

PhiladelphiaStories

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

SPRING / 2022 / FREE



POETRY ISSUE! / THE SIMPLE TRUTH JEFF MCLAUGHLIN / LIFE EDGE CHRISTOPHER DRAJEM

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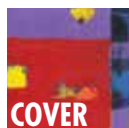
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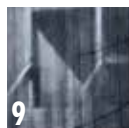


The Triangle by Mark Partridge

Mark Partridge is a mixed media artist whose work has been influenced by his professors from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Partridge's art is informed by experiences had while traveling globally and living abroad in Puerto Rico, Venezuela and Mexico. Presently, he spends time between homes/studios in West Chester, Pennsylvania and Deerfield Beach, Florida. www.markpartridgeart.com.



La Pizarra by Mark Partridge



Bridge House by Karen Fogarty

Artist Karen Fogarty received her education through the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art. Fogarty is a prize winning, signature member of the Philadelphia Water Color Society and a member of the Fellowship of the Pennsylvania Academy. She was the 2002-03 recipient of a Leeway Grant. Fogarty has been a faculty member of the Wayne Art Center in Pennsylvania since 1999. Visit www.karenfogartyart.com.

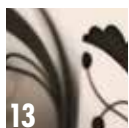


Plate Pattern 1 by John A. Benigno

John A. Benigno's work can be seen at the Chestnut Hill Gallery, and Philadelphia's Print Center. His photography appears in collections at the Berman Museum, the Woodmere Museum and other prominent venues including the State Museum of Pennsylvania. Recipient of a Luminous Endowment for Photographers grant, Benigno found inspiration in the work of Paul Strand when he created *Plate Pattern 1*. www.johnbenigno.com.



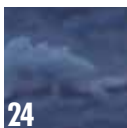
Anthropomorphically Speaking by Alan Soffer

Labeled as "urban abstraction" by artist Arthur Secunda in 2005, Alan Soffer's work has been exhibited at the Delaware Art Museum, Philadelphia's Rosenfeld Gallery and at Villanova University among locations. He organized and curated the first national encaustic conference in the United States in 2005. Among his lasting contributions to education in the arts, Soffer runs *Art Incubator* workshops with artist wife, Libbie Soffer.



Philly School Children by Eleanor Day

Following her initial instruction at an arts-based high school, and four years at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Eleanor Day is primarily a self-taught artist. Day finds inspiration in the paintings of Munch, Klimt, the Pre-Raphaelites, and Caravaggio. Her love of stained glass and the mystical aspects of religious painting and iconography have long influenced her work. Day's recent work brings attention to the struggles of those who are marginalized in current society.



Heat Lightning by Jack Lloyd

Jack Lloyd holds a lifelong interest in the visual arts. Previously using art in various capacities as time and opportunity permitted, he now pursues art at a higher level. Favoring realism in his artwork, Lloyd uses pastels and acrylics to create mood and atmosphere and feels fortunate to have studied under many accomplished professional artists. Visit www.johnlloyd.com.



Philadelphia Boathouse Row Path by Keith Willis

Fine artist Keith Willis has lived in the Philadelphia area since 1977. Using oils, his medium of choice, Willis creates realistic landscapes and portraits showing life as it is. He is a member of the Oil Painters of America and the National Oil and Acrylics Painters Society. His work renders the beauty of our world and reveals his wonder in it. www.keithwillisart.com

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



SUPPORT PROVIDED IN PART
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Letter from the [Poetry] Editor



Sandy Crimmins

Philadelphia Stories happily announces that the poem, "greens" by Edythe Rodriguez was selected as the winning poem in this year's Sandy Crimmins National Prize in Poetry. Crimmins judge Cynthia Arrieu-King writes that "greens" is "virtuosic" and "handles its use of the page like a kind of spontaneous music."

We are also awarding each of four runners up a \$250 prize: Kelly Lorraine Andrews for "The Madonna of the Rabbit," Stephanie Niu for "Abecedarian for Pinyin," Aimee Seu for "Rich Friend," and Alison Lubar for "You Can't Say 'Oriental.'" Poems from Liz Abrams-Morley, Cleveland Wall, Ike Pickett, and Mackenzie Kean were selected as honorable mentions by the judge. Poems from Lupita Eyde-Tucker, Courtney DuChene, Mikhayla Robinson, and Laura Tanenbaum were selected as "editor's choices" by the contest readers, contest coordinators, and poetry editor and appear in the online Spring 2022 issue.

Along with Edythe Rodriguez, the winning poets will be celebrated with an online reading at the LitLife Poetry Festival's closing reception on Saturday, April 23. Visit <https://philadelphiastories.org/2022-litlife-poetry-conference/> for more information and to register for LitLife.

Joe Sullivan continues to support this contest and we are grateful for his enduring friendship with Philadelphia Stories. We are also grateful to contest coordinators Eli Aharon and Phoebe LaMont for their consistent, helpful, and organized work. We thank Yalonda Rice, managing editor, for her flexibility and patience. Above all, we thank the poets who trust their work with us; reading your poems each year is a pleasure and a challenge that is humbling and humanizing.

— Courtney Bambrick, Poetry Editor, *Philadelphia Stories*

WINNER OF THE 2022 SANDY CRIMMINS NATIONAL PRIZE IN POETRY

"greens," Edythe Rodriguez (Upper Darby, PA)

RUNNERS UP

"The Madonna of the Rabbit," Kelly Lorraine Andrews (Pittsburgh, PA)

"Abecedarian for Pinyin," Stephanie Niu (New York, NY)

"Rich Friend," Aimee Seu (Tallahassee, FL)

"You Can't Say 'Oriental,'" Alison Lubar (Cherry Hill, NJ)

HONORABLE MENTIONS

"Her, Too," Liz Abrams-Morley (Philadelphia, PA)

"How to Act," Cleveland Wall (Bethlehem, PA)

"There are Horses in North Philadelphia!"

There are Figs in My Stomach!" Ike Pickett (Philadelphia, PA)

"Fiona Rice Does Not Talk to the Rabbits,"

Mackenzie Kean (Freehold, NJ)

EDITOR'S CHOICES

"Eucalyptus," Lupita Eyde-Tucker (Melbourne Beach, FL)

"Ars Poetica Caught in Eternal Recurrence,"

Courtney DuChene (Philadelphia, PA)

"In the Wake of Heat," Mikhayla Robinson (Athens, GA)

"The Night Diana Died," Laura Tanenbaum (Brooklyn, NY)

FINALISTS

"A Lion Who Lives in a Fear Filled World,"

Shagufta Mulla (Independence, OR)

"A Psalm of Assaf," Jared Ijams (Brooklyn, NY)

"Advice for a New School Year," Megan Merchant (Prescott, AZ)

"Advice to My Six-Year-Old Self," Jane Miller (Wilmington, DE)

"Diptych: Brood X," Matt Hohner (Baltimore, MD)

"Gathering and Letting Go," Brendan Praniewicz (San Diego, CA)

"Ghost," Nala Washington (Camp Springs, MD)

"Lovecraft," Sean Hanrahan (Philadelphia, PA)

"Ode to the Laundromat," Kathleen Shaw (Schwenksville, PA)

"Ornithology of Hunger," Katherine Gaffney (Petal, MS)

"Raking the Leaves," Steve Burke (Philadelphia, PA)

"same old same old," Nicole Adabunu (Iowa City, IA)

"There'll be no more writing around the thing,"

L.J. Sysko (Wilmington, DE)

"Two Tones against Brick," Alison Hicks (Havertown, PA)



greens

Poem by Edythe Rodriguez

golden shovel after Clifton's "cutting greens"

the washin

inhale the potlikker smell curlin
through the first floor, Nellie n em
runnin round
the living room. I

fold & roll. one hand holds
them in place ends frayed their
stiff rebellion, all crunch and body
chiffoned. prepare the water. pour in
the greens. the salt. the vinegar let the worms & dirt & other obscenities
embrace
the steel bottom think

and wash the day of
its burdens of every heavy thing
it has forced you to carry. wash the day but
keep the evening smell that seeps through every screen door the smell of kin
comin to help wash & eat. hand your niece the collards
and
her sister the kale

scrub & strain
again. again. brace yourself against
the edge of the sink wash & score the smoked meat four lines each.

the stewin

no stranger
to the long cook drop in a turkey tail. another.
walk away
from
the kitchen / cut the radio on my my my mymymymy

you sho look good tonight your husband wrappin from behind his kiss makin
you sway together hands
lead &
drag you from the room from their
of us earshot. the irony
stewin down the bed

& the pot
 too. no stranger to the

 long cook this bed / pot
 ain't
 done the greens (and I) needed stirrin dem kids (Black
 as all hell) knew the
 timin. *Gramma* echoed down the hall cuttin
 through the steam & headboard
 flashbacks. is
 it worth gettin up? leaving this black
 skinned brother in my
 bed. I look him over *they know what to do*, I decide grab his hand
 &
 lay back. just
 for
 a
 minute.

the bowl & honey cornbread

I remove the
 lid & hover, the greens
 steamin up the stovetop eyerolls
 fly from the line at the stove. (you know bout Black
 folks & lines, right?) so I hold the first waiting bowl under
 the
 ladle glide the knife
 through the bread's browned crust. &
 again about 7 times the line dispersed / the
 chairs full they spat *who gon clean the kitchen?*
 between mouthfuls. the day's stories & who's datin who all twisted
 round the table dark
 settled just beyond the porch the tv still on /
 the newslady still whinin the family all here & its
 spine
 &
 head & feet watching from the stove I
 looked on at my babies with their babies & could taste
 the passage in
 my
 natural
 Black hands. an appetite:
 the
 promise of bond
 & gathering over a hot plate & the food of
 living
 Black things
 everywhere.



Edythe Rodriguez is a Philly-based poet who studied Africology and Poetry at Temple University. As an African Renaissance poet, my poetry is a call for aggressive healing, protection of our African selves, and sankofa. I am a fellow of The Watering Hole and my work can be found in *Tulane Review*, *Philadelphia Stories*, *Call and Response Journal*, and *Bayou Magazine*.



The Madonna of the Rabbit

Poem by Kelly Lorraine Andrews

i.

The baby bunny's back again,
chewing grass with ears
turning and turning.

Rabbits were thought
to reproduce without touch,
their white fur pure as the Mother.

When my husband hoses the garden,
it darts and hides behind a shovel, femoral
artery pulsing as I count the seconds.

"Attentiveness is the natural prayer
of the soul," said some French philosopher.
I watch its little heartbeat beat beat beat.

ii.

I follow you with my spiritual name,
braid your voice into my own.
Children chatter outside the frame.

In memory, the sun sits at a sixty-degree
angle to Earth. We're prettily
reflecting and scattering the wavelengths.

When I called on the dream line
it wasn't you really, hair too short
and a yellow blonde, but it felt good

to say I'm capable of growing too.
I see your black hollyhock, fruitful
while taking its time to become conscious.

I want to be the bunny held close
as you give the baby to another,
to lie in the blue of you.



Kelly Lorraine Andrews' poems have appeared in *Dream Pop Journal*, *Ghost Proposal*, *Ninth Letter*, *PANK*, and *Prick of the Spindle*, among others. She is the author of five chapbooks, including *Sonnets in Which the Speaker Is on Display* (Stranded Oak Press, 2019), *The Fear Archives* (Two of Cups Press, 2017), and *My Body Is a Poem I Can't Stop Writing* (Porkbelly Press, 2017). She received her MFA in poetry from the University of Pittsburgh. Along with her husband and two cats, she's tending to her garden, trying to be tender to herself.





Abecedarian For Pinyin

Poem by Stephanie Niu

Ah is the first and easiest sound for a child to make,
Over the doctor's popsicle-stick probe or at the kitchen table,
Entreaty for another warm spoonful. Ah is the first spell we learn to sound out,
Invitation miraculously saying *Here is a want I trust you to*
Understand and fill. We practiced the other vowels like songs, even
Ü which sounds like the word for fish. The consonants, too, shone
Bright on their poster, *de* a horse's hoof, *te* an umbrella handle, letters
Placed to form a chant, swelling into each other and crackling in our
Mouths. When a new student from China named John joined my
Fifth grade class, I was quickly appointed translator,
Described assignments to him while the class watched.
The attention mortified me. My classmates' curiosity at sounds
Not theirs turned my speech into performance. Once, the teacher said "It's
Like music to my ears" in class, amidst bongos and maracas. After that, I
Gave translated instructions brusquely, furtively, the words
Kicking out of my mouth before others could hear. I wanted to
Hide the sounds. Instead, I was forced to sing my strangeness aloud.
John bore the brunt of my shame, and I am still sorriest to him,
Quizzed for a year on assignments relayed mostly through anger. Drinking
Xifan at home, my parents asked about my new role translating for "the
Zhang classmate," delighted I could make use of our language. I admit,
Chinese does chime like music. I couldn't have deadened my
Shifting tones in that classroom if I'd wanted. We
Rang words back and forth to each other like strings plucked on a
Zither. So what if our speaking sounds like singing. We
Curved our mouths around the four tones as children for a reason.
Syllables gallop from my open mouth and John understands them.
Yes, learning language is a kind of incantation. We chant pinyin down a poster.
We say Ah hoping someone will understand and answer.



Stephanie Niu is the author of *She Has Dreamt Again of Water*, winner of the 2021 Diode Chapbook Prize. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Georgia Review*, *Southeast Review*, *Poets Readings the News*, and *Storm Cellar*, as well as scientific collaborations including the 11th Annual St. Louis River Summit. She lives in New York City. Find her online at <https://stephanieniu.com/poetry> or on Twitter as @niusteph.





RICH FRIEND

Poem by Aimee Seu

Hello sounded like a new language
from her mouth. Intergalactic sparkle
of passionfruit lip gloss. Stuck her finger
through the threads where my thighs
rubbing together, wore away my jeans.
New clothes much? she smirked. Her mother looked me up
and down in the doorway, worried. I was mesmerized
by the kitchen pantry. Gleam of hardwood.
In framed photographs: Gwen in black velvet riding helmet.
Gwen at art camp. Gwen on stage with other porcelain doll
children, tip-toe in pale tulle. Moon lowered
behind her on its rope. There was a time I would've been jealous
but, seventeen now, all I wanted was to obliterate
the parentless house of my body, glow white
under blacklights, blast my hair straight
on the highway, pierce any flesh I could pinch. To meet crushes
late night at the gate of her cul-de-sac. Gwen, in neon makeup
and Bjorkian rags, denim that was purposefully and expensively
ripped or frayed or bleached. I learned
glamorous damage, felt royal
in her clothes. And she gave generously—
purple bomber jacket with fox fur hood,
white corduroy bellbottoms, rainbow holographic
wallet with the silver unicorn zipper.
Even once, an antique locket, her grandparents'
portraits inside, frowning at me, a stranger.
Odd that she gave it away. Odd that I wore it.
We read how Yoko won Lennon's heart & we began
writing yes all over the walls. Across the dashboard, in the bathroom stalls
at school. Yes, yes. Our chant. I'd see one of her yes's carved
into a desk when we were classes apart
and burn with our girlish devotion.
Yes to the tongue-ringed music video skater
rolling a blunt in slow-motion, yes all over Johnny's face
in her Cry-Baby poster, yes on repeat to the song that still transports me.
To the indulgently foamed push-up bras, ordering \$80 of food
on Mother's stolen credit card and throwing it all up—
what we once called fun. To the roof where we sat
to watch night collapse over everything.
We were a spectacle
in her father's convertible, trading
seats so she could ride shotgun and pack the bowl.
Her chair tilted all the way back as I drove,

sound system vibrating the leather.

Gwen, I see you clearer now: her fascination with boys
she called *troubled*, who were banned from the mall,
who her father called *shitheads*, whose fathers punched
or burned them with cigarettes. The romancing of terrible wounds.
Gwen thought the work boots I duct taped together
when I was kicked out in the rain
were charming.
I still remember the mesh canopy of her princess bed,
like the room a willow makes inside.
Our den of hoarded cigarettes, bottles her parents
didn't notice disappear, hard candy, gel pens,
Adderall, packs of gum. On vacation with her family
in Bermuda, we tore pages out of the hotel bible
& burned them on the beach, dared God to curse us.
Set off fireworks and ran hand-in-hand
when the cops came. Our LSD eyes engorged
on the Grand Canyon: so willfully red
beneath the rawhide sun. Or Colorado, us half asleep in hot springs
in the snow. I just wanted to go everywhere with her
and she wanted to bring me, like a treasured stuffed animal
or a groupie, so easily-amazed How did her parents see me—
a parasite teen coaching their daughter toward risk?
Or a mangy stray their big-hearted only-child
brought home—*De-flea me, make me presentable!*
One night I asked, lying on the floor beside her bed,
both of us spun out on her mother's benzos,
Which of us do you think will die first?
Definitely you, she said.
Definitely. I agreed
and we fell asleep laughing.



Aimee Seu is the author of *Velvet Hounds*, winner of the 2020 Akron Poetry Prize. She graduated from the University of Virginia Creative Writing MFA Poetry Program in 2020. She was recipient of the 2019 and 2016 Academy of American Poetry Prize. Her poetry, fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *Pleiades*, *BOAAT*, *Redivider*, *Raleigh Review*, *Diode* and *Minnesota Review*. Her current project is a collection of nonfiction vignettes.



"You can't say 'Oriental'"

Poem by Alison Lubar

because it's offensive." My blue-eyed friend
sneers, smiles at superiority in knowledge,
fairness, and freckles. My mother says
her hair is mousy.

My mother is not a rug. She has used
this word for forty years, feels its reclaimed
East-Asian kinship. This word is hers; it is
mine. She taught me to

I. *"find/establish/feel one's bearings/location/way, get the lie of the land"*
as other, as not-them, unbelong
at the lunchbox cracked open.
Fourth-grade culture-day potluck
leaves yakitori untouched. I throw
it out of blue tupperware into the bushes;
local wildlife doesn't discriminate, and relay
its evaporation with delight "they loved it."

II. *"adapt, accommodate, acclimatize, attune"*
I learn to accommodate questions until
I'm thirty. I acclimatize to exotic. Attune
to scrutiny. I do mind you asking; I do
not exist to satiate curiosity. This unease
others you; I sniff it in like sweet gasoline.
I will respond with fire. Like her, I am crowned
with midnight river hair so long it tucks into our jeans.
We belong everywhere.

III. *"aim, steer, design, intend"*
towards mysterious as a hand I hold
to chest. Or a ship adrift, I outmaneuver
and drop into the conversation my Auntie,
the camps, Godzilla, what's *of my people*.
Use chopsticks for popcorn, cheese crackers,
anything oily. Scoff at weight-control advice:
"they'll help you eat slower!" unless you've
always used them. She still keeps
my pink plastic baby ones with birds,
little finger loops for a toddler.

IV. *"align, place, position, set"*
My mother as direction, I fix my sight
where the sun rises, eastward. She
warms me face-first.



Alison Lubar teaches high school English by day and yoga by night. They are a queer, nonbinary femme of color whose life work (aside from wordsmithing) has evolved into bringing mindfulness practices, and sometimes even poetry, to young people. Their debut chapbook, *Philosophers Know Nothing About Love*, is forthcoming with Thirty West Publishing in May 2022. Most recently, their work has been published by or is forthcoming with Moonstone Press, New York Quarterly, and Sinister Wisdom; you can find out more at <http://alisonlubar.com/> or on Twitter @theoriginalison.



HER TOO:

Ledor Vador

Poem by Liz Abrams-Morley

i.

This, which is and is not for my mother.
This, which is and is not for the island of
Puerto Rico, which is America, which is, yes,

America which is not understood by too many Americans
To be America, paper towels flung at the heads of the bereft
Near drowned, after the hurricane passed through.

This, which is and is not about my mother
About an island crimson with bougainvillea,
Pale blue and breathless after storm, where

Once, long before paper towels were lobbed
Across a room of citizens by not-their-president-
Not-my-president, my mother nearly bled to

Death for no reason she would blame on
Puerto Rico. *Blame America*, she once told me,
And I do.

ii.

At the aquarium in Camden, my small granddaughters are mesmerized by the dance
and drift of tentacled jellyfish, kites floating through a watery sky blue, through fluid air
as if on one perfect day of enough. Enough wind to raise the kites above the beach.
Enough stillness to keep them there. Enough for me to watch my granddaughters'
rapt believing faces, reflections in the round window of the jellyfish tank, to guide their
small hands into cold waters toward smooth-backed sting rays, surprisingly lumpy cold
limbs of rust-tinged sea stars in the touching tank. In this, I am become my mother.

iii.

This is about and not about Puerto Rico,
Not about and about my young, pregnant
Mother. This is about my friend Gerard,
Desperate to reach his mother, cell signals
Dead in Puerto Rico, Hurricane Maria
Alive and furious. This is about
Gerard, how he apologized to our collage
Class for his distraction, while we, a group of
Mothers, tried to reassure him, listened to
Dead air on his phone, tore and cut and glued.

Coral of stewed tomatoes, ripped bits of mountain,
A few fish swimming through calm green waters.
I made my landscape under sea, serene: teal, yellow.
No screaming reds of bougainvillea.

iv.

She never learned to swim, my mother,
but she loved to walk along sand.

Transplant to salt-spray and waves,
she spent summer days picking up

beached creatures, running fingers
over smooth shells, bumpy dried skins,

teaching us to name the life by the husk:
razor clam, devil's purse, whelk. Once,

horseshoe crabs washed up, stranded;
on earth long before us, she instructed.

Once a storm blew starfish hoards to shore.
We carried plastic pails to the beach, could not

bail fast enough, next dawn, mourned
the hundreds left to dry.

v.

Then one summer, she disappeared for at least a week from our island. When she returned, she remained far away, pale, stayed out of the sun all day. I picture her now, alone in the shuttered, cool house, how she must have replayed the way the air felt when she deplaned the small prop in Puerto Rico. I picture her hesitation before she entered, on a back street, a clinic where no one spoke English, the only language she had in which to ask for what she needed. Gray, dark, colorless in the memory she finally confessed to us so many years later. Outside, the moist hot air. The unforgettable slashes of red bougainvillea,

I almost died. So many years of silence before we finally heard the confusion—shame/
fury—heard of the doctor, stateside, who refused to treat the ceaseless bleeding
because of what I'd done.

vi.

Blame America, she said.
And I do.



Liz Abrams-Morley is the author of *Beholder*, 2018. *Inventory*, 2014 and *Necessary Turns*, 2010, which won an Eric Hoffer Award for Excellence in Small Press Publishing that year. In 2020 she was named the year's Passenger Poet in *Passager Journal's* annual contest. Liz's poems and short stories have been published in a variety of nationally distributed anthologies, journals and ezines, and have been read on NPR. Former faculty of Rosemont's MFA, Liz is co-founder of Around the Block Writers' Collaborative (www.aroundtheblockwriters.org).

How to Act

Poem by Cleveland Wall

Pretend you are waiting for a bus.
 It is best to practice this
 while waiting for the bus.
 It's called Method.
 While waiting for the bus,
 check your wrist as if
 you had a watch on.
 Gaze fixedly at a spot
 several blocks away as if
 expecting a bus to round
 the corner. Gaze as if
 conjuring the bus like a rabbit
 from a hat. Now look away.
 Tap your foot to indicate
 impatience. Pretend
 not to be listening to the couple
 arguing on the bench.
yes it is no it isn't you always do this
no I don't yes you do GODDAMN IT
 It's OK to wince when he punches
 the bus stop. No one's looking
 at you in that moment.
 OK, beat. And—take out a cigarette.
 This is your motivation
 to move off—out of the wind
 so you can light it. Otherwise,
 it looks as if you're reacting
 to the argument you weren't
 listening to. No—you are a poet,
 preoccupied with subtler things.
 Smoke implacably—world-weary as if
 waiting on the 53 Godot line.
 Consider the pigeons pecking
 at the rice from a discarded burrito
 on the ground. Pretend to think
 about their lives. How long
 has that burrito been there?
 How do they not get salmonella
 or botulism—whatever it is

you get from eating a burrito
 off the sidewalk? OK.
 Shake it out. Focus. Now, say
 your mobile rings and it's your mother.
 Pretend you are receiving
 a phone call from your mother.
 "Sad news." You know what it is
 before she says, but must act
 surprised, dismayed. Your godmother
 has died, whom you didn't really know
 but who showed up in your mother's stead
 at your first big reading, exactly as if she
 were your godmother. What is appropriate
 for this level of connection?
 Decide how you will feel about it
 and commit to that. Don't oversell it.
 While this is happening, imagine
 it is really happening to you.
 What would the person playing you
 in the movie of your life say?
 Console your mother. Wait
 for the mood to even out. Hang up.
 You are so far beyond
 the squabbling couple and the pigeons
 now; they have no idea the depth
 of your emotion as you stare
 at a shred of plastic snagged
 in a filthy municipal tree. Pretend
 not to hear the diesel motor
 lumbering up the street, your reverie
 broken only by the pneumatic sigh
 of the bus doors opening beside you.
 Brave face, chin up; stride ponderously
 onto the bus as if departing your home
 forever; find a window seat.
 Pretend to be looking through
 your reflection, instead of at it.



Cleveland Wall is a poet, teaching artist, and librarian in Bethlehem, PA. She performs with poetry improv troupe No River Twice and with musical combo The Starry Eyes. She is the author of *Let X=X* (Kelsay Books, 2019) and many small, handmade chapbooks.



There are Horses in North Philadelphia! There are Figs in My Stomach!

Poem by Ike Pickett

It is Sunday, a real full moon.

We are at an outdoor drag show
at Pentridge Station. A person of ambiguous gender
speaks to me softly. Gone for now is the vitriol of gluing a portrait
to an ashtray. A parochial joy comes. Happy are the mascots
to feed cats in the park. Come to me, Lucretia Mott.

Place a bill in my bra.

We worship. Six buck beer. Corn hole.

A friend presses an ear
to an all-gender restroom door.
If she hears crying,
it is September. We weep
and love it when someone notices.

I feel a great buzzing before any decision.

My heart then cracks,
rocking a smaller, shinier side.

All of it is interesting, but the heart is too common,
like a pigeon. No one has out their steno pad
to note my set intention.

A woman with a broom swats the highest branches
of her fig tree. I offer her my hands,
and the figs taste sweetest.

There are horses in North Philadelphia! There are figs in my stomach!
I wonder how they experience me. Then how I do.

Some nights, I am held in the light by a pronoun.

The weatherman predicts historic rain again—founding fathers in their dumb hats
falling like industrial chestnuts. Some congregations have church nurses
to tend to those who faint. They're there after, waving their hankies at the slavers.
Plastic birds make mobiles around George Washington's head. He is shorter than I thought.

I'd love to experience faith little by little,
but I drop my leaves like a ginkgo tree.

One thing I know?

I can feel divine ground. It is yellow.

A lot of churches closed upon discovering Heaven
is an alley with free parking. We have those here!

Many congregants crumpled their programs.

What does it take to remember
a spider, dead and curled? To see Heaven here?

When I died, I was leveling
my eye in a spider's corpse. I saw it all held.

I'd like to invite you to my making.

It will be quick and sexy.

Those in the back may only know it by the flash.

Those in front by the fleeting looks of friends around them.



Ike Pickett is a queer writer and musician. They currently live in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where they work in early literacy and urban greening at Historic Fair Hill. In 2021, they made the longlist for *Frontier Poetry's* Award for New Poets. Their work is forthcoming in *Five South*.

Fiona Rice Does Not Talk to the Rabbits

Poem by Mackenzie Kean

Dear Mr. Lorcan,

The last time I wrote to you the blueberries were here,
 and Mom was showing me how to cut a tomato for the kill.
 For one, the blueberry bush devoured my body whole
 when I leaned in head first, hoping to find the perfect one for
 you. A midnight pearl, musseled between two satiny leaves.
 For two, you must use a serrated knife and saw, slowly. In
 the kitchen beside the heap of pink seedy guts, Mom had said
 garden gnomes do not make good friends. But you listen,
 Mr. Lorcan, and you don't tattle to the walls of the seventh grade
 girls' bathroom, telling them that *Fiona Rice talks to the rabbits*.
 I talked to a rabbit. What was I supposed to do? Benny Wilks,
 the eighth grade boy with the window-pane teeth and drawer-knob
 elbows, snapped the baby white rabbit's neck like a toothpick and
 left her in a puddle of herself beside your ceramic shoes. She was
 dead but she was also safe now—the honeysuckle vine that works its
 way down the front fence and hooks around your ceramic pointed
 hat was hooked around her, too, as if it were somehow you. When
 Benny Wilks was gone, I scooped her soft, crumpled body into cupped
 hands like a swallow of water. She needed a prayer or a poem. Leaning
 in with my whole body, I said *You were small and you were tender*. It
 made me miss being small and being tender. It made me want to cry,
 but I didn't. When mom saw the small ball of white musseled between
 my two hands, she took it out to the dumpster and then scrubbed
 my palms to the bone. *Now use a serrated knife and saw, slowly*, she
 pointed to the three tomatoes waiting for their turn. I cut into each
 one again, again, again until my hands were soggy with pink seedy guts.
 How did you get to standing so still, Mr. Lorcan?

Sincerely, Fiona Rice



Mackenzie Kean is an English major and creative writing minor at Rutgers University. Her love for writing emerged from the poems, plays, songs, newsletters, unfinished novels, picture books, and online magazines she created and shared with her family throughout her childhood.



The Simple Truth

Jeff McLaughlin

Nature's assorted players stir themselves into motion, from the lowly insects to the elusive reptiles to the lofty mammals. It is early morning, and there are approximately thirteen hours of daylight ahead. Thirteen hours of creaturely struggle and ambition and hope. And choices. Those who make the correct choices will survive until evening. The others, unfortunately, will – today – succumb to the realities of corporeal competition and natural consequences.

I ponder all of this while lying at the edge of dawn on the second day (first morning) of a two-day wilderness hiatus, alone in a small tent, flap open, with my loyal dog Sophie lying halfway in. Her paw is on my arm, and her muzzle is pushing insistently against my cheek, urging me to action. "Nature calls," she might say if she could speak humanese. Habits must be as strong for dogs as they are for humans. At home, I would now open the back door and let her go outside. Here, we are already outside. But she still wants me to rise and accompany her, as if my presence will provide official sanction for her morning business. There's an unalterable ritual involved, and it must unfold in its complete form: man with dog, walking, sniffing, walking further, stopping, peeing and/or shitting, turning, and repeating, etc. All creatures have rituals, from the spider-web spinners to the lumberjack beavers to the corporate executives practicing the latest Tony Robbins techniques for business success. Rituals are probably as important for survival as good choices are.

I lie on my back now, part way out of the tent, staring at the green translucence of the trees above, listening to the soft rush of the nearby river, and savoring this groggy yet mindful moment. My mind typically races like this first thing upon waking up. It's as if, being deprived of reality-based thought during the dreaming hours, the brain is making up for lost time, probing and savoring and analyzing every bit of worldly sensory data it can get its hands on. At times, maybe I think too much for my own good.

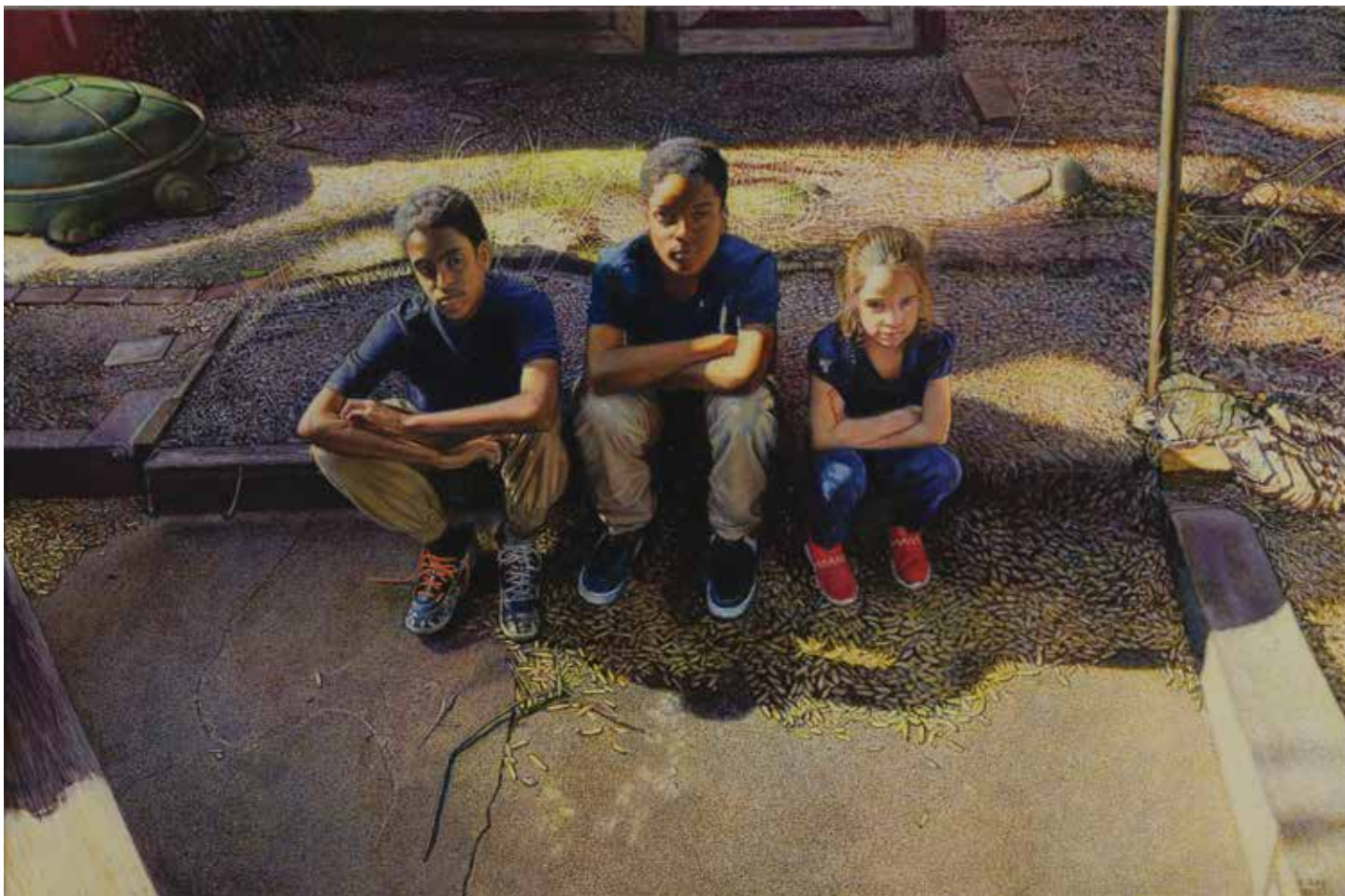
The dog has given up on me for the moment and is groping and probing through the trees at the edge of the campsite. Above the rustling, I hear a change in the steady sound of the river. It sounds like a small boat or canoe, with the high-pitched splashing of oars plus the lower rumbling of the vessel as it cuts through the water. I push myself to a semi-sitting position and peek around the edge of the tent toward the river. The stiffness in my joints probably comes from a combination of yesterday's long walk and the effects of sleeping in the damp, cool Septem-

ber air. By the time I look, the craft has passed and is no longer in sight through the clearing in the trees and bushes lying between my tent and the water's edge.

As I stand, Sophie returns to me, stumbling and limping ridiculously, oblivious to her own woundedness in the form of a sprained rear right leg. Sometime yesterday evening, she apparently got caught in a hole or lost her footing on the trail or something. I first noticed the limping as I sat by our campfire last night, watching her chase bugs. I say I noticed because the way she's acting, it seems that she is unaware of any problem and oblivious to any pain. A dog in denial, Sophie disappears again for a few moments into the bushes north of the campsite and returns with her nose ringed with fresh brown dirt. Her fur is wet from the dew that covers everything surrounding us. She then disappears in the direction of the river. I can hear the splashing sounds as she tests the water, no doubt slurping up a few mouthfuls in the process. Sophie is happy to romp and jump with abandon, worsening her leg in the process, the pain being simply an irrelevant inconvenience. I think to myself (here we go again), is it denial, or is it, instead, transcendence? I mean, if Sophie could talk, would she say (in denial), "No problem, I'm okay, really. Let's go, man." Or would she explain, "Hey, life goes on. Everybody hurts to some extent. I do not separate myself from my injuries. Rather, I become, or I am, my injury. Okay, let's go, man." Canine Zen.

I spread a blanket close to the front of the tent and sit upon it. The campfire is smoldering slightly, so I stir it up and throw in some newspapers and kindling. In no time, the fire returns to life. I add the half-burned log that I moved aside last night before falling asleep. Then, opening the ancient Coleman stove on the ground nearby, I commence pumping, then turning the knob, then holding a flaming match until the fire poofs to life. When I walk to the river to collect water in an aluminum pan, dog frump-ing along by my side, I look both ways, up and downstream, for signs of the canoe or boat that passed by. Nothing in sight.

The risen sun is brilliant over the river. The light is playing and sparkling on the moving water, part direct sunlight and part reflective light from overhanging branches and leaves. This will be a perfect morning for photography. Maybe I'll get some good close-up macro shots of the dewdrops on leaves and on the few remaining late summer asters or fleabane or touch-me-nots. I am looking forward to the continuing solitude. This area, being isolated and primitive, doesn't attract many campers at any time,



but now, in late September, I'm not surprised that I am the only overnight visitor. Before returning to my breakfast, I lean down and splash an exhilarating double handful of water into my face.

Back at the blanket, the dog sits by me as I wait for the coffee water to boil, her haunches pressed against me, face across my right knee, eyes turned up toward me. It's that look of pure adoration and loyalty of which only dogs are truly capable. I remove three eggs from a plastic container, cracking and dumping them into a small flat pan. With the pan over the second flame on the Coleman, I stir the eggs then sit back down to wait some more.

My mind, as I have said, tends to ramble in the early morning, and now I'm thinking of the dewdrops and how, in a close-up photo, they often appear so deliberately placed, in patterned rows along a leaf-edge or neatly arranged around the circle of a flower's central disk. It is all so purposeful, so well planned. Furthermore, it's a purpose that can only be revealed to someone taking the time to look and look close. Still, the beauty and the purpose speak for themselves, once discovered. In human affairs, purposefulness — though equally real — is less tangible and more obscure, even to the earnest seeker. Human purpose is also open to endless and conflicting interpretations, and it insists upon its own explanation. How many times do we ask one another, "Why did you do that?" or something similar? With nature's purpose, however, an explanation is beside the point. It just is. Of course, I'm only speaking for myself here.

As if my musings on human purpose have the power to call matter into being, I hear a decidedly human-like rustling in the bushes. It's coming from the direction of a narrow trail that heads in a southerly direction along the river bank. I catch sight of in-

creasing shadows and movement in the bushes just before my visitor emerges, dressed in a uniform that immediately identifies her as a park ranger.

"Hi," I start the conversation.

"Hi. Did you sleep here last night?" As she speaks, she is wiping spider webs from her wet dew-splattered sleeves and from the thighs of her pants.

"Yes." I reach down to remove the egg pan from the fire and turn off the flame.

"You didn't happen to see a canoe go by with three people — teenagers — did you? Sometime yesterday, in the late afternoon?" She removes a small notebook and pen from her breast pocket and prepares to record the very next words to emerge from my mouth.

"No. I got here in the morning, but I was out walking most of the day. I thought I heard something this morning, though, which I now guess was you ... in a canoe, maybe? Otherwise, I haven't heard or seen anything unusual." She's writing as I ask, "Is something wrong? Are they missing?" I realize in a split second that it's probably a stupid question, but the ranger doesn't treat it so. Nor does she confirm that she, in fact, arrived by boat.

"Well, they came in yesterday. A friend was supposed to pick them up first thing this morning about five miles downstream from here, at the Fulton Bend camping area. But, this morning, they weren't there."

"Are there any other campsites between here and there?"

"Yes. Windham Hollow. About two miles downstream, near a spot where the rapids get pretty rough. It's really treacherous now with all the rain we've had. I'm worried they may have

gotten themselves in trouble. There are notices at every launch point telling people not to canoe down that far unless they are trained and properly equipped. But, you know, sometimes people don't listen to advice like that."

"Uh-huh," I agree, pouring boiling water over a pile of instant coffee crystals in a yellow plastic cup and turning off the flame. "Would you like some coffee?"

"No, thanks," the ranger says absently as if I have just interrupted her train of thought. When she continues, I detect a condescending tone in her voice. "It's the simple truth. Like they know that the danger is there, but just figure they'll be the exception. Like they're invulnerable or something." She pauses as if reflecting upon her statements. "Well, I'm going to head downstream. I just stopped here when I saw the smoke from your fire. If you see anything, I'd appreciate it if you'd call the park office. The number is on the park brochure; if you have that. If necessary, they can get in touch with me." She removes a phone from her belt, looking at it closely as if to evaluate its condition.

"Okay, yeah, got it."

"By the way, I'm Ranger Lazinski." From reading her black plastic name tag, I already know her full name to be Sharon R. Lazinski.

"I'm Eric Adams. Nice to meet you. I'll call if I see anything." I'm ready to shake hands, but Ranger Lazinski has both of hers occupied with the pen, notebook, and phone.

Saying "Thanks," she turns and walks briskly back down the trail in the direction of her (I assume) canoe. Just before disappearing into the thicket, she turns and – without smiling – says, "Enjoy the rest of your visit."

"Thanks," I say in return, with a quick wave.

As the ranger vanishes, my thoughts turn from the three teenagers, and their possible plight, to thinking about how, at any given moment (like this one), there are millions of separate lives going on across the planet, running their separate and diverse courses, sometimes intersecting at accidental and unpredictable moments. Two or more unrelated life stories can thereby become connected in important ways, each affecting the other in, again, an unpredictable, or at least unknowable, manner. So, here is me, here is Ranger Sharon R. Lazinski, here are three teenagers. Our lives are now connected, like it or not. Even though I have not encountered the teenagers themselves, I do know about them, so they are in my life. And actually, even though the teenagers do not know about me (yet?), I am, in a sense, part of their lives, too.

What does this mean? It means that I think too much, about too little, too early in the day; that's what it means. By noon, these questions will seem irrelevant. I know this from experience.

This latest stream-of-consciousness session, however useless, brings me around to consider the various intersections in my own recent life, which have brought me to this day and this campsite and this glorious place of mostly isolated relaxation and reflection.

It all begins with the fact that I am losing my job. I am being fired. Or, as they put it gently in the insulating world of academia, I have been "retrenched." I looked up these two words. To retrench is to "cut down, reduce, or diminish." To fire is to "dismiss from a job." While the former sounds more polite and somehow acceptable, the latter is clearly more accurate, from my perspective anyway.

At any rate, my college teaching position is being eliminated

(not "reduced" or "diminished" but wiped out entirely). Therefore, by default, I will disappear (or be "retrenched") along with it. They tell me that I should not take it personally; it has nothing to do with me: not my professional performance or my obvious contributions to the college or my potential future contribution, etc., etc. It's just that, well, I've become expendable. In these past five years, I have acquired tenure, earned the respect of students and colleagues, and even been encouraged to pursue the administrative route. Encouraged. Reinforced. Provided with a sense of future and mission. And then, whoops, sorry, no longer needed.

It was a Thursday, 11:00 a.m., out of the blue. I am invited to a meeting, and the bomb is dropped. Wow, numbness sets in, then denial, then confusion, then anger, then an overwhelming sense of betrayal and, strangely, embarrassment. I am embarrassed that I have spent five years of my life with an organization that could do this to someone, based on expediency and economics alone, with no regard for merit or reputation or experience or ability. Is it only in academia that one could get away with such inept, counter-productive, short-sighted management? Probably not, actually. But from the middle of such situations, it's natural to feel singled out.

Back at the college, it was somewhere between the "confusion" and "anger" phases that I wrote a piece for the college newspaper, which, of course, they immediately agreed to print, given its overtly inflammatory tone and provocative potential. Laced with phrases like "the administration's disgraceful secret tactics" and "robbing our students of the education they purchased in good faith," the article described how our university had lied to students, lied to faculty, sabotaged collaborative bottom-up reforms, and insulated itself from input and from the influence of students and faculty in whose name it exists. All to serve the holy cause of numbers and dollars. And on and on and on. They printed the article verbatim, unedited. Soon the local paper called, then the local radio station, then the public station fifty miles away in Binghamton. It seemed that I had single-handedly created the issue-of-the-week. I had, at the same time, seriously angered the entire third floor of the college administration building. This was not what I had in mind, or so I told myself and others. I was as honestly surprised as anyone when this mild-mannered, soft-spoken, normally polite assistant professor turned into a raging media pit bull.

The word "betrayal" became a bouncing projectile in the ensuing verbal war between the college administration and me. They said, in effect, "You have betrayed the college, indeed the whole state system, with your rantings and ravings." They stopped just short of extending my betrayal to "education in general throughout the universe as we know it." For my part, I continued to accuse the third-floor gang of betraying me, lying to me, betraying all of us, which ultimately hurts the students, and on and on and on.

So, the whole damn thing just blew up beyond reason and, now, here I am, on a two-day retreat, at the insistence of my loving and understanding wife, in an isolated campsite in a relatively remote part of Adirondack Park. Back home, the sparks continue to fly, but – for now – I am pleasantly and refreshingly separated from all of it. Physically separated, that is. For now.

After my breakfast of coffee (two teaspoons, as usual, for the first eye-opening cup) and scrambled eggs, eaten standing up, I start out with the dog. Even away from home, in a strange en-



HEAT LIGHTNING by JACK LLOYD

vironment, the morning dog-and-master walk is undertaken almost unconsciously. This is simply what we do first thing, usually before breakfast at home, without stopping to decide or consider. As the dog begins her goofy limp-dance, I am reminded that this should be a brief walk for the dog's sake, though she will certainly not agree.

A narrow trail leads east from the campsite toward the river's edge, joining -- at roughly 90 degrees -- another trail running north and south about ten feet from the water; it's the same trail from which Ranger Sharon (what was her last name?) appeared a short time before. We take the southern route, finding that the trail narrows rather suddenly, becoming overgrown with various bushes and small trees at waist and chest level. At this time of day, it is impossible to avoid becoming soaked from the dew. However, the terrain is perfect for the dog who slips beneath the wet canopy just ahead of me. We walk a short way, a hundred yards or so, and I turn to go back just as the dog -- apparently distracted by a squirrel or some other real or imagined creature -- takes off down the trail, silly-looking bum leg dangling behind. Soon I lose sight of her beneath the brush, but I can hear that she has stopped and is now sniffing and snorting and pawing the ground not far ahead of me. A moment later, she returns with a blue fluorescent-type baseball cap dangling from her mouth.

"Oh, nice find, Sophie," I say sarcastically, then notice that the cap, clean and new-looking, lacks signs of having been on the ground for any period of time. Walking on, I discover why.

As soon as I see the body sprawled across the trail, I draw in a spontaneous and audible breath. Then, some sort of survival-rescue instinct kicks in, and I am kneeling by the body, quickly but calmly checking for vital signs. It is a male, 17 or

18 years old, with longish dark hair, dressed in a multi-colored flannel shirt and black jeans. Yes, there is breathing. No, there is no blood in sight. No, the body doesn't look contorted in any way that would suggest broken bones. There are no signs of struggle. In fact, the young man at my feet appears to be simply sleeping. This hunch is confirmed when, as I nudge his shoulder, he awakes suddenly with a moan, a cough, and a groggy, confused expression that is quickly replaced by a terrified look of realization and dread.

"Oh, God," are his first words.

"What is it? How did you get here? What's..."

He raises his head from the dirt to speak. "My friends. Julie. Brandon. I think Bran's dead." He points feebly back up the trail from which he had apparently come as his head falls back to the ground.

"Can you stand? Are you hurt?" As he seems to make an attempt to move and perhaps stand, I say, "Come on, we'll go and get some help for your friends."

I reach down, grasping him by the shoulders and helping him into an approximate standing position. I hold tight to his staggering, exhausted frame as we negotiate the trail back toward the campsite. Sophie, sensing that this is serious business, keeps her distance, lumbering on ahead of us but looking back frequently.

"What's your name?" I ask, mostly just to make him talk, to keep him awake and, perhaps, alive.

"Tom."

"Okay, Tom, look, everything is going to work out here. You can just rest while I call the park rangers. They'll get an ambulance in here to..." I stop in mid-sentence. To what? Take your

dead friend (or friends) to the morgue? I don't finish the sentence.

It takes less than five minutes for us to reach my tent. I help Tom to the blanket, where he lies, head on the ground again, staring straight ahead with eyes open in a blank stare. The dog resists the likely temptation to go over and lick Tom's face or nuzzle against him.

In less than 15 minutes, Ranger Sharon (Lazinski, I am reminded as I read her name tag) arrives at the campsite to announce that an emergency medical team is on the way. When the two EMT vans arrive, the medical technicians (four in all) help Tom into one of them. Someone suggests that I ride along (as a witness?), so I join the ranger in her state-issued, gray Ford Taurus, and she allows the dog to jump into the back seat. Our caravan, led by the ranger's car, moves up the road toward Windham Hollow. I am aware of a general mood of trepidation surrounding us, like the hint of fog that engulfs the three vehicles as they move with urgent deliberation. As we bump along, tires shoot occasional stones, each with a pop and a smack as it hits a tree or a softer whoosh as the stone penetrates the thick forest brush along the road.

We park at Windham Hollow and move, as a team, down the trail, and through unoccupied campsites, toward the river. It is not surprising to find nothing at or near the riverbank since Ranger Lazinski had only recently searched this area from her canoe. It is deeper in the brush, at least 20 feet from shore, that we discover the two bodies, still soaked and – at first – both looking to be absent of any life signs. A closer inspection reveals this initial impression to be half true.

A male, about 18 years old, taller but much thinner than Tom, is spread grotesquely beneath some branches, with arms and legs at awkward and random angles, a large pool of dried blood beneath his bruised head. This must be Brandon. Even though the eyes are closed, the badly bruised face wears an expression of resignation that seems to reveal the young man's final reflections upon the life draining from his battered body.

Julie, unconscious but breathing, rests her head upon the right thigh of her lifeless companion. She awakes moments after our arrival. With eyes open, her face forms the same expression of dreaded remembrance that Tom had displayed upon awaking on the trail.

As the emergency team takes over, Ranger Lazinski walks off toward the south as if she has spotted something. Sure enough, she soon bends to pull the battered front end of a canoe from some brush that must be about thirty feet from the water. Amazingly, someone had the presence of mind to drag the damaged canoe from the water after the accident.

Julie is carried to the ambulance that already holds Tom, while Brandon -- his body placed on a stretcher and covered head to toe with a sheet -- is solemnly placed in the back of the second vehicle. After turning around in the small parking area, the vans pull away. As I stand motionless, watching, an unexpected and nameless sensation comes over me. I become contemplative, not in itself unusual, but, in this case, it's an empty sort of contemplation. It's as if the events of the previous -- how long, one hour perhaps, a little more? -- are infused with significance and deep implications that I can only sense but not yet truly comprehend.

After the EMT vans disappear through the trees, Ranger Lazinski looks at me as if searching for something profound to say.

Instead, she comes up with the predictable, "Are you okay?"

"Yes, thanks. Boy, it's something else, isn't it, the way things happen?" I turn my head to look out over the scene toward the river as if searching for a clue or an explanation.

"Yeah, well, you know, nature doesn't play around. But she does play fair. It's the simple truth." I turn back to face her and wonder if she is repeating a quotation from somewhere or if she has just manufactured that bit of wisdom on the spot. Then she continues with a shrug of her shoulders and a wave of her left hand, palm up, in the direction of the river.

"I mean, the rules are plain. They're obvious. Play it straight, and you're okay. But, buck the natural order -- by running dangerous rapids over a rocky river ledge, for example -- and you have to accept the consequences. It's a brutal truth, yes, but a simple one at the same time."

The ranger walks a few steps in the direction of her car, but I can tell she isn't finished speaking. "You can depend upon the songs of the birds with as much confidence as you can count on the deadly grip of the grizzly bear. Mother Nature is always true to her word. And consistent, too, with both the good and the bad."

With the hint of a laugh, she adds, "And that's something you don't find too often in the human realm, do you, that consistency?" Then with another short laugh and slight embarrassment at her own pontificating, she concludes, "Hey, maybe that's why I'm a forest ranger."

I offer my own muttered chuckle in response and say, "Yeah, well, thanks. I'd better go pack up my stuff. Time to get back to civilization, as they say." The dog, forgotten these past 10 or 15 minutes, limps into sight at the sound of my call, dripping from an apparent dip in the cooling river.

"Okay, let's go," says Sharon. So we climb into her car and drive to my campsite.

With my loyal wounded companion beside me, I make my way down the trail from the dirt road to my tent. The muffled rumble of the ranger's car, fading with distance, is replaced by the persistent buzzing chirp of the curious chickadee that watches me from a nearby tree. The wind can barely be heard moving the trees overhead while the river broadcasts a soft flowing gurgle.

I sit on the blanket and concentrate upon these sounds like a mantra, relishing their persistence and ... what? Conviction? Confidence? My body seems to absorb the sounds, becoming heavy in the process. With eyes closed, I feel my new weight as I sink and settle into the blanket. This is the most relaxed I've been during these two days, indeed, in a long time. The sounds wash over and around me, cleansing me and purifying the moment.

In this state of balance and tranquil awareness, I am not mindful of the competing sounds that might exist outside the boundaries of this present calm. I can almost forget the noise that waits, "back there," to eventually, inescapably, intrude upon this serenity.

Jeff McLaughlin was born and raised in Reading, Pennsylvania and currently lives in Chester County. A former elementary school teacher, he has most recently served as Associate Professor of Educational Psychology at West Chester University. Previous work has appeared in publications including *PXV Arts*, *Listener*, and various academic journals. McLaughlin is also a "junk-art" sculptor and singer-songwriter, whose work can be found at www.moondogmotel.com.



Life Edge

Christopher Drajem

Four maple shelves sit on black metal brackets along a wall in the kitchen of my family's Fairmount home, nestled between two windows that let light into the rear portion of the house. My brother built them from a tree that was cut down on his property in West Virginia. They were installed recently, not long after we moved in, but they look like they have been there for a long, long time.

Before relocating to Philadelphia in the middle of the pandemic, my husband Patrick and I lived in Seattle. East coast transplants to the Pacific Northwest, it was where we lived for almost three decades. We met and were married there. It's where we adopted our two kids, and where they grew up. It's a place we called home.

When Patrick and I first considered buying our Seattle house, the kitchen was the biggest drawback. It was small and boxed in. For two people who love to cook and enjoy entertaining, we worried it just wouldn't work. However, that was the only real issue with the house. The location was convenient, it was newer construction and in decent shape, and our kids each had their own room plus there was a spare room for grandparents and other visitors. Our real estate agent helped us imagine remodel opportunities, so we looked past the one glaring deficiency and bought it.

After a few years, the renovations began. Walls came down. A main floor powder room was removed. A local carpenter crafted custom cabinets and fashioned a twelve-foot island, topped with a single piece live-edge counter cut from a monkeypod tree. A local furniture design studio built a solid, oversized dining room table made of metal that sat on repurposed legs from an old lathe.

For two years we were able to spread out, welcoming friends and family to join us at the island while preparing meals and drinking wine. We crammed as many as we could around the table, tucked into a built-in bench or on extra stools and chairs we pulled from all over the house.

Thanksgiving dinners. Christmas Eve celebrations. Wedding and baby showers. Game nights. Fundraising events. Happy hours near the fire. Annual farm-to-table dinners. Birthday parties. Date nights. Weeknight family dinners. Our Seattle home saw it all.

Around our table we welcomed friends we've known for years, sharing stories we told and retold countless times, and still, our laughter increased with each retelling. There were intent

conversations with other parents who were meeting the challenges of parenting while trying to remain sane, and we listened, commiserated, and supported one another as best we could. New friends became good friends over a Sunday brunch. Good friends reconnected over drinks and games late into the night. Anyone who wanted was welcome to stay in the guest room or on the couch in the basement. Coffee was plentiful the following morning.

And then the pandemic struck. Patrick tested positive for Covid-19 just as the lockdowns started, and days later so did I. That same week, Patrick was offered a job at the University of Pennsylvania. Within two months, we sold our house and were ready to move.

In a flash, boxes were packed, travel plans made, and we closed the door on that remodel, completed with such diligence and care, our dream kitchen, perfect in so many ways. Now someone else would celebrate there. Thanksgivings and Christmas Eves and date nights that we had initially imagined for ourselves were now destined for someone else. We drove away from the home we loved, a home I was convinced we would never sell.

We arrived in Philly in July of 2020. Bought a house. Settled in. The kitchen here is fine. Not cramped but nothing we would have dreamed up for ourselves. It does open to the dining room and also onto a back courtyard, where we tentatively hosted family and visiting friends when the Covid-19 rates and vaccines allowed. We toss out ideas to one another about how we might remodel to make things better. But for now, it is good enough.

The kitchen shelves remind me of the island from our Seattle home, but they are something all their own. They're stacked with plates and glasses and cookbooks, convenient for unloading from the dishwasher and setting the table. The plates and glasses and books came with us from Seattle. It's strange to see them here, and also comforting. Patrick thinks we need to buy some new glasses, but I am reluctant to let these go. It helps to see these, reminders that although some things change, not everything does. Or has to.

We've cooked two Thanksgiving dinners in our new kitchen. Last June we hosted family to celebrate our daughter's graduation from high school. New neighborhood friends have come over for happy hour, and Zoom happy hours continue our connection with friends in Seattle. During the shut-in months of last winter, we held weekly video meetings with my parents and



PHILADELPHIA BOATHOUSE ROW PATH by KEITH WILLIS

brother in an attempt to shore up one another's spirits. Eating around our own tables in our own homes, we laughed, talked about politics or books, and dreamed up travel plans for when we could see one another again.

My sister-in-law Krista says our house feels warm and comfortable. That makes us happy. It is nice that she and her family can easily drive from Long Island for a day or a weekend. Another sister-in-law Patrina and her family are just a quick drive out the Main Line. We have had more grandparent visits in the past year and a half than the previous five years. It is a gift for our kids to connect more easily with their cousins. It's also a gift for us to build closer connections with our parents, siblings, nieces, nephews, and East coast friends.

And yet—I miss Seattle with an ache so deep I sometimes question the wisdom of our move. The feeling reminds me of the sadness that settled in when I returned to Seattle after a visit to Buffalo, where I grew up. For days, I would think to myself, “You are so far from home.” But after many years, it was Seattle that became more familiar. We learned neighborhoods like the back of our hands. We had favorite stores, cafes, restaurants. Our friends became family and our family members became their friends as well. Our bonds with colleagues deepened over the years as did our kids' connection with their biological families, most of whom live in the Pacific Northwest.

The sun shines here, not always, but certainly more than it did in Seattle. When it did shine there, the view from our living room window was west toward the Olympic mountains, snow-capped, imposing, and eternal. Nothing compares with riding along Lake Washington on one of those days, sailboats gleaming white out on the water, Mt. Rainier towering in the distance. My bike rides here—along the Schuylkill River, up to Wissahickon Park, and back along MLK Boulevard—remind me of those rides to Seward Park and back. On the way home, the sun sets here just the same, off to the west in shades of orange and rosy pink.

Our lives were there and here, and now they are here and there. We have always been a bicoastal family and that will continue. We will travel back and forth and back again. We won't be surprised if one or both of our kids returns to Seattle to again call it home. We wouldn't rule out returning ourselves at some point.

There's been much discussion of home throughout the pandemic. As the places we eat and play and sleep became where we also work and go to school, many of us felt trapped in our homes. Others found new comfort there, the safety and security of a place that kept the disease at bay, a slowing down from an often-hectic place, a sense of peace. For too many, the financial struggles that went along with the pandemic have made finding or keeping a home especially difficult.

Poet and author Maya Angelou once wrote, “I long, as does every human being, to be at home wherever I find myself.” It's the longing that I both identify with and hope to more fully understand. How can I be more entirely present in this city where I need to make new friends, learn new roads, understand new customs and norms? When will I feel rooted? How long will it take? What does it mean to be at home?

Last weekend I made a cake, a new recipe, and as it baked, a cinnamony warmth filled our home. Our neighbors came over later in the day, and we went up to the roof deck, watching as the sun sank behind the city. Blue sky turned orange and pink and gold along the horizon and a few stars twinkled on. Everything seemed to glow. We laughed and got to know one another a bit better. We toasted one another. When we were done, we all made promises to do it again soon.

Christopher Drajem is an educator, writer, and LGBTQ+ advocate. He has taught high school English, mostly in the Pacific Northwest, since 2000. His 2019 collaborative memoir, written with his mother Linda Drajem, is titled *Wandering Close to Home: A Gay Son and His Feminist Mother's Journey to Transform Themselves and Their Family*. Christopher currently lives in Philadelphia with his husband Patrick and their two children.



Some Stuff Ain't For Sale

Jeannine Cook

Year 2. For the last two years, we have lived and witnessed a level of community that we believe is worth a testimony.

Our testimony is that we've witnessed folks bring us cases of water to get through sidewalk sales in smoldering summer heat; we've watched piles of love letters and thank you cards and flowers and awards stack up behind our desk from well-wishers; we've hosted author readings on street corners and the orchestra in our living room and athletes and artists of every genre lend us their best.

Our community has ensured a few dozen youth have a safe nourishing place to call home--running daily operations, hosting our pop-up shops, book giveaways, and now the trolley tours.

Our community drives us to write more, and build more, and to listen more even in the face of the overt and covert vileness that seeks to take the best of us away from us. Did you know somebody almost got away with me?

Our sister bookshops are a social experiment in sisterhood and even under undeniable odds, we are thriving and flying where it matters most. But, as with any experiment, there are results to report.

The lyrics from Ntzoze Shange's 1976 choreopoem, for colored girls who considered suicide when the rainbow was enuf, provide context for one of the revelations that we wish to address--

"Somebody almost walked off wid alla of my stuff," Shange's character, Lady in Green, says as if swats these words with her hips as she shares about being in love with "a kleptomaniac who was workin hard at forgettin while stealin/stealin all my shit."

On our journey, we are more and more often finding institutions, corporations, organizations, media engines, and political figures who are way too similar to Lady In Green's kleptomaniac lover. We are finding institutions that we have "made way too much room for" attempting to seduce us into long term relationships, and even birthing their children, knowing just like "a man who's ego walked round like Rodan's shadow" that they have no intentions of true love.

Instead there is a demand for our votes, our dollars, our attention spans, our memories, our signatures, our image and likeness, and all manners of coercion to try to steal our "anonymous ripped off treasures." But this stuff is mine, Mr. Louisiana Hotlink.

This is not the first time that institutions, corporations, organizations, media engines, and political figures have tried to take off with "our stuff in a plastic bag beneath their arms." This is how it has gone for generations--through the slavery and the civil war and the jane crow and the jazz and the renaissance and the marches and the redlining and the free breakfasts and the cyphas and the cross colors at every turn taking a dime for things that we didn't even know we had. "Why dont ya find yr own things," Shange's Lady In Green says as she shimmys.

But the warning in Shange's piece is not for the greedy lover that we have made too much room for; we expect them to behave the way they have always behaved. No, the Lady in Green is calling out to her sisters from a place of both shock and caution. She reminds us that they can't have us, unless we give us away. That it is our responsibility to hold on to our stuff and to get it back if and when it gets confiscated.

Unfortunately, in the past, while some stood firm in the conviction that "I gotta have me in my pocket," others were freely given up "our fried plantains/ pineapple pear juice/ sun-ra & joseph & jules in exchange" not realizing that we are the only ones who can truly handle our stuff. Giving it up, generation after generation, is like throwing our stuff in the sewer. It's like a mammy nursing her master's baby, while her own children starve. Some stuff ain't for sale. Our stuff is not up for commodification/publication/classification/gentrification/decoration/replication.

So yeah, we taking our stuff back. We want our rhythms & our voices. We want our open mouths. We want our arms wit the hot iron scars. We want our legs wit the flea bites. We want our calloused feet & quik language. We want our stuff.

Say it loud, like the Lady In Green,

Our own things'/ that is our name.

For the last 10 years, Jeannine Cook has worked as a trusted writer for several startups, corporations, non-profits, and influencers. In addition to a 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.

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