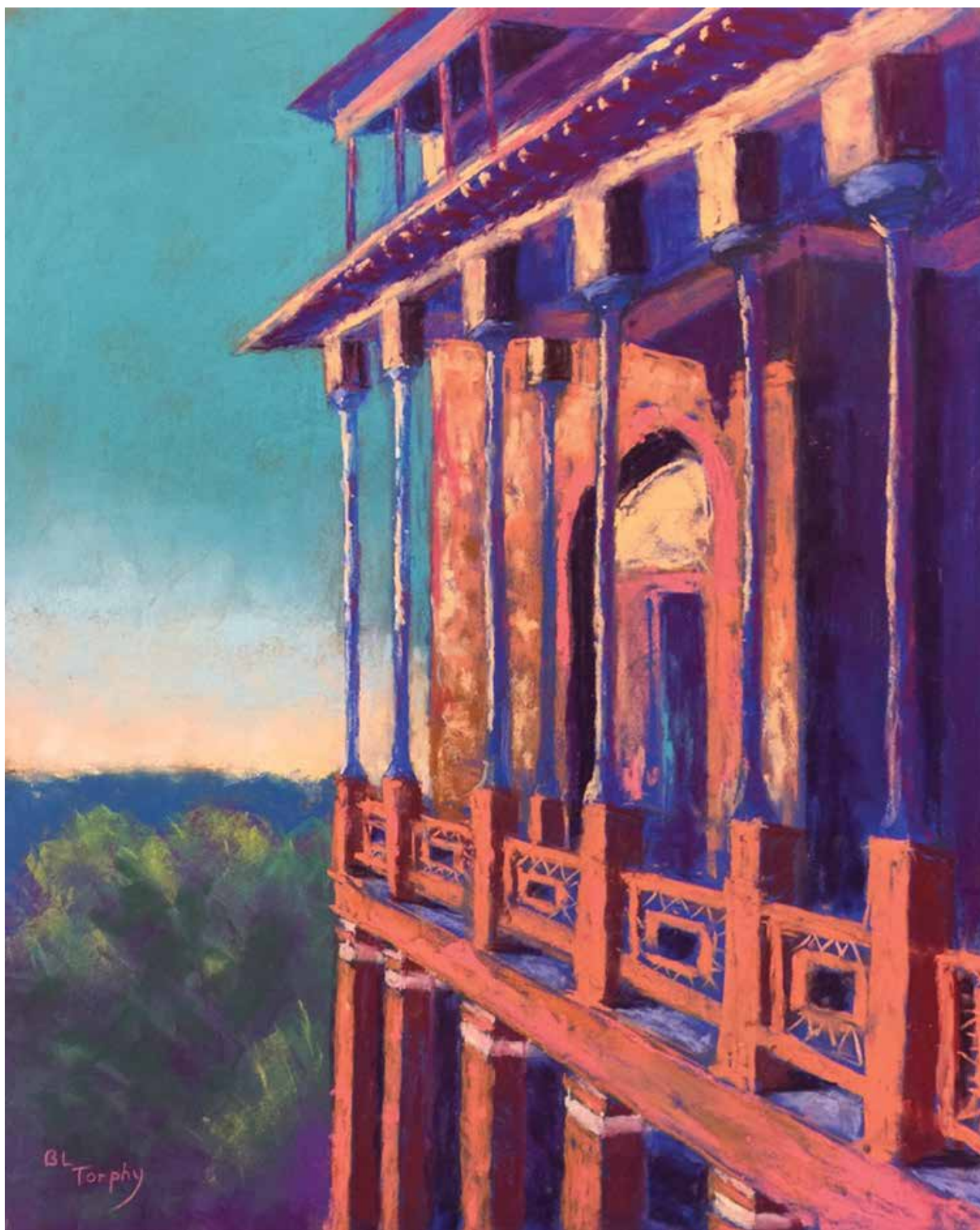
In April, when Ameena finally received a call from Selim, she exploded. He tried to explain that he just rented a room in her apartment in preparation for entering into a contract marriage. "Ameena, don't be mad. Some people do it here to get papers. It's not real."

She cried and begged him to return home immediately. "You have to choose either me or your America."

"Ameena, listen—"

She wouldn't listen. She yelled and cursed him. She asked him not to contact her anymore. "Many wives become widows at a young age," she said. "I'll consider my husband dead."

Ameena moved in with her mother. She loved to sew. She



became a seamstress for neighbors, friends, and relatives. They paid her well, but she could meet only half of her expenses. Her twin brother, who had a thriving import business, started giving her a monthly allowance.

When anyone asked Ameena about her husband, she faked a smile and said, "He lives in America." Selim phoned occasionally to speak with the children and wired money prior to festivals. Then news reached Ameena that her husband had moved out of the home of the Mexican woman; his plan didn't work out, and now he was sleeping with a white woman. Five years later she heard from someone that his asylum application had been granted. But his new status wouldn't allow him to travel back to Bangladesh. She didn't understand.

Not long after, her son made her tea in the evening and said, "Daddy wants me to study in the U.S."

For half a minute, without a word, Ameena observed her nineteen-year-old son. Her face slowly tightened. "Never," she said. "You want to be like your father?" She pushed the cup away, spilling tea on the table.

In September 2016, Ameena learned from Selim's sister that he had lung cancer. At the end of the year his health deteriorated, and he had surgery. Could she fly to America to take care of her husband, his sister had asked. Ameena said no, and again she was asked in December. Then, in January, Selim called. She heard a forgotten yet familiar voice, now scratchy and strained. She pursed her lips but couldn't form any words. After a moment she managed to speak. Her words and his words were punctuated by long pauses. He told her that he would send the necessary papers. She would need to get a passport.

Her interview at the embassy was scheduled in early April.

Ameena has never felt so distinguished in her life. For the last three months, no matter who she met, she has heard the same question: When are you going to America?

Her flight is at one in the morning. A day's journey from Dhaka to New York, with a four-hour layover in Dubai. A bus is hired to carry her relatives, who insisted on coming to the airport to give her a send-off. They all hug her, and some cry at the immigration checkpoint.

She starts sweating when boarding begins. It's her first time flying. She is given a window seat, and a flight attendant helps her fasten the seatbelt. She stiffens and holds her breath as the plane takes off. She says a prayer, and for a moment thinks she will never see her husband or her children again. But before long she realizes that the aircraft is in midair, and she gazes in wonder at the glittering skyline of Dhaka.

In the arrivals lounge at JFK, Ameena catches a stranger waving his hand at her. She does not recognize him until she hears her name. Selim is shockingly thin, his face so red, Adam's apple sticking out. His head is shaved. Back home on her bedroom wall there is a family picture in which their children are standing on either side of Selim and her. Twenty years later, he matches so little of his earlier self, scarcely resembling that image of him anchored deep in her memory. It must be the cancer, she decides.

"You haven't changed much," Selim says in the car. He peppers her with questions. How was the flight? Did she face any problems anywhere? In Dubai? At immigration? He breathes heavily between sentences.

From the driver's seat his friend, Rafiq Bhai, glances at her in the rearview mirror. He says it was his idea to get her assistance at Dubai Airport, so she wouldn't have to struggle with her limited English.

"You've come at the right time," he says to her, stopping the car before a condo. "It's almost summer here."

When Selim reaches for the luggage, Rafiq Bhai says, "You're not supposed to lift anything heavy."

In the elevator, Selim stands close to Ameena, his body brushing against hers. His breathing is labored and rapid.

Selim opens an apartment door numbered 17 and guides her into a sizable living room. His friend leaves, saying to call him whenever they need him.

"You can freshen up," Selim says, pointing to another room. "I'll warm up some food."

Ameena takes one of her suitcases into the bedroom and shuts the door. She hears laughing and loud conversation emanating from outside. Through the window she peers down at the balcony of the apartment opposite. Wine glasses in hand, a couple of men with women in skimpy outfits are sitting in the late afternoon sun. She checks the window, but it has no curtain like back home. She moves into the corner of the room and changes into salwar kameez.

At the kitchen table, there is rice, mashed eggplant, chicken curry and dal.

"Eggplant?" She eyes him. "You don't eat eggplant."

"But you like it," he says, serving her rice.

"You cooked these yourself?"

He nods, asks how the kids are doing.

"Oh, I need to call them!" she says.

"I messaged them already."

She looks at his plate. He has taken a small portion of rice. He meets her eyes and says, "I can't eat much."

A small sigh escapes her lips.

He coughs. "It's the chemo. It kills the appetite."

She eats in silence. He eats in small bites.

"You're a good cook," she says.

After dinner, while Ameena does the washing-up, Selim makes her milk tea.

"Do you still take two spoons in your tea?" he asks.

She smiles. "No, one spoon now."

He hands her the tea mug. Her fingers touch his for a second.

An hour later, as she yawns, Selim tells her to get some sleep. Ameena goes to the bedroom. When she wakes up, everything is quiet and dark. She peers out the half-open window; the night sky is clear, with a crescent moon. She slips out of the bedroom to use the bathroom and finds Selim asleep on the living room sofa.

The following day he takes her to an Indian grocery store, just around the corner. On the streets she spots Bangladeshi faces, hears them talking aloud, and makes out a Bengali song blaring from a jewelry shop. "It doesn't feel like America here," she tells him on their way home.

"It's Jackson Heights," he says, laughing. "A little Bangladesh."

Ameena looks for spices in the kitchen cupboard and sets to cooking. Selim wants to help, but he starts coughing.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Yes, just tired."



"Why don't you lie down?"

"That's what I do most of the time. Let me sit at the table and talk to you."

He grabs a chair and inhales. He tells her that he drove a taxi for years, until last August, when he got the diagnosis. That was when he quit smoking.

That night Ameena settles in the sofa bed and says Selim should use the bedroom.

"You have health issues," she says. "You need a bigger bed."

"Why don't we share the bed instead?" he says.

She holds his gaze. He lowers his eyes and enters the bedroom. Rubbing lotion on her hands, Ameena stretches out on the sofa. The rooms are still; the only sound she hears now is Selim's wheeze, rhythmic and loud as the ticking of a clock at night. His words echo in her head. *Why don't we share the bed instead?*

She slides off the sofa and tiptoes into his room. In the semi-darkness, she makes out his eyes, looking at her. He moves over and makes room in the bed. For a long while, lying side by side on their backs, they stay silent. Then he places his hand on hers. She trembles. His hand is cold.

"I'm sorry," he says.

She doesn't answer. Eyes closed; she sees Dhaka: The small one-bedroom apartment they rented after their marriage. Their Saturday nights at the movies. Their first vacation in the mountains of Chittagong. The birth of their first child.

In the first few months, after Selim left for America, she hardly slept at night, staring at his empty side of the bed. She missed his touch. His smell. His cigarette breath. His occasional snoring.

"Forgive me, Ameena," he murmurs and rubs the back of her hand. "I'm happy you came."

She sighs, staring up at the ceiling. She imagines unknown figures—the women her husband slept with—filling in the two-inch gap between her and him in the bed, pushing them apart. Hispanic, white...were there more? She feels small. Tears spill from the corners of her eyes.

Ameena gets up early, says her morning prayer, makes herself milk tea, and watches the day breaking from the balcony. Then she reads the Quran while sitting at the kitchen table. At eight, she wakes Selim for breakfast.

Every other day she visits the grocery store by herself to buy vegetables. Often Selim asks her to check the mailbox on her way back. She doesn't understand the washing machines in the building's basement. She prefers to hand-wash their laundry in the bathtub.

Twice, morning and afternoon, she and Selim sit on the balcony. She sips tea, and he coffee.

"Do you remember the char island in Narayanganj?" she asks him one day.

He squints for a moment and then a slow smile brightens his face. "How can I forget? We spent some beautiful hours there, didn't we?"

Ameena grins.

"I enjoyed the boatman's song too," he laughs.

It was already afternoon on the char island, Ameena recalls. She asked him how they would get back to the other side of the river. They'd hired a boat to get here, but no boats were seen anchored at the island. They stood at the shore waving to the passing rowboats in the distance until a man in a canoe noticed

them and came to their assistance.

The boatman agreed to ferry them across the river. On board, Selim asked him to sing a song, if he could. The man was in his twenties and chatty. He belted out a Bengali folk song. *The world will remain forever as it is. And someday we'll leave this beautiful world behind...*

One warm Monday, Selim says, "I'm feeling good today. Let's go out."

He orders an Uber and ten minutes later they are in front of a Bengali clothing store.

"Don't waste money," she tells him. "I've brought enough dresses from Dhaka."

He doesn't listen. He buys her salwar-kameez, a sari, and a pair of sandals. Afterward, he takes her to Hudson River Park. The park is swarming with people. Ameena feels uncomfortable seeing the women everywhere wearing so little clothing.

"Why are they lying like this under this hot sun?" she asks.

"It's called sunbathing. As we love winter in Bangladesh, Americans love summer. So when it's a nice sunny day like this, people come out in the park to enjoy the sun."

They have ice cream. Ameena wonders if Selim remembers that last week was their wedding anniversary.

Later that month, Selim invites his friend to dinner. Ameena cooks all afternoon, then has a shower, and puts on the new sari.

Rafiq Bhai visits with his wife. After the meal, the two men talk about Bangladeshi politics on the balcony. Rafiq Bhai's wife is fairly young. Ameena learns from the woman that she is his second wife. The first wife, in Dhaka, divorced him and married his cousin while Rafiq Bhai was in the U.S. The young woman has been in America two years now. No, her parents didn't force her into this marriage. She herself consented to it because Rafiq Bhai had a green card.

On a drizzly day in August, Ameena passes Selim his morning medicines and a glass of water. "Your hair has grown long," she says. "You need a cut."

He returns the empty tumbler. "Do you want to do it? You once gave me a haircut, remember?"

She does remember. It was in the first year of their marriage. On a rainy day in Dhaka, when he was about to set off for a salon with a tattered umbrella, she suggested giving him a trim.

"It turned out not bad," he says.

She smiles demurely. "Do you have good scissors?"

Selim finds her scissors. In the living room, Ameena spreads outdated newspapers on the floor and places a chair on them. With another sheet of newspaper, she makes a hole in the center and slides it over Selim's head to catch the falling hair.

An hour later Selim stands before the bathroom mirror. "It's almost perfect." He looks at her and adds quickly, "That's my fault, of course. I couldn't provide all of the haircutting kit that barbers need."

"See, I have many skills." She leans on the bathroom doorway.

"I know. I'm amazed by your dexterous hands. Maybe we should open a salon."

They both laugh.

Before going for a shower, Selim says, "Ameena, I didn't tell, I applied for you and our kids to come over. It's a lengthy process. The problem is, to sponsor and bring you all here perma-

nently, I need to be employed. But in my current condition—" he pauses and sighs.

She touches his shoulder. "Don't worry about these things now."

Over the weekend, they attend a small wedding. The groom is Bangladeshi and the bride, Pakistani, Selim informs her. Some women come to chat with Ameena. "So glad that you made it to the US at last," they say. One short woman about her age sits beside her during dinner. She tells her some of the latest community gossip. A fifteen-year-old girl invited her white boyfriend home when the parents were out, only to get caught by her father who is a devout Muslim and came to the States on DV Lottery. He gave her a good beating. She called the police and had him arrested.

"The child had her father arrested?" Ameena asks. "What kind of daughter is she?"

"Well, this is America."

She tells Ameena she was a high school teacher in Dhaka. Her early days in New York were full of struggles. She started with a cleaning job. "Think of my situation," she says. "I was a respected teacher back home. In America, I had to clean shit in toilets. They call it living the American dream." She laughs and says she now works at a nursing home and earns more than her husband.

In early September, Selim has increasing breathing difficulties and coughs up blood. At night, he sleeps with his head and chest elevated with three pillows. Ameena rubs lukewarm mustard oil on his chest. He stays in bed all day now, wearing a beanie she knitted for him.

In October, after two visits to the hospital, a nurse comes to the apartment to set up an oxygen machine beside the bed. She shows Ameena how to use it and tells her to call 911 in case of emergency.

Some weeks after, on a cold and windy evening, Selim is moved to the hospital. Ameena is allowed to stay overnight with

him. Rafiq Bhai chauffeurs her back and forth to the apartment. A few days later, she learns how to take a bus. It's only five stops to the hospital. She cooks and brings meals for him, but he cannot eat. He drinks very little.

The next Saturday it is bitterly cold. That afternoon is the last time Selim can breathe without the ventilator.

"I wish I never came to America," he says, his hoarse voice almost a whisper. "Wish I could turn back the time."

"You really think so?"

"I regret what I've done to you, to our children." He pauses and coughs. "I don't expect you to forgive me."

"I've forgiven you already. That's why I agreed to come."

"You have a great heart, Ameena. I am—I've been terrible."

"Oh, don't say that. You'll get better soon." She interlocks her fingers with his. "After you get well, we can visit Dhaka and I will take you to the char island."

His face beams, then darkens, and then his eyes get misty.

He goes into a deep sleep. He stops responding. Tubes crisscross his body.

Rafiq Bhai manages everything. Hospital, burial, certificates. She has to sign a lot of papers.

It starts snowing on the day of her flight. She stands motionless by the bedroom window, watching the silent snow whitening the earth. Everything is so gray, so barren. Ameena thinks of Selim's phone call the first time he saw snow. She asked him what it looks like. "It's like cotton floating in the air," he said. Ameena slides the sash open. She extends her hand through the window to feel the falling flakes on her palm.

Rahad Abir is a writer from Bangladesh. His work has appeared in The Los Angeles Review, The Bombay Literary Magazine, Himal Southasian, Courier International, The Wire, BRICK LANE TALES anthology, and elsewhere. He has an MFA in fiction from Boston University. He received the 2017-18 Charles Pick Fellowship at the University of East Anglia. Currently he is working on a short story collection, which was a finalist for the 2021 Miami Book Fair Emerging Writer Fellowship.



CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Philadelphia Stories is a free print magazine that publishes fiction, poetry, essays, and artwork from writers and artists from PA, NJ, and DE and makes it available to 5,000 readers every quarter. We'd love to see your work!

Find submission guidelines at www.philadelphiastories.org Free to submit year-round!

Under Quarantine

Poem by John Sweeder

I watch her watch her mother wave
goodbye through the window
of her room in assisted living,

each pressing a single hand
against the glass pane,
palm to palm, as if in prayer,

a gesture lasting but a moment
before daughter, a masked
store clerk, departs for work—

their loneliness an orchid
dropping its last leaf.



John Sweeder's poetry has appeared in Burningword Literary Journal, Shantih, Better Than Starbucks, and Haiku Journal, among other venues. His first book of poetry, *Untethered Balloons*, was published in March of 2021 by Adelaide Books, New York/Lisbon. Now a retired professor, John was born and raised in Northeast Philly and taught at La Salle University for 30 years.

Sympathetic Magic

Poem by Jack Romig

Old *brauchers* knew the making of good beer from pumpkins,
the preparation of ripe poultices to fix sore eyes and hearts,
the scribbling of mystic letters that, tacked to the lintel in a grid,
would drive the worst of malefactors from the door.

The learning of these arts, they knew, embodied one fixed rule:
A man can teach them only to a woman; a woman only to a man.

And so with us. This of you, that of me, in rites of bed and table,
exchanges older than the spoken word, new incantations purely ours,
and secret spells invoking skies and seasons, wind, soil, water, light.

We may bury a potato under the eaves and repel all wickedness.
I will show you.

**A braucher was a healer in the Pennsylvania German tradition of folk medicine.*



A native of eastern Pennsylvania, Jack Romig lives with his wife and son in the Berks County village of Huff's Church. He was a longtime manuscript editor with Book-of-the-Month Club in New York City. His poems have appeared in *The Fourth River* and in the former online journal *Common Sense 2*, where he was poetry editor for three years.



Experimental Trials

Olivia Fantini – Third Place Contest Winner

After the first, which was of course televised, a silence swept over the land. Networks later reported a full four minutes and thirty-nine seconds of dead air during which the camera simply recorded the creeping progress. It was the black-haired man—whose body was slowly rising from the exam table, carried by invisible hands to hover six inches above the linoleum tiles of the vaccine site—who finally broke the silence. “Jesus,” he whispered.

From his ratty armchair my father said, “Those nonbelievers on Possum Drive must be shitting themselves right about now.” Over the course of the four and a half minutes, during which the man’s body had moved steadily, gracefully through the air, my brother Jeb had scooted closer and closer to the television. The blues and golds from the screen illuminated the soft round skin of his cheeks. My mother crossed herself and said, “God is good.”

My father included the black-haired man, Jacob Blackwell, in our evening prayers that night. Fingers twisted into my nightgown, I tried to focus on his wooden voiced recitation, but another moment hung in my mind, twisting and flashing and untwisting on its long string, a suncatcher grabbing all the surrounding light and scattering it, fracturing everything with its sharp angles.

The floating man was on the front page of the *Kentucky Gazette* the next morning alongside an interview with a scientist who spent a lot of time talking about density and gas in the body and possible chemical reactions in the bloodstream.

“These people wouldn’t know God if He hit them upside the head with a two-by-four,” my father said, letting the thin pages flutter back into place on the table. “Miracle!” he declared over the rim of his coffee cup. “Miracle!”

My mother flipped to the case count for Alabaster. “Two more deaths.”

“Who?”

There was quiet in the kitchen as she rifled through to the obituaries.

“Nonbelievers.”

My father nodded. No one from the congregation had died of the virus.

As I was pouring cereal, we received a call from the Grace Fellowship phone tree. Ma put the call on speakerphone, so we could all listen to Sister Alice share the pastor’s message about God’s gift. Sister Alice had a stutter, and Jeb was bouncing in place, impatient to return to his Lincoln logs long before she finished. She got it out at last. The plague was over. The earth

had been cleansed of wickedness. Sloth, gluttony, covetousness, wrath, pride, and lust had been wiped out. Adulterers, homosexuals, murderers, rapists, criminals, and thieves had received their judgement. God had sent a sign that it was time to begin anew in His holy name, and Jacob Blackwell was that sign.

“Amen,” we said as one into the speakerphone, and then my mother hung up and called the Bradburys to repeat the message. My father cut Blackwell’s picture out of the paper, emptied a gold picture frame of a photo of his mother, and inserted the floating man. He hung it in the kitchen between a print of the Madonna and a brass crucifixion.

At school the Grace fellowshippers were already talking about Blackwell as the Second Coming. After lunch we piled into the gym.

“Six feet apart! Six feet apart!” Mrs. Kanoffel kept yelling as the science teacher fussed with the projector which was showing nothing but blue. In the echo chamber of cement bricks, I heard Millie Zarturo laugh, or I thought I heard her laugh. She would be in the back with the nonbelievers. I didn’t turn my head to look for her. Then the Fox News logo came into focus. It was warm in the gym, and the breath in my mask slipped up to fog the lenses of my glasses until I had to take them off and wipe them every few minutes. Blackwell was still floating. They showed a short clip of him hovering around the hospital room where he was being kept for observation, eating his breakfast in mid-air. They were doing it again, this time with a woman. She had short red hair that curled out on either side of her face. Black wires and electrodes were connected to her temples, her chest, and just about everywhere. The doctor administering the vaccine stepped back as soon as the liquid entered her body.

At first, nothing happened and the fellowshippers sitting together in the front row of the bleachers nodded at one another. “He shall come again in glory to judge—” Shirley Baker began, then there was a tugging on the wires. The camera frame zoomed out. Her legs were lifting. Her shoulders rose. There she was, a solid two inches above the red pleather of the exam table. I think she could have gone higher if she weren’t hooked up to all those machines which just kept chugging along. Nothing beeped rapidly like in those hospital shows. No plunging red lines appeared on the monitors. A few of the nonbelievers on the back rows of the bleachers laughed.

“There seem to be no adverse side effects,” one doctor said later, standing beside the floating woman.





When we got home from school, Dad wasn't there. We ate without him and didn't hear his car in the driveway until late. Every afternoon that week after lunch we trekked to the gym to watch the breaking news coverage. Our experiments for the county science fair went forgotten. The trifold was tucked away in the back of my closet, and although I often thought of those five green dots left by her sleeping hand, I did not take the board out to study them. I tried to let the dust settle over my guilt.

On Wednesday, an older man levitated six and a half inches off the ground. On Thursday, a young woman made it nearly a foot. On Friday monozygotic twins hovered at exactly the same height. On Saturday, to quiet Jeb, Ma ushered us into the station wagon, and we drove the two hours to the Louisville Slugger Museum. "Your father needs to rest," she said when Jeb asked why he wasn't coming.

On Sunday, in the sun-filled sanctuary, which smelled overpoweringly of disinfectant, the pastor gave a sermon called, "Are You Worthy of God's Kingdom?" He began with the flood. Our congregation, he said, was a mighty ark which protected us from the waters of destruction because we were found to be righteous in His eyes. The virus had cleansed the earth of the sinful, but only those who were truly pure of heart would enter heaven. Pastor Pierce explained that the vaccine was a test of holiness. The higher we floated, the closer we were to God. My father, clean shaven for the first time this week, seemed finally at peace in the warm glow of the pastor's words.

The monozygotic twins died of back-to-back heart attacks that night. The doctors said it had nothing to do with the injection, but suddenly nobody besides us wanted anything to do with the clinical trials. Government funding was cut overnight, and the plan for the multi-city pilot delivery program was halted. That's why the experimental trials were moved to Alabaster. There was such a clamour for it from Grace Fellowship that those white coats packed up their Erlenmeyer flasks and came on out here in two weeks flat. Everyone wanted to know they were worthy of God's kingdom. It was the school nurse who told me, when I couldn't stop crying during the annual 7th grade eye exam, that children wouldn't be included in the experimental trials.

"Not until you're eighteen," she said, eyes kind over her powder blue mask.

So I tried to erase the memory of Milly Zarturo. If I couldn't remember the sin, maybe it wouldn't count.

The doctors thought the floating would dissipate with time, but Blackwell was still averaging four and three-eighths inches off the ground three months later. Soon the aisles of the Piggly Wiggly were full of floating men and women. Nonbelievers would ask my mother to hand them the last box of Bisquick on the top shelf, and she would extend her arm. Jeb and I had to get the groceries on the bottom shelves. Once you were up there, floating, it didn't seem you could come down so easily. The bike shop in town had offered to install clips on the brake and gas pedals, so vaccinated adults could drive, and soon all the elders in the

congregation were floating around in cycling shoes.

I had thought it would be a sort of graceful gliding, but my father, one of the highest floaters at eleven and a quarter inches, couldn't carry a cup of coffee to his armchair without spilling it. "At least I don't have to wear those dang masks anymore," he would say cheerfully every time the coffee sloshed from his mug. The floaters walked through the air, which seemed to be an invisible bumpy surface beneath their feet. Sometimes they stepped into holes, sinking to nearly an inch above the floor. When this happened, they stumbled, but they didn't seem capable of falling. Something in the air seemed to catch them before they reached the ground. Mrs. Popejoy with her flowered cane and thick prescription glasses had taken to shuffling everywhere so as to avoid the craters.

Not long after all the adults had been vaccinated, Grace Fellowship began a petition to allow children into the experimental trials. Pretty soon news vans were parked outside the church day and night. Men and women with perfect hair, wearing tailored suits and surgical masks, milled around in the courtyard as Pastor Pierce preached about salvation and waved his clipboard in the air. One of the Sisters had tied a pen on a string to the clipboard, and it shook and trembled and jumped as the pastor gesticulated.

A girl from the high school, a nonbeliever named Sarah-Bell, dressed up in a Grace Fellowship jumper and kerchief and gave an interview to Robert MacNeil. A couple of fellowshippers saw it on the PBS news hour. Apparently Sarah-Bell talked a bunch of BS about wanting to float and how her ma told her she would throw her out of the house if she didn't make it at least five inches off the ground. Jeremiah showed me the clip in the library while we were working on our social studies homework. "You can tell she's trying not to laugh," he said, as Sarah-Bell lifted a hand to cover her face. The shot switched to a closeup of Mr. McNeil looking directly into the camera. He sighed deeply and began talking about societal pressures in religious communities. I pulled off the headphones, looked out the window, chewed on my lip, then looked back at Jeremiah. "Did you hear about Mayweather?" He shook his head.

There had been a rumor going around the school that Tommy Mayweather had sex with a nonbeliever back in September, but when he got the vaccine on his eighteenth birthday, he floated eight and a half inches. I whispered this to Jeremiah over the large, laminated map showing Christopher Columbus' travels which we were supposed to be copying into our notes. "Maybe God doesn't care if you have sex. Maybe all this time we've been wrong about what He has forbidden." Jeremiah's tongue was protruding from his lips, and the tip wiggled slightly as he glanced at the map and then back at his drawing, forehead scrunched in concentration. "Or maybe that whole thing was a rumor and Tommy never had sex with anyone."

At night in bed, after Jeb had turned out the light, I lay awake wondering how God measured sin. Apparently none of the adults had a sin heavy enough to keep them on the ground, even Mrs. Perzinsky who used to be an underwear model. Pastor Pierce had said the virus cleansed the world of wickedness, and I was still here, so that must mean my sin had been forgiven, at least part-way. I tried to forget about Millie Zarturo and the shimmer of tiny golden hairs on her flushed cheek and the scent of the warm air just above her skin.

In November, a lawyer from Grace Fellowship sued the experimental trials on the grounds of religious freedom, saying

children had a right to receive the vaccine. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court. It took a long time, and during those months I tried to be good and righteous. I did visualizations like when the gym teacher told us to imagine the ball striking the center of the bat. I imagined washing the stain from my soul the way Ma had taught me to scrub the menstrual blood from my underwear. I closed my eyes hard until I could see the soap froth turn pink and feel my fingers become icy beneath the cold water, until I saw the stain stream over the porcelain basin and spiral down the drain.

We were hanging garland at the church, getting ready for the Christmas pageant later that week, when one of the older boys poked his head into the sanctuary and yelled, "They found one." He took off down the carpeted hall. We clutched the skirts of our jumpers and followed.

The large room in the church basement was packed. The television showed a grainy recording of a woman I didn't recognize. She was small with short brown hair and a stern mouth. After nine months of the pandemic, a few nonbelievers had shown up for the experimental trials. All had floated.

A man in a white coat administered the vaccine. There was a long silence. The digital timestamp on the bottom right of the footage flashed away the seconds. Nothing happened. The woman's feet remained on the floor. The scene cut back to a bright newsroom where Robert MacNeil was interviewing a scientist. The red and white headline along the bottom of the screen read, "Anomalous Woman." I looked around for the pastor but couldn't find his face in the crowded room. "What does it mean?" one of the younger kids asked in a whisper. My father, leaning against a beat-up piano in the corner, said simply, "God missed one."

She was dead by the eleven o'clock news. From my hiding spot, I peeked through the slats in the banister. They showed the crumpled sheet-metal of her white Honda illuminated in the darkness by flashing ambulance lights at the intersection of fifth and Broadway, and then a bunch of photos from her Facebook page. She had been a nurse and a single mom. Two of her co-workers had recently died of the virus. "She was desperate to protect herself and her son," a crying woman explained to a shaky camera beside the accident site in the gently falling snow. The screen cut to a photo of the woman on a sled, holding a child on her lap. My mother turned off the television and rose from the couch with her tea. It was then that I noticed the empty armchair. My father was still at the deacon's meeting.

At school the next day, Ronny Buckman said his older brother had seen the woman walking the boulevard plenty of times and that she had been a prostitute. He said all those photos of her in scrubs were just from a Halloween party. By lunchtime there was a rumor that the car accident had been a setup, and that Pastor Pierce had something to do with it. I wasn't sure if the rumor came from a fellowship member or a nonbeliever, but suddenly it was everywhere. Older nonbelievers shouted the rumor to one another with a smile in the hallway between classes. In the cafeteria, a group of older fellowship boys began banging on the table and chanting Pastor Pierce's name until Mrs. Kanoffel approached with a stern look.

It was taco day, and the beans had soaked through the bottom of the hard-shell taco, so it tore in my hands and spilled in my lap when I lifted it to my mouth. I put the taco down and drank two cartons of chocolate milk. I glanced across the cafeteria to where a group of nonbelievers were exchanging gifts.

Millie Zarturo was somewhere behind the shiny gift bags and thick red ribbons, but I could not make out her face.

It was the last day of school before Christmas vacation, and we had a test in every class that afternoon. When I asked Jeremiah what he thought about the rumor, he just shrugged over his flashcards and said the woman's death was inevitable, i-n-e-v-i-t-a-b-l-e. It was one of the words on our English spelling list. "Of course God was going to intervene. I-n-t-e-r-v-e-n-e." But did he think Pastor Pierce had intervened? "Only He is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent." And he proceeded to spell each word.

In February, they came out with another vaccine that didn't make you float. Most of the nonbelievers in town got vaccinated with the new one, and things finally started to feel normal again.

That spring every boy in fifth grade signed up for the baseball team. We went to every game, my parents hovering over the last row in the bleachers, behind the nonbelievers and the out-of-towners. Jeb played shortstop like Pee Wee Reese, pounding his left hand into his glove and spitting into the red clay. His raggedy bowl cut was too long, and he was forever shaking the hair from his eyes before crouching into his low stance, glove hovering in the air before him. He refused to let my mother cut his hair all season. He said it was his good luck charm. When my mother repeated the Grace Fellowship adage, "There is no such thing as good luck, only God's luck," he only shrugged and went to his room.

One Saturday he jumped nearly three feet to catch a rogue hit, the maw of his red-brown glove roaring into the air. The out-of-towners gave him a standing ovation. My father whooped and clapped and said, "Just think of when he can fly." Pastor Pierce had started to call it flying, even though you still had to lift your feet to move, and no one seemed to be able to make it higher than fourteen inches. A girl from the school newspaper caught the play with her camera, and the picture was on the front page, "Miraculous Catch." My father shook his head over the headline. "These people wouldn't know a miracle if it hit them upside the head with a two-by-four."

We were in the middle of Kentucky-mandated standardized testing when the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Grace Fellowship. None of the teachers told us, but we knew because Grace Fellowship parents started picking their kids up early. I imagined holding the sin in my hand, closing it in my fist, pictured it compacting, draining, shrinking to nothing. How much sin were you allowed to carry into His Kingdom? How much was too much to fly? What if they gave me the shot and I rose a quarter of an inch and nothing more?

From inside the silent rooms with butcher paper hanging over the reference charts on the walls, I could hear my father's voice in the hallway, arguing with Mrs. Kanoffel. "She can finish the test later." "State rules require-" He was already walking towards the door. I knew the skid and shuffle of my father's footsteps, knew them in the aisles at church, knew them coming down the stairs early on Sundays, knew the soft sound as he moved through the uneven air. I could hear my blood rushing through my ears like a river rushing towards an edge. Ma and Dad had taken us to Niagara Falls when I was nine and Jeb was six. For a moment I could feel the clouds of cold mist on my skin, feel the force of the water stampeding against the eroding rocks, and hear the middle-aged woman in the blue raincoat behind us muttering to her friend, "They never talk about how many people died going over those falls by accident."

On my way to the front of the room, I passed Millie Zarturo's

bent head. The tributaries of her brown curly hair split off one after the other, revealing a sliver of her milk-white scalp as she meticulously filled in perfect circles with her number two pencil. Millie was a nonbeliever. She would finish her test uninterrupted. She would walk home, maybe stopping at the corner store for a pack of gum, then she would watch some after-school sitcom my father would never let us see. During the commercial breaks maybe she would check the local news, but she wouldn't think of me. I was nothing to her, and she didn't know; it was the only reason I hadn't asked her to forgive me. I had thought about apologizing a hundred times, but I couldn't apologize without telling her what I had done. I thought if I never said it out loud, maybe it would cease to exist.

"Hurry up," my father kept saying as we walked down the hallways covered in student artwork. "Hurry up. There'll be a line already." Jeb was with him, and as we ran to keep up with my father's long strides, I could hear the hiss and rub of his backpack straps. He was holding his glove. It was a Tuesday, which meant practice. The playoffs were next week.

My hands were trembling, and it took several tries to secure the metal tongue of the seatbelt into place. Pastor Pierce says we all choose our path. Man makes his own fate. Sweat slid down my training bra. I was in seventh grade, and I had already ruined the rest of my life.

The sun was in my eyes as we drove to the vaccine site. I raised a hand against the bright orb, but my face still felt hot in the shade of my palm. We rode across the train tracks, and as the car jolted over each bump, I realized I wasn't going to heaven. The car lurched once more and puke erupted, orange and stinging from my nose and mouth, coating the yellow and blue atlas in the backseat pocket of the passenger side, the center console, the window. My gray jumper was warm and wet against my skin. I blinked back whatever else threatened to come up. My father pulled over, but there wasn't much to be done. We drove the rest of the way with the windows down.

The line was the longest I had ever seen in my life, reaching its thin arm down County Route 603. The afternoon sun baked the vomit onto my dress until it formed a crusty continental outline. We waited, and I watched the shifting of our shadows with the sun's trajectory across the sky. The whole congregation seemed to be here, but the kids were quiet. Ronny Buckman was two places ahead of us in line, but he didn't seem to have any jokes today. He just chewed on his fingernails until his mother slapped his hand out of his mouth, and then he scrunched his eyes against the sun and stared into the distance. It wouldn't be long now.

When she got off work at five, Ma brought me a new jumper and we waited in line together. As the vaccination tents drew nearer, the claps and whoops became audible. Then we could see them, the newly risen emerging from the plastic flaps, boys from the school band, girls I had played tag with at the church potluck, floating slowly, unsteadily, to the glistening parking lot. I flexed my fingers incessantly as I waited until the skin, brittle from so much hand sanitizer, cracked and began to bleed.

It had been over four hours, and I decided I couldn't get the vaccine.

My father was down the line talking to Neil Caringo, hands pushed deep into his pants pockets, leaning back on his heels, so I turned to my mother. She had her eyes closed against the sharp angle of the sunset, and her lips were moving which meant she was praying. In crowded waiting rooms, when nonbelievers

pulled out their cell phones, my mother closed her eyes and talked to God.

"Mom." I spoke quietly so the McCutchins behind us in line wouldn't hear. Her eyes remained closed. I tried again. "Mom."

"Yes, baby." Her eyelids were pearly orange against the setting sun. I knew I had interrupted her conversation.

"I can't get the vaccine."

"Of course, you can, baby."

"No, I can't."

"It's a small needle. Just a little prick and then it's over."

"I don't feel well."

"This'll just take a minute. Don't you have a minute for Him?"

Her eyes were still closed, the familiar wrinkle lines on her forehead smoothed away, her face a placid lake into which I was throwing an infant to drown. She held one hand in the other, cupping them softly over her stomach. She had come straight from work, still in her dental hygienist's scrubs. On her breast pocket, an orange tabby batted at a ball of yarn. The toes of her brown clogs were scuffed, and her blue orthotics peeked out by her heels. Around her lake-like face, wisps of hair branched out like streams. If I told her, everything would change. I looked down to hide the water welling in my eyes.

"Mom. I—"

"Baby, if you got something you need to get off your chest, tell it to the Lord." She opened her eyes now and nodded towards the tents, the dwindling line. "We'll soon know His reply."

My stomach clenched around my secret.

"I really don't feel well," I tried again. "I read you shouldn't get a vaccine if—"

"Excuse me." My mother tapped on the shoulder of the woman in front of us. "My daughter's got a stomach ache. Would it be okay if we moved up the line, so we can get her home as soon as possible?"

My lip split beneath the pressure of my teeth as we moved rapidly up the remainder of the line this way, stepping ahead of quiet nods and muted smiles until we were next. Jeb stood at my mother's side, buried in the pages of a baseball book from the library. There were claps and cheers from within the tent in front of us, and then a ninth grade boy with an electric pink Band-Aid on his bicep floated through the flaps.

"Next," a woman in pink rubber gloves waved.

"Jeb can go first." I shoved my hands into my pockets to hide their shaking.

"I'm not doing it," Jeb said, nose still in his book.

"What's that?" My father was at my mother's side now, ready to go in with us.

"I'm not doing it," Jeb repeated.

"Is the kingdom of heaven not—" my father began, but Jeb interrupted.

"Coach says we aren't eligible for the playoffs if we float."

The woman with the pink gloves put a hand on her hip. From the tent beside her, another woman poked her head out and called, "I can take whoever's next over here."

"Come on," my mother said, stepping forward. My father reached for Jeb's hand, but Jeb pulled away and took off running. A ripple passed down the line as folks turned their heads to watch the Douglas boy sprinting down Route 603, his too long hair flowing like a ribbon in his wake. Maybe if I had run too, everything would have turned out differently.

Then my mother's hand was in the small of my back, push-

ing me forward. The tent flaps drew back. The woman with the pink gloves was scrubbing my upper arm with an alcohol swab. I closed my eyes and told God I would pay any price to atone for my sin and be allowed into His kingdom. I felt the sting of the needle and imagined the plunger in reverse, imagined the woman drawing the sin out of me, those two minutes of my existence exiting my body, filling the syringe with a thin blue substance which would never again enter my life.

It was back in September, the day Jacob Blackwell floated, in the darkness of morning hours long preceding the school day. The science fair was Wednesday, and I had carried our unfinished trifold over to Millie Zarturo's house. Thin bodies of markers rolled over the slanted bedroom floor and collected in a dip beneath her bed. When I was finished with my third of the trifold, I reeled myself up from the pool of that exhausted compliance and found Millie asleep on the floor. The uncapped green marker in her hand had left several small dashes on the poster where her sleeping body had shifted.

I found the green cap and reached for the marker, but my fingers settled instead on her mask, and then they were unhooking the elastic from the seashell of her ear. I wanted her to be a fellowshipper. I wanted to walk to church with her and gossip after choir practice. I wanted to brush the hem of her jumper with my pinky as we sat on the worn wooden pews. I wanted to see what was under her mask. Milly's pink lips were parted in sleep. Her cheeks were flushed, and as I leaned closer in the shine of her desk lamp, I could make out the shimmer of tiny golden hairs, a whisper of the down that covered the goslings in spring. I pulled my mask off and leaned closer, bringing my nose to the warmed air above her cheek. The faintest aroma of laundry detergent and peppermint rose to meet me, and another smell I couldn't pin down, something gentle, the smell of warmth if warmth had a scent. My lips brushed her cheek, gliding over those soft downy hairs, my mouth opened.

I felt a sharp pain as something was removed from my body; then I heard my mother clapping.

It took my father and the other men from the church a long time to find Jeb. When it grew dark, they returned to the house for flashlights. Still unsteady in the air, I crouched by the hutch in the living room, scrounging for more AAA batteries for our camping lantern. I was still awake when the phone rang in the middle of the night, and I knew that meant they had found him. "They're taking him now? God bless," I heard my mother say softly into the hallway phone.

The next morning, my mother woke me at six to get ready for school. It took longer than usual, being up so close to the shower head, having to crouch to reach the bottom drawer of my dresser. I was running late by the time I entered the kitchen. Jeb sat at the table in front of a bowl of Cheerios. Dark circles crouched under his eyes. My mother hadn't brushed his hair, and it poked out at awkward angles. An electric pink Band-Aid peeked out from beneath the lip of his shirt sleeve. When my mother grabbed her keys wordlessly, Jeb stood, feet still on the floor, and reached for his backpack, and I knew God had heard my prayer and answered with His swift and terrible judgement.

Olivia Fantini grew up in Massachusetts and spent six years teaching middle school. She is currently an MFA candidate in fiction at the University of Minnesota where she was awarded the Gesell Fellowship. Her fiction has appeared in TriQuarterly. She is currently at work on a novel and a memoir.

Biopsy

Poem by Barbara Daniels

you escape
the coil-spring trap
leave the ripped

foot there
pooled in blood
you have been

touched by
the hot instrument
of pardon

see the lawn lit
by benediction
light at the end

of day silver
pond a mirror
towers of clouds



Barbara Daniels's *Talk to the Lioness* was published by Casa de Cinco Hermanas Press in 2020. Her poetry has appeared in *Lake Effect*, *Cleaver*, *Faultline*, *Small Orange*, *Meridian*, and elsewhere. Barbara Daniels received a 2020 fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.



Reflections on Hedwig and the Truths We Learn

Shannon Frost Greenstein

"What is that?"

"It's what I've got to work with."

It is 2004.

I am a junior in college.

"What is this called, again?" I ask.

I am in the dormitory of a boy who is absolutely no good for me, but for whom I just switched my major in the event he might be impressed with me, and in the event he might start to think of me as more than—*anything* more than—just a friend with benefits.

We have been doing a weekly movie night for most of the semester, a result of his vocal belief that my knowledge of film is far inferior to his own. It is not the only thing, he occasionally reminds me, he finds inferior. "*Hedwig and the Angry Inch*," he responds, and, misunderstanding the title of the DVD, I wonder what itching could possibly have to do with the plot of this film.

"I can't believe you've never heard of this," he continues.

So far, he has shown me a *lot* of films—some independent, some canonical, some just weird—I've never heard of, which just serves to further convince me this tumultuous relationship is to my benefit.

"What's it about?" I inquire.

"An East German rock star with a botched sex change operation," he answers.

"Oh!" I say. This arc surprises me more than anything involving itching.

"And it's a musical!"

"Of course it's a musical," I agree, as if it is common knowledge there is no better way to tell such a story.

It turns out...there isn't.

It is 2013.

I am not doing well.

Undiagnosed mental illness, unresolved trauma, and anorexia have all combined in a perfect storm of dysfunction. I am emaciated; self-harming; self-medicating; and so, so sad. My

marriage is on the rocks; my body is falling apart; everything is shrouded in a hazy darkness through which I trudge from day to day, feeling as if each of my limbs weighs hundreds of pounds.

I do not know that agony is not normal.

"Guess what I heard?" my husband says.

We are driving home together from our respective jobs in the city. I am lost in ideation. "What?" I ask dully.

"They're reviving *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* with Neil Patrick Harris as Hedwig."

This sentence slices through the fog of my depression like a sunbeam.

I think back to 2004, and my first viewing of Hedwig next to the boy who never did fall in love with me. I think of the tens of dozens of times I have watched the movie since then, after it immediately escalated to the top of my list of favorite films. I think of Neil Patrick Harris, of whose existence I was reminded thanks to his role in *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*, also one of my favorite films. I think of Doogie Houser and Dr. Horrible's Sing-a-long Blog and Assassins; I think of the fortitude it takes to be a leading Queer actor in Hollywood in the early 2000s.

My mouth drops. "You're kidding."

"Nope, I just saw the article today." He looks at me. "I thought you would like to hear that."

He is suffering too, watching my decline. I know he feels impotent as I lose more weight and cut my skin; I know he does not know what to do. I appreciate his endless attempts to cheer me up over the past year, but I am usually too lost in emotional turmoil for any of it to work.

I still do not know the people I love feel my pain by proxy.

However, I am experiencing something with this news, a stirring of excitement and anticipation I have not noticed for months. It is a departure from the overwhelming negativity which has tainted my consciousness as of late, and I seize upon the rare chance to feel anything positive at all.

"When?" I demand. "Can we go?" I beg. "Do you think Neil Patrick Harris will sign my Hedwig tattoo?"

Hedwig and the Angry Inch has so touched me over the years,

a still from the film is etched into my skin. I have memorized all of the dialogue; I have been listening to the soundtrack for a solid decade. I've even followed the career of John Cameron Mitchell, one of the show's originators and its first titular character.

My husband smiles ruefully.

"I doubt we'll be able to afford Broadway tickets," he admits, and I know he is correct.

"We'll figure it out anyway!" I say, somewhat manically. "We'll bring friends and get a group rate, or we'll stop buying weed and we'll save up, or..."

I chatter more on the drive home than I have in ages.

It is 2014.

"Are you excited?"

"I'm so fucking excited," I answer.

My husband and I are at a Holiday Inn in Manhattan. It is the first time we've stayed in a hotel in five years; it is our first vacation since our honeymoon in 2009. It is only 36 hours in New York – a mere ninety minutes from our home in Philadelphia – but I am as excited as if we were taking several weeks at an all-inclusive paradise with umbrellas in the drinks.

"We should go soon," my husband warns as I reapply lip gloss and brush my hair again, unable to keep my mildly-frenetic feet in one spot for more than a few seconds. "The curtain goes up at eight—which means 8:15, but whatever."

We are going to see Neil Patrick Harris in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* on Broadway.

This entire affair is eighteen months' worth of latte deprivation, online shopping abstinence, and all the Christmas presents I kindly requested of family be gifted as straight cash. Getting here was a Herculean task, involving uncomfortable favors and friends of friends of friends and waking up before dawn to join a phone queue. It is beyond surreal to finally be on our way to the Belasco Theatre; I have literally had a countdown in my phone for the ten months since we acquired these tickets.

For a few of those months, I was also in residential treatment for my eating disorder.

Residential treatment is fully-immersive, extraordinarily intense, and overwhelmingly uncomfortable. Given that most eating disorders develop as a way to avoid feelings, and that a starving brain is designed to numb feelings out of self-preservation, the process of feeling feelings again is viscerally painful. It was weeks upon weeks upon weeks of weight restoration and trauma processing and missing my husband; it was relearning how to care for my body and manage my mind.

Recovery from an eating disorder takes years, and things do not improve immediately upon leaving treatment; it is not a magic pill. The short time I have been home has been difficult and emotionally taxing, though I must admit I prefer it to when everything was bleak and I loathed my very self.

My husband and I leave the hotel and walk through late-afternoon sunlight filtering through the Manhattan skyscrapers. I stop and request he take a photograph of my outfit. We arrive at the Belasco, where a growing crowd stands below a gigantic image of Neil Patrick Harris. I stop and take a photograph of the marquee. We enter, ascend the stairs, display our tickets, descend the stairs, and find our seats. I stop and take a photograph of the stage; an usher admonishes me for taking the photograph.

We are slightly early, and I look around at the interior of the

theater. The set is illumined with an ethereal blue glow, staged to look like the vestige of a bomb site, littered with burnt-out relics. There is, inexplicably, a Playbill for *Hurt Locker: The Musical* on the ground below my feet.

I think about the long months since we first decided to purchase these tickets, the long months in treatment, and the long months of suffering before that. This show has remained a shimmering beacon in my temporal lobe, the lighthouse at the end of a journey across rough seas. It has been a reason to continue slogging through the relentless pain of healing. I think about Hansel and Hedwig. I think about all the women next to whom I slept at the residential treatment center. I think about everyone I've known who comprehends the ache of mental illness; I think about the pain of being an "other." Then the bell chimes, and the theater quiets, and the lights dim, and the show starts.

It is 2021.

I am learning about self-love or radical acceptance. I reflect often on the experience, seven years ago, which I classify – now and probably forever – as "The Best Theatrical-Going Experience of My Life." The reason for this, sheer theatrical merit notwithstanding, has very much to do with the state of my mind today. It has to do with the seventeen years that have passed since I was first introduced to *Hedwig*, and the seven years that have passed since the show; it has to do with my work in therapy, my progress, and my struggles.

But first, maybe, some background.

Hedwig and the Angry Inch is essentially a rock opera, told in the style of a live rock show, the setlist composing the narrative and the stage banter between songs supplying the details. It is the story of a Queer rock star from East Berlin who immigrates to the United States after a botched sex change operation and fronts a rock band known as the Angry Inch. It is a story of loss, and mourning, and overcoming; it is a story of love and trauma and creation.

Hedwig, born as Hansel, is abused as a child in East Germany. She meets an American sergeant with whom she falls in love, who promises to marry her and take her out of communist Germany. Hansel assumes her mother's name and passport and undergoes a genital reassignment surgery – which is botched – in order to leave East Berlin. Her husband then deserts her in Junction City, Kansas, immediately upon their move to America. Hedwig forms a band and falls in love with a young musician, who later abandons her upon discovering her "angry inch" and rockets to solo stardom utilizing their co-written material. Again and again, Hedwig is knocked down; she continues to get up, searching for love, searching for home, searching for self. At its foundation, *Hedwig* is very much a tale about the growth which can emerge from grief; it is about the journey to identity.

The 2014 revival of the show with Neil Patrick Harris opened at the Belasco Theatre on April 22nd. It was staged as a live-music concert in real-time, the venue fictitiously presented as the abandoned set of *Hurt Locker: The Musical*. Later runs would feature Andrew Rannells, Michael C. Hall, Taye Diggs, and John Cameron Mitchell, the last of whom also played Hedwig in both the original and the film versions of the show. *Hedwig* ran until September of 2015 and won four Tony awards.

There is a line of dialogue from *Hedwig* that regularly flits through my head, words I think about when I am struggling. It is a



line I remember when I am lamenting my still-ongoing recovery; the nuisance of mental illness; the injustice of having a disability. It is spoken after Hedwig and her partner begin to make love for the first time, and he has discovered Hedwig's failed gender reassignment. He asks, in a quavering voice, *what is that?*

There is a pause.

And Hedwig says, *it's what I've got to work with.*

"It's what I've go to work with."

That's it. That's the line.

And it's *everything*.

Through the darkest years of my twenties and thirties, when I could not find hope and everything hurt, I resented my illness, and my history, and all the other factors which combined to make my existence seem harder than everyone else's. I was so filled with resentment, there was no room to enjoy anything else. But after treatment, and time, and about seven more years of therapy on top of that, there is finally space for light to trickle in. I appreciate the strengths I have developed in the face of my illnesses; I feel gratitude for my children and chocolate and the beauty of a sunrise. I have worked my ass off learning skills to mitigate my disabilities.

I now know there is joy between all the struggling, and that

has to mean something too. Because I have finally accepted what I have to work with. And, just like Hedwig, I feel whole.

Shannon Frost Greenstein (she/her) resides in Philadelphia with her children, soulmate, and persnickety cats. She is the author of "These Are a Few of My Least Favorite Things" (Poetry, *Really Serious Literature*, 2022), "Correspondence to Nowhere" (Nonfiction, *Bone & Ink Press*, 2022), and "Pray for Us Sinners" (Fiction, *Alien Buddha Press*, 2020). Shannon is a former Ph.D. candidate in Continental Philosophy and a multi-time Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee. Her work has appeared in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Bending Genres*, and elsewhere. Follow her at shannonfrostgreenstein.com or on Twitter at @ShannonFrostGre.

SAVE THE DATE

LitLife Poetry Conference

April 23, 2022

For more information or to submit a proposal,
contact Courtney Bambrick at Courtney@PhiladelphiaStories.org.



Core Strength

Jeannine Cook

"She ain't nothing but a \$5 hoe," our booknerd, stripper friend chides while she two-step shimmies towards the pole in the center of her new home's private library. We are in her house, Young Money's *Seeing Green* playing on repeat in the background. This is her den of delectable book treats. Surrounded by the smell of seductive *stunken* leather and crumpled paper backs, this is where she reads and *entertains*. "Like Sula," our friend reinforces her statement with eyebrows raised as she grips the titanium-gold pole and wraps her legs around it, careful not to stab herself with her spiked four inch heel.

The \$5 hoes that she is talking about are activists who partner with corporate brands for trinkets and the long-term effects those relationships have on communities. We are talking about how much modern day branding is like the physical branding done to ancestors of the past. Always some colonialist loser with their hot irons and pitchforks wanting to inflict their names and their labels and their pain on someone else's chest or ass or thigh. And how branding cannot be misconstrued with reparation.

And she is changing the subject to Toni Morrison's 1973 book, *Sula*, knowing damn well we have been drinking. We are sitting at our booknerd stripper friend's meticulous and neat desk pontificating over an Old Fashioned in our ripped jeans and a bleached-brown-from-black Strategic AF tee shirt. We could use some lotion--and some socks. She is one with her pole.

"A \$5 hoe like Sula?" our booknerd stripper friend pokes at Toni Morrison's free-spirited protagonist and title character. In this deep character study of a novel, Morrison channels two best friends, Sula and Nell. Readers get to experience the two women's lifetime of decisions on love, friendship, community, loyalty, and philosophy. We get to examine their dubious choices and more importantly examine our own through them--asking ourselves throughout the story, which character we are more like under different life circumstances. Sula or Nell?

Then our booknerd stripper friend effortlessly flips herself upside down, legs spread V to the sky. Talk about core strength.

Morrison has created an ongoing sore spot in our friendship.

We state:

"Sula was spontaneous."

She states:

"Sula was inscrupulous."

We state:

"Unscrupulous."

She states:

"Bitch, you know what I mean."

She lands in a split that makes our cheeks ache.

We were asking her to imagine a world where Rosa Parks was sponsored by Aunt Jemima-selling syrup as she sauntered away from her seat in southern Alabama, where Fannie Lou Hamer was sponsored by Uncle Ben's, pushing rice while delivering rants against racism at mass meetings in Mississippi. It is unimaginable.

"Don't you dare say an unkind word about Ms. Parks," she glances over her shoulder at us.

"What about Hamer?" Our hand gestures adamant towards the sky. "Morrison is speaking about the whole human," our fingers like a maestro conducting our words. "We all a lil' Sula from time to time. Not connecting our decisions to what is best for the community, not caring. We are all a lil' Nell from time to time. Over sacrificing at our own peril. No need to choose between these two. Instead stand in the middle." We rest our flailing arms at our sides.

Modern day branding tactics are sneaky and not nearly as visceral as cooking someone's flesh with a burning hot piece of metal. Because of this, the tactics are a little harder to spot. They may disguise themselves in marketing lingo like partnership, campaign, and collaboration or hide behind financial backing calling themselves grants, fellowships, and awards knowing damn well they have an ulterior motive--let us put our names on your back, shoulder, or face like chattel.

"We had a woman reach out wanting to present a youth poetry award at the bookshop," we say looking through our friend's super neat Nicki Minaj cover collection.

"Sweet," she is on the floor stretching. "You should stretch your hip," she says tapping the floor where she wants us to sit down next to her.

"Right. No problem. Sure." We ignore her and get back to our story. "But the closer we got to the event, the youth poetry award woman finally shared that the award was being sponsored by Gucci and that they wanted to pay us for using our venue as long as one of their representatives was able to present the

award and speak to the press out front. But Gucci had literally just dropped their Blackface turtleneck line. We were like, 'Sis, we could never host them after that.' And the crazy thing is she couldn't understand why not. They'd just given her a community ambassador fellowship, she said clutching her pearls. Five thousand dollars and that turtleneck thing was a thing of the past. So is slavery," we rolled our eyes as she and her little check pranced out the door.

"Precisely. In my industry, the best of us live by a standard. We work by a code. We have to have each other's backs. But there are those who don't." Our booknerd stripper friend is laid flat out on her back taking in deep breaths. "We say this is a hoe willing to mess it up for everyone else by accepting \$5 to do some shit that the rest of us would never do at all because it doesn't serve anyone—it doesn't even serve the hoe. We chop those dumb bitches the fuck up at the end of the night because they make it harder for the rest of us having people think we are all \$5 hoes," she Floyd Mayweather jabs and uppercuts the air.

At this point, some of us may ask ourselves, why would anyone accept less than they deserve? And the answer is because we don't know what we deserve and haven't asked ourselves this question enough for actual feedback.

We stay quiet. We know very little about booknerd stripper culture. The closest we've come in support of our friend's self-proclaimed, good hoe goals is cornrowing her braids into a crown that fit snugly beneath her platinum 40 inch.

"What about freedom, though?" we ask after a long minute of silence. "Aren't people allowed to do whatever they want? Free will?"

"Yup, and those free hoes who do so without a standard

among people who they can trust are easy prey. They always get picked off. Those people, like Sula, end up chopped and alone with people like me and Nell who have to come along and give them medicine and pick up their pieces."

In Morrison's novel, Nell ends up serving her lifelong friend, Sula, in her dying moments, even after what she perceives is Sula's severe betrayal.

"What we always felt was missing from Sula and Nell's relationship was a plan. A decision. A meeting of the minds," we say looking down into our glass of Old Fashioned.

"Yup and the moral of the story is never be a \$5 hoe, my G," she says dozing off to sleep.

Ase. And so shall it be.

IG - @itsmetheyfollow and @harrietts_bookshop

Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/harriettsbooks/>

Twitter - @harriettsbooks

For the last 10 years, Jeannine Cook has worked as a trusted writer for several startups, corporations, non-profits, and influencers. In addition to holding a master's degree from The University of the Arts, Jeannine is a Leeway Art & Transformation Grantee and a winner of the South Philly Review Difference Maker Award. Jeannine's work has been recognized by several news outlets including Vogue Magazine, INC, MSNBC, The Strategist, and the Washington Post. She recently returned from Nairobi, Kenya facilitating social justice creative writing with youth from 15 countries around the world. She writes about the complex intersections of motherhood, activism, and community. Her pieces are featured in several publications including the Philadelphia Inquirer, Root Quarterly, Printworks, and midnight & indigo. She is the proud new owner of Harriett's Bookshop in the Fishtown section of Philadelphia.



SAVE THE DATE | Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) Conference

March 23-26, 2022 : Pennsylvania Convention Center, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Philadelphia Stories is a premiere sponsor for the 2022 AWP Conference. Visit awpwriter.org/awp_conference for more information.



MIGHTY WRITERS

**THINK CLEARLY.
WRITE WITH CLARITY.**

mightywriters.org



FREE WRITING PROGRAMS FOR AGES 7-17

MW STUDIOS ARE LOCATED IN EIGHT NEIGHBORHOODS:

- MW EL FUTURO, 1025 S. 9TH ST., PHILADELPHIA, PA**
- MW CAMDEN, 1801 BROADWAY, CAMDEN, NJ**
- MW KENNETT, 122 ROSEHILL AVE., WEST GROVE, PA**
- MW MILL CREEK, 4700 BROWN ST., PHILADELPHIA, PA**
- MW NORTH, 2300 MASTER ST., PHILADELPHIA, PA**
- MW PENROSE, 1101 SUSQUEHANNA AVE., PHILADELPHIA, PA**
- MW SOUTH, 1501 CHRISTIAN ST., PHILADELPHIA, PA**
- MW WEST, 3520 FAIRMOUNT AVE., PHILADELPHIA, PA**

RESOURCES

workshops currently conducted online via Zoom

Creative Writing Workshops

Express your unique voice. Find joy in writing.

Evening and daytime workshops

Flourtown, PA • Center City, PA • Ardmore, PA

Writers of all levels welcome

Fiction • Non-fiction • Creative non-fiction • Memoir • Poetry

Find out if a workshop is right for you.
Sit in on one workshop meeting as a guest,
by appointment only.

Alison Hicks, MFA, Greater Philadelphia Wordshop Studio
www.philaworkshop.com • ah@philaworkshop.com • 610-853-0296
Monday evenings in Ardmore • Tuesday evenings in Center City
Private Consultation for Manuscript Development

Rachel Kobin, Philadelphia Writers Workshop
www.phillywriters.com • Rachel@phillywriters.com • 610-449-3773
Tuesday and Thursday evenings in Flourtown
Coaching for Writers

Philadelphia Great Books



Interested in joining a Great Books discussion group?

There are over 50 groups meeting regularly in PA/NJ/DE using the Shared Inquiry Method for discussing significant works of literature or non-fiction.

Contact us to find a Great Books discussion group in your area:

phila1@greatbooksdiscussionprograms.org

For further information about Great Books events on the East Coast, see

www.greatbooksdiscussionprograms.org

PhiladelphiaStories

SANDY CRIMMINS NATIONAL PRIZE FOR POETRY

CELEBRATING RISK & INVENTION IN POETRY

Philadelphia Stories will award
\$1,000 to a first-place winner and \$250 to 3 runner-ups.

DEADLINE — NOVEMBER 15, 2021

VISIT PHILADELPHIASTORIES.ORG/POETRY-CONTEST FOR DETAILS

WRITER'S SPOTLIGHT

November 2, 2021

More details coming soon!
Follow us on Facebook
@PhiladelphiaStories.



ABOUT THE 2022 Judge:

Cynthia Arrieu-King teaches creative writing and general studies and is a former Kundiman fellow. Her poetry books include *People are Tiny in Paintings of China* (Octopus Books 2010), *Manifest*, winner of the Gatewood Prize selected by Harryette Mullen (Switchback Books 2013), *Futureless Languages* (Radiator Press 2018; audiobook on Bandcamp) and *Continuity* (Octopus Books 2021). An excerpt of her experimental memoir *The Between* (Noemi 2021) can be found on Fence Portal. Her writing has appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, *Boston Review*, *BOMB Magazine* and the tiny. She edited the Asian Anglophone edition of *du:ie* (issue 119) and Hillary Gravendyk's posthumous volume *The Soluble Hour* (Omni Dawn Books 2018). Her updates can be found at cynthiaarrieuking.blogspot.com.

Michener Level (M)

(\$30 - \$49)

Aaron Bauman &
Leigh Goldenberg
Alexander Balis
Alice Chung
Barbara East
Brigid Brennan
Cathleen Cohen
Cheryl Squadrito
Christine & William Schuster
Christine Henninger
Christine Obst
Cirel Magen
Daniel A. & Roberta K. Zehner
David Arey
David Updike
David Strickler
Deborah & William Off
Diana Krantz
Elizabeth Hughes
Ellen Langas
Frances Metzman
Hadley Witcher
Harvey & Marcia Steinberg
Hello Sunshine Gifts
Jane McGovern
Jesse Daniels
John & Christine Benigno
Joseph Buehler
Joseph Quinn
Julie Rockefeller
June Flavin
Karen McLaughlin
Kathryn Ionata
Katie King
Laura Panarello
Linda Garfield
Lori & Peter Joyce
Marialice Stanzeski
Mark Cofta
Mary & Lance Donaldson-Evans
Mary Erpel
Merry Jones & Robert Bloch
Pam Mclean-Parker &
Gregory Parker
Peter & Robertta Krok
Robin Rosecky
Rosalind Bloom
Sandra Nork
Sharon Steinhofer

Sheila Fox
Stephen Burke &
Giselle Garnicki-Burke
Stephen Campellone
Stephen Cirillo
Suzanne Comer
Theodore Heron
Thomas & Loretta McFadden
Tom & Sarah Molinaro
Treacy Nicole Cirone
Virginia Smith
Walter Thomason
Watsuki Harrington
William Hemmig

Buck Level (B)

(\$50 - \$99)

Adriana Lecuona
Anne & David Flynn
Ave Maria Merritt
Brenda Leon & Patrick Bambrick
Carmen Febo San Miguel
Catherine Johns
Chantal Jauvin
Charles & Kathryn Bahnson,
in memory of Nancy Kress
Christine McNamara
Christopher Beardsley
David Sanders & Nancy Brokaw
Dennis Lawson
Dorothy Fulton
Eileen Cunniffe
Elisa & Victor Sheronas
Elizabeth Abrams-Morley
Elizabeth Larsson
Gerard Di Falco
Jennifer & Erik Streitwieser
Joan Tropp
Joel Burcat
John & Nancy Farrell
John Swan
Karen Yuska
Kathleen Furin
Kay & Roy Peters
Laura Regnier
Lois Schlachter
M. Kathryn Taylor
Mary Scherf
MC Burgert
Mo Ganey & Don Kates
Paul & Hairong Dobias

Robert & Judy Schachner
Stanley Syzmanski
Susan Etkin
Susan Karol Martel
Talmage Brennan
William & Elizabeth Kirk
WM J Untereker

Whitman Level (W)

(\$100 - \$499)

Annalie Hudson Artist
Cheryl & Ross McLaren
Christine Le Ager &
Deborah Waxman
Deborah Burnham
Debra Fox
Jacqueline Hopkins
Jane Day
Janine Pratt & William Hyman
Joan & James Husted
John & Karen Shea
Laura Tamakoshi
Lynn Harvey & Scott Jahss
Martha Bottomley
Nathan Long
Pamela Burgos
Paul Smith
Rebecca Lipner
Sandra Sampson
Stefanie Levine & Steven Cohen
Subhashree Ramesh
Susette Brooks
Thomas & Jennifer Durso
Vernita Hall

Potok Level (P)

(\$500- \$999)

Carol Oberholtzer
Gary Zimmario
James Knipp
Thomas Rush & Meriam Zandi

W.C. Williams Level (WC)

(\$1000+)

Barbara Holmberg
Daniel V. & Michelle Johns
Heather McGlinn Hansma &
Scott Hansma
Joseph A. Sullivan
Michael Ritter & Christine Furtak
Thomas McGlinn

Sustainer Members

Alex Husted (WC)
Bryan Skelly (B)
Carlo & Sharon Spataro (P)
Carol Clark (B)
Concha Alborg (P)
Courtney Bambrick &
Peter Baroth (B)
Dana & Chris Scott (W)
Gabriella Aldeman (M)
James Zervanos (B)
Joel Edelstein &
Betsy McKinstry (W)
John Oliver Mason (M)
Julia Chang (B)
Julie Odell (W)
Katherine Santoro (B)
Lawrence O. Spataro (B)
Madelyn Devlin (B)
Marie Anne Nowak (B)
Mark Weiser & Amy Punt (W)
Maureen Fielding (B)
Mitchell Sommers (P)
Nancy Jackson (W)
Pamela Fox (B)
Peggy Gordon (B)
Robert McCrillis (W)
Tara & Andrew Smith (B)
Thomas Baroth (W)
Trish Rodriguez (W)
Will Woldenberg (M)
William & Lisa Sweeney (B)

Corporate & Foundations

Dakota Tulip Investments (W)
Helpsy Partner Donation (M)
Josh Shifman Fund of The Greater
Cincinnati Foundation (P)
OGS Recycling (P)
RetroChic By Pietra (M)

Matching Gift Partners

Charities Aid Foundation
America (P)
Houston Endowment (W)
Merck Partnership for Giving
Schwab Charitable (W)

*Author honoraria made possible
by the generous support of the
Conrad Weiser Author Fund.*

You can help keep Philadelphia Stories in print and free by becoming a member today at
www.philadelphiastories.org/donate/

A MAGAZINE THAT CREATES COMMUNITY

THANKS TO MEMBER SUPPORT, *PHILADELPHIA STORIES* HAS BEEN SERVING THE WRITING COMMUNITY OF THE GREATER DELAWARE VALLEY SINCE 2004 IN THE FOLLOWING WAYS:

- Connecting local writers to readers through 5,000 print copies of a free quarterly literary magazine, distributed at more than 200 locations, including all branches of the Free Library of Philadelphia and The Delaware and Montgomery County Public Libraries.
- Supporting a community of young Philadelphia-area writers through *Philadelphia Stories, Jr. & Teen*, print and online magazines by young writers.
- Offering affordable conferences and workshops for writers.
- Hosting readings and other social events for writers.
- Hosting two national contests, one for fiction and one for poetry.

YOU can help keep *Philadelphia Stories*—a non-profit 501c3—in print and free by making a donation today! For as little as \$30 a year, you can get home delivery and know that your gift directly supports the local arts community.

I would like to support local art & literature by making a contribution today.

MONTHLY PLEDGE:

☐ \$5/Month ☐ \$10/Month ☐ \$20/Month ☐ Other _____

ONE-TIME MEMBER PLEDGE:

☐ Michener (\$30-\$49) ☐ Potok (\$500-\$999) ☐ Buck (\$50-\$99)
☐ W. C. Williams (\$1,000+) ☐ Whitman (\$100-\$499) ☐ Other _____

NAME _____ ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

EMAIL _____ PHONE _____

CARD NUMBER (MC, V, DISCOVER) _____ SECURITY CODE _____ EXPIRATION _____

Thank you for your generous support of Philadelphia Stories

To donate online please visit www.philadelphiastories.org/donate/,
or mail to: Philadelphia Stories, 201 York Rd, Ste. 1/#1-753, Jenkintown PA 19046



Erin Entrada Kelly,
MFA Creative Writing
graduate, is a
Newberry Medalist
and New York Times
Best Selling Author

Come Write & Publish

MFA in Creative Writing

MA in Publishing

Double Degree Creative Writing/Publishing

ROSEMONT
COLLEGE

rosemont.edu/mfa