

PhiladelphiaStories

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

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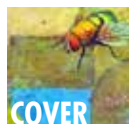
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ART



Fly at the Ruins by Rosalind Bloom

A graduate of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Rosalind Bloom also has an MA in Art History from Columbia University. For many years Bloom taught art history at Villanova University and Rosemont College and currently works in her home studio in Narberth, PA. An active member of Philadelphia's Da Vinci Art Alliance, the Women's Caucus for Art and Inliquid, her artwork is found in public and private collections and appears in various publications.



Sunflowers in Coffee Pot by Jim Green

Jim Green's works are painted in an impressionistic style using a vibrant palette. Since graduating from Tyler School of Art, Green's paintings have been juried into many art shows including Phillip's Mill and other prominent New Hope area galleries and venues where his work has received numerous awards. Green's paintings are held in several private collections. He conducts painting classes and demonstrations. Visit www.artbyjimgreen.com.



What is a Person? by Christina Tarkoff

Christina Tarkoff's award-winning paintings reflect on the art of being human. Tarkoff's home and 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.



Lonely Girl Room 3400 by Constance McBride

Constance McBride delves into gender-based issues with ceramic sculpture, installations and mixed media. Her work appears in public and private collections and is exhibited nationally in galleries and museums. Most recently, it was included in a group show in Belgium, France and The Netherlands and her series, *The Lonely Girls* was on display at Tubbs Gallery in DE. McBride earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Arcadia University, Glenside, PA.



Here Together 3 by Terri Fridkin

Terri Fridkin's mixed media works embody bold color and geometric forms inspired by modern architecture and nature. Fridkin is a Philadelphia native and graduate of Drexel University's School of Design Arts, and a member of Muse Gallery and The American Color Print Society. She exhibited in 150 juried and invitational shows plus 6 solo shows. She is a multiple award-winning artist whose works are in public and private collections throughout the USA. www.terrifridkin.com.



The Loft by Bill Sweeney

Pastel artist Bill Sweeney lives in the Chadds Ford area and has been painting since 1981. He is a member of the Pastel Society of America, and a signature member of The Philadelphia Watercolor and the Maryland Pastel Societies. His work has been exhibited widely and recognized with numerous awards including prizes from the PWCS International Exhibit of Works on Paper and the Images exhibit at the Central Pennsylvania Arts Festival. Visit billsweeneyart.com.



Power of Water by Joy Lai

Joy Lai is an art educator based in Philadelphia. She teaches at the William Penn Charter School where she shares her love of art and nature with her wonderful students every day. Lai loves to draw. *Power of Water* is a study of the Grand Canyon created in gouache.



Come and Meet Her by Noah Hanselman

Noah Hanselman is a New Jersey based collage artist creating pieces inspired by her experiences with love, loneliness, and different kinds of heartbreak.

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Journey to the Mangrove

Sidney Stevens

There they are again, far below Elaine's 20th-story window sitting on a bench outside the adjacent building—a newer senior residence, not as tall as hers. She's noticed them for several nights now as she rises from bed to go to the bathroom. They linger, ensconced in the white glow of an outside lamp. Beyond them a tiny patch of mangrove hugs the shoreline of the bay. This dwindling strip of wetland trees is currently shrouded in darkness, but Elaine knows it well from her more mobile days when she wandered there often, hoping for a glimpse of sea turtles or dolphins, or possibly even a manatee floating among the tangle of stilt-like prop roots. A small piece of wild that miraculously persists in the midst of rapidly multiplying high-rises.

Who are these night dwellers on the bench? Residents? Employees? Sweethearts? Friends? What are they saying? Elaine glimpses them again just before sunrise when she makes yet another bathroom visit. She maneuvers her walker to the window for a better look, silently cursing her decline from women's tennis champion back in college to this. She can't make out their gender, age, or other identifying characteristics. No facial features or hair or flesh, only the general shapes, maybe an arm or leg. They curl toward one another like vines to sunlight, spellbound in rapt and soulful conversation.

Every night it's the same scene: huddled figures on the bench, always illuminated within the encircling blackness beside the night-covered mangrove, like actors spotlighted on stage. Elaine watches over and over again from her audience perch high above, as bewitched by them as they are with each other. How is there enough in the world to talk about hour upon hour? She's never had enough interest in anyone to sustain a dialogue that long. And yet here's proof it can happen. Perhaps her mother was right: she should have developed social skills expected of her instead of concentrating so single-mindedly on her education and career teaching science at a private Long Island girl's school.

Elaine plays with possibilities and finally concludes the figures below must be lovers, ancient and creaking like herself, meeting in the wee hours for a rendezvous, grabbing at one last chance for connection. It's a radical interpretation that energizes her. She's been hoping to die.

Nothing but misery now, aching knees and old crab-like fingers barely supple enough to grasp a fork or cup. Not a shred of love left. Marvin and Ben—two husbands gone. Not that either

would have communed with her till dawn. Disappointments, both, in too many ways to inventory, certainly incapable of such cozy intimacy. She never was able to change either one. Nor Daniel, her only child, shared with Marvin. All that's left between them now: a brief once-a-week Sunday phone call filled with just enough terse sentences to call it conversation.

Not much different from the residents of her building, most of whom nod if they must rather than greet her outright. Certainly, she hasn't offered many greetings herself in the ten years she's lived here, but that's not her fault. Most of them are dull and spent, focused more on their pains and petty gripes and what's for dinner than discussing anything remotely intellectual—the future of globalization, ocean warming, the promise of artificial intelligence, even something innocuous like new book recommendations or the latest sculpture exhibition downtown. It's a source of profound frustration for Elaine that she shares so little in common with her fellow residents, or anyone if truth be told. It's been that way for most of her ninety-two years. If only there was someone now to talk to. About anything at all. Even for a bit.

At nightfall, Elaine applies plum-colored lipstick and combs her thin, white hair for the first time in days, then inches out of her apartment with the help of her walker toward the elevator. She's forced to stop every few steps to catch her breath and regroup. Her knees are on fire. She trembles from the effort to stand as she rides down to the lobby, and exits the elevator into utter silence, as if the world has ceased living. The grand overhead chandelier barely casts enough light to make out the marble floors or tastefully placed planters filled with philodendron and bromeliads. She shuffles past the mousy night woman manning the front desk. Elaine doesn't remember her name, and the woman barely glances up before gazing back down at her phone. Not even a nod of acknowledgement. The place looks like a luxury hotel—they could certainly act the part, too.

"Rude," Elaine mutters, but then her anxiety inundates her thoughts. What if her fresh adult diaper doesn't last the trip? Or she can't muster the energy to get back? Why has she been consigned to such loneliness in this world that continually falls short?

Oh, never mind, she chides herself as she hobbles out the front entrance toward the building next door, impatient with the

gloom that continually permeates her mind. She's determined to see these lovers up close and join them. Surely, they'll invite her to sit.

The air carries a hint of cool but it's not unpleasant on Elaine's skin. She can feel the sea breeze gently sweeping in from the Gulf across the boulevard from her building. It's been years since she's gone out after sundown. How lush the sweet fragrance of night-blooming jasmine, and so quiet without the constant hum of daytime traffic. No moon or stars, but the sky is luminescent as if lit from behind by some soft flame. Against it, Elaine can make out the silhouettes of towering coconut palms, the branching trunks of gumbo limbo trees planted in a row along the walkway, and even the giant crown of the majestic banyan tree that stands near the parking garage with its magnificent twisting braids of aerial roots. How exotic and alien compared to the red oaks, cedars, and sugar maples on Long Island, where she lived her entire life before moving here.

Elaine rounds the back of the building, stopping again and again along the dimly lit walkway to muster more strength. It seems it's already taken hours to get this far, and every muscle and joint throbs from the grueling effort. But, oh, how she's missed this beauty, the sweet touch of nature, the only part of life that has ever neared perfection in her estimation with its orderly almighty interconnectedness. So, unlike the human world, which has resulted in nothing but a cascade of disappointments.

Elaine gasps at the sight of two luminous figures ahead on the bench. They look different than they do from her tower window. They don't move. Their low voices don't fill the darkness as she imagined they would. She can't make out their features any better than on high. She inches nearer and nearer—until they're completely indistinct. In fact, they disappear.

Elaine lowers herself slowly to the bench—their bench—nestled in their soft light. Perfectly alone. "My god," she murmurs, running her hand across the cool seat. No one has been here tonight. Were they ever?

Elaine sits for some time by the hidden mangrove, weighed down by hurt so deep it seems impossible to soothe. It pounds down her entire length from crown to slack belly to old misshapen toes. "Why?" she groans.

She gathers strength to rise, falls back to the bench and strains up again, over and over. If only this were her time to go, be done with this. It's all too much, these disappointments. *Please*, she pleads silently, but, of course, the end never comes. Why is she made to keep living?

Elaine finally manages to steady herself upright, clutching her walker and steeling herself for the exertion and patience she'll need to get back home. As she's always done in life—maneuvering through moments that displease her by sheer force of will. Too many ordeals to count.

And then she hears it. Something she can't identify in the mangrove. Not an actual sound exactly; it's more like a low-level rumbling that isn't truly audible. She feels it in her gut calling her, something like the sudden sensation of being watched when no one's in sight.

"Nonsense," Elaine mumbles and turns for her long shuffle home. Likely just her increasingly odd and unpredictable imagination, which has somehow convinced her that lovers sat

here only moments before. Or a hallucination brought on by exhaustion—it's well past her bedtime after all. Or faulty hearing that's misconstrued the very real rustling of a marsh rabbit seeking nocturnal shelter, or an osprey arranging its feathers for sleep, or a drowsing alligator. Or perhaps even a ... what?

Next, you'll be imagining mermaids. Elaine bristles at this ridiculous thought as the rumbling calls again. She sinks back to the bench, alarm prickling her skin. A name floats in. *Bonbibibi*. From a teacher's training workshop on coastal ecology she once attended. Goddess of the vast mangrove forests of eastern India, revered by villagers for her protection against man-eating tigers. But Bonbibibi's defense comes with a catch, one that still strikes Elaine as quite sensible: No one is to take more than they need from the mangrove. Greed mustn't upset the splendid balance of nature, which provides for all needs, something Bonbibibi is sworn to uphold.

You've been greedy. The weight of these words is like a slam to Elaine's head.

"It's not true," she cries. Why must she imagine goddesses when she's in the dark, by herself, far from bed, at her age? She feels leaden, all of her—her thoughts, her bones, life that refuses to depart her burdensome body—so weighty a thousand muscled men couldn't keep her from sinking into the bowels of the world. How will she ever rise from this bench?

"One of your heart chambers is empty," Marvin had once shouted, the only time he ever raised his voice. "No amount of giving ever fills it."

"No!" she hisses, pounding her fist on the bench. What did Marvin know anyway? He, who never dressed quite right, mostly cheap polyesters and poor-quality cottons, made worse by his lazy posture. His lack of geographical knowledge and disinterest in international affairs. His disregard for art and theater. His preference for ballgames—baseball, basketball, football, golf—he loved them all and nothing else nearly as much. An ill-informed man in most regards. Oh, she loved him despite all that. She could never explain it. Yet she never lost an opportunity to remind him of his deficits, left him magazine articles about politics and dragged him to art galleries, told him to sit up straighter and use his brains, all in hopes that he'd finally better himself. *I push you because I love you.* She used to say this to him. Surely, he knew she cared. It felt like love to her—nurturing him to cultivate his best self.

You've been greedy.

Heaviness tugs harder at Elaine. She had said the same thing to Ben, whom she loved slightly less but still did love. Also, a disappointment—unable to read the veiled motives and desires of others, making it impossible to discuss friends and family because he lacked useful insight. Indifferent to her urgings that he be more aware of those around him, live less on the surface, develop his powers of perception.

And Daniel, poor Daniel. How she loved her son most of all. Struggled to toughen him up, as any mother would, pushed him to pay attention in school and perfect his manners, act right, stop falling short. "Please try harder and be your best," she'd beg. How else to succeed in a world where everyone judges you? *I push you because I love you.* Daniel finally closed up and hunkered down until he could flee for good.

Slumped on the bench, Elaine sees it all so clearly. The horror she's wreaked—the truth of her greed. Not greed for clothes or furniture or jewels or land, though she hasn't lacked for any



of these. But greed for control. For life to be just as she wants it with every book and objet d'art in place, no unexpected complications to mar her days, no traffic jams, loud noises, dirt, spills, or telemarketers interrupting dinner. No unruliness or unpredictable behavior from family or acquaintances, especially after she's laid down her preferred conduct.

Her greed has demanded more of others than can be expected of any human soul. Greed driven by fear. All-consuming fear that life won't provide for all her needs—particularly her innermost yearnings to belong, to matter. That people will leave if she doesn't keep them in line. That they'll hurt her, fail her, disappoint her. That their imperfections will show her in a bad light. What a thing to consider at her age when her time is almost up. Too late to rectify. But she had to take matters into her own hands.

"I'm sorry," Elaine moans. She's never uttered those words before. They nearly choke her.

These three men were terrified of her, terrorized. She sees that now. They were good men, flawed like anyone. Yet what if they'd expected perfection of her like she did of them, withholding full loving acceptance until she vanquished every defect and weakness? How miserably she'd have failed—has failed—at being perfect. She sees that now. Her demands have resulted in exactly what she's always feared most: Abandonment. No one loves her, not a soul in the world.

"Forgive me," Elaine pleads. A scorching despair spreads through her like poison, nearly intolerable. And just as her endurance is almost exhausted a profound sense of protection envelopes her. Perhaps death has come finally, providing a painful though necessary review of her years on earth before ushering her to the next world.

"I'm sorry." It seems the easiest thing to say in the velvet sanctuary of beautiful love that's gently escorting her from life toward longed-for death. "I'm sorry," she proclaims again to the night. She means it now with all her being, from her deepest recesses. As if Bonbibí's protective grace has arrived to remind her she's a beloved part of life, loved just as she is, in a way she's never loved anyone. No need for greed and control. No need for fear. As if she herself is a goddess with infinite capacity for forgiveness and love—for herself most of all. Why was it so hard for ninety-two years? How easy it is now.

"You broke your hip falling off that bench," the nurse's aide says.

Elaine contemplates the young woman bearing a food tray, dressed in maroon scrubs with a cartoonish bunny tattooed on her right wrist and the word "SMILE" scrawled across her left. Entirely banal. "I didn't know," Elaine whispers tentatively, unsure if this vapid woman is merely a dream. "I thought I died."

"Not your time." The woman smiles, a kind but not wholehearted smile, something you offer a stranger in need. Definitely not a dream, just another young woman like so many Elaine taught—women with significant potential—filling silences with empty conversation and their empty skin with hackneyed images. No originality. "Must be a reason you're still here," the woman says.

Elaine mines her brain, scouring through folds of gray matter, into the nooks and crannies of memory, rummaging through all that appeared so vivid and certain in the pre-dawn hours,

hungering for that feeling of peace and belonging—that glimpse of heaven. Surely that's where she was headed. Why is she still here?

"Thank you," she says as the woman sets the tray before her. It's been years since she's uttered those words. They fill her like warm soup. She can be kind, even to someone so insipid. But only for a moment. Already love's fine embrace is fading, its nighttime caresses nearly beyond remembrance. Whatever she encountered by the mangrove—so profound and massive and beyond explanation—no longer feels so true under the fluorescent lights of her hospital room.

Elaine lifts the cover off her plate: Salisbury steak and mashed potatoes, soggy green beans, and chocolate pudding in a disposable plastic cup with peel-off foil lid. A wave of displeasure churns inside her. She doesn't want to see through fault-finding eyes. If only those lenses of joy, compassion, and gratitude from earlier would return, affirming that she lacks for nothing, that she's blessed to be alive. Elaine samples the pudding and spits it into her napkin. Surely this could be better; they could try harder. She rings for the aide to remove her tray.

Panic grows when no one comes right away. It mounts with each minute she waits. How long must she stay here? Why doesn't anyone care?

Elaine squeezes her eyes shut, wringing out agitation, commanding muscles and thoughts to uncoil. Nothing's ever right, but panic is useless. So are tempting visions she obviously can't sustain. They require too much. She must go on. And with that, she expels a sigh, discharging everything she saw and understood on the bench by the mangrove. No more torturous reckoning of past wrongdoing—of what must change and grow, of what could still be. Elaine releases it all to the familiar comfort of habitual disenchantment. Beyond the reach of self-scrutiny and remorse. Beyond enlightenment.

Sidney Stevens is an author with an MA in journalism from the University of Michigan. Her short stories are forthcoming or have appeared in literary journals, including Oyster River Pages, The Woven Tale Press, Scribble, Hedge Apple, The Wild Word, Bright Flash Literary Review, OyeDrum, and The Certificationist. Her creative nonfiction has been published in Newsweek, The Dillydoun Review, and Nature's Healing Spirit. She lives in Coopersburg, PA.

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Authors' Tea

Poem by Sarah Mills

In school we learned that there are four types of sentences
classified by their purpose:
To tell, to command, to exclaim, to ask.
I decided that I would not make demands of the world—
even my statements lacked the confidence of a real person.
Even they were a kind of asking.

There's always one crayon that won't fit back in the box.
I learned to take up the least amount of space,
saving room for the others.
I wanted to erase myself like a misspelled word
rubbing the paper so hard it tears
leaving nothing behind but pink crumbs.

The teacher wanted our best work for the authors' tea,
but I knew my writing was asking too much.
So I wrote a new story, one that was a little charming,
a little funny, but not a lot of anything.
I used as few words as possible
to shorten the length of my voice against the gnawing silence.

In my retelling, I stand as tall as an exclamation mark.
I look you all in the eyes and I ask you—
no, I *command* you
to place your hands on my shoulders, gently, and tell me that one day
I will learn to use my voice to put out fires,
and also, to start them.



Sarah Mills is a former English teacher who now works as a freelance writer and editor. Originally from Delaware, she received her bachelor's degree in English Education from the University of Delaware and her master's in Literacy and TESOL from Wilmington University. Her poetry has appeared in *Glass Mountain*. She is currently writing a YA novel. You can visit her at sarahmillswrites.com.

Kulikitaka

Poem by Michael Angelo Abreu

Dominicano soy!
Dominicano soy!
Dominicano soy
in a city of cold.
'toy cruz'ao
in my heart.
My body, made of bark,
and hair of mango fibers
is rooted to the orderly lines
painted on perfect concrete.
Mi sangre de zapote
doesn't move with
easy mountain river speed, here
in the
fluorescent white
banks of
fluoride streams.
No puedo bailar
como los arboles de palma en la brisa,
because in the mirror
I see a rigid oak tree
wearing a stiff shirt with tight collar—pero
Dominicano soy!
in the choking alleys
of montaña tall skyscrapers.
Dominicano soy!
barred outside the wide
finca de arroz bright
fashion avenues and high
art boutiques and white
spaces.
Dominican soy!
morenito con sol
in the cold.
Dominicano soy!
while American.



Michael Abreu is a leaf. He takes frequent walks through the Wissahickon woods, musing about life and its many particulars, such as love, happiness, suffering, and spiritual growth. These kaleidoscope ideas find themselves splashed across his poetry. Through his exploration of writing, he seeks not only to further develop his voice but also to obtain a deeper understanding of who or what he is.

'69 Mustang

Poem by Joshua Barnes

Standing in a semi-circle,
They watch Mr. Stevens turn the ignition,
Rev the engine.
These men,
They comment on the purr of the motor,
 The cherry paint,
 The polished chrome,
But I can't see the beauty they see,
So instead I look at the sky and the trees,
 Or from a hairy forearm to
 Oil- and grease-stained fingers.
These markings of men.
I shrink,
Looking at my own hairless arms –
 Stick arms,
 Like a girl's arms –
He wraps his hand around my shoulder,
Asks what I think.
I hesitate,
Frightened that my delicate voice,
 -- Fragile
 Shrill voice –
Will cut through their conversation,
And reveal to them
In sound and in word that
I am an imposter here.



Joshua Barnes was born and raised in Boyne City, Michigan, and is now a Philadelphia transplant with a career as a Nurse Manager. His poetry has previously appeared in *Kairos Literary Magazine*, *The Bloom*, and has been featured on the Lake County Arts Council website. He's been a devoted comic book nerd since he was ten. When not writing or working, he can be found reading poetry and horror fiction, perfecting his handstands, or binge-watching *Drag Race*.





Don't Trust Reflections

Andy Pressman

It's been weeks since I had seen my face.

It feels so strange now, Kevin sat across from me in our small tent, a chessboard sat on the floor between us. He looked down before making his first move, moving his king's pawn forward one space. Nobody knows how or why they started appearing, all we know is that while reflections are the only way to see them, reflective surfaces are also the only way they could get you. When the news broke, people panicked. Anything reflective was smashed and thrown away. The lucky ones got out; Kevin and I were able to get some camping supplies together and make it out to the woods before the worst happened.

"At least we have each other, and...." I paused, I knew the silver lining in all this, but it just felt wrong after everything that happened. I took a breath and matched his move, moving my king's pawn forward one space.

I looked up to meet Kevin's eyes with my own. "It's okay, Caitlin, you can say it." I let out a deep sigh, and a light cloud formed as my warm breath met the cold air.

"At least we are together, and, in a way, looking at each other is the closest we have to see our own reflection, kind of. Well, it's more than most people can, at least."

My twin looked me directly in the eyes before looking down and considering his next move. Despite being born only mere seconds before me, Kevin was always the more protective of the two of us. When I would get myself into trouble, he was always there to help bail me out. We did everything together, and he was my brother as well as my best friend. "Guess there is a silver lining in that, but-"

"Stop." I cut him off. We were both thinking the same thing, but I couldn't bear to hear it out loud right now. "It's your move."

Kevin let out an understanding sigh as he glanced at the opaque water bottle beside him. We had barely managed to fill it before things really got out of hand. We were the lucky ones, far enough outside the city and some supplies to keep us alive, at least until things calmed down. Although we both knew in the back of our minds that there was no way to know if it would ever be safe to return to our home and find some semblance of normal life. There were only a few sips of water left, going down to the nearby river felt too risky, and neither of us knew when it would snow next. Instead, we sat in this tent, day after day, playing chess and just talking.

He looked down at the board again, his hand drifting over each piece as he considered every possible move. Eventually, his

hand settled on the pawn in front of his queen and moved it forward one space as well. After so many games of chess between us, it often came down to who made the first attack; One simple mistake could snowball the entire game, so it became a game of patience. I placed my hand on my queen pawn and moved it forward one space.

We continued on in silence, move after move. Kevin would make a play, and I would copy it. There was only the rustling of the forest as animals scurried through the grass, and birds flew through the trees and called out to each other.

The peace was only occasionally interrupted by a gunshot ringing out, leading to a moment of silence as if the entire forest briefly held its breath. It hoped that the sound was simply someone hunting for food but knew all too well of the much more likely alternative. Sanity and resources were both in short supply these days. The further you could get from other people, often the safer you would be.

The game continued on; nearly every piece had been moved, the board still in perfect symmetry as I matched each of my brother's moves, neither of us willing to take the first piece.

We both glanced at the board, each contemplating our next moves in the game. In tandem, we lifted our heads to look directly at each other. When our eyes finally met, we froze and then spoke at the same time.

Kevin whispered, "Caitlin."

I whispered, "Kevin."

For what felt like a lifetime, the two of us stared at each other. Neither of us moved, and I wasn't sure if we even could if we tried. The forest fell silent, and the world seemed to disappear around us. Quickly there was nothing left but me, my brother, and the small chess board between us. In the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of movement. Then everything went black.

Andy Pressman grew up in suburban Philadelphia and has been attached to the city since he was born. He grew up always loving telling and sharing stories and writing short stories has been the best way to share that love. Writing has become a comfort activity for Andy, as it's a wonderful escape from normal life into endless fantastic worlds, and he takes extra joy in sharing those worlds he creates with others.

Free postcard From the saint shrine

Poem by Mary Zhou

Deliciously dark confession
booths and big lightless
pupils with golden
grapes and dead guy
in a glass box. Everyone
so so still. So silent.
Backs of their heads
devotional. Guy restocks
the votives. Clink,
clink, the color glass.



Mary Zhou (they/she) is an artist based in Philadelphia. Their poetry is also forthcoming in *Oversound* and Philadelphia Poet Laureate Trapeta B. Mayson's Healing Verse Poetry Line. Poetry, both read and written, has carried them through the last two years. You can find them online at marzhou.com

Bensalem

Poem by Greg Probst

You take Street Road back to the world,
pine needles fall nearby.
These places still exist, revisited
like a box of wilted baby pictures in a storage locker.
On a Sunday, you take Broad to Vine to I-95
and you take the exit to Pain and Mercy
and go to the places that kill you.
It all stands before you confident as ghosts.
320 Pine Court is still there and you drive slowly
and out of the passenger side window you see yourself
sprinting out the door
and you see yourself
walking behind Holly
over the pine needles
to the bus stop and the third grade
and your Oldsmobile is not where mom parked it
and a steakhouse replaces the woods you rode your bicycle through
and a wrought-iron gate keeps Street Road from Beech Court
and you want to call Kourtney Melendez and tell her she was the best friend you
ever had
but you know that Cyprus and Spruce and Willow
are not to be revisited today.



Greg Probst is a teacher, writer, and filmmaker. He is the recipient of the Pam Perkins-Frederick Memorial Scholarship for the Marriage of Art and Poetry and the Dr. Allen Hoey Memorial Scholarship for Short Fiction. His writing has been featured in *The Centurion*, *The Temple News*, *Hyphen*, *Rathalla Review*, and through the Teachers Institute of Philadelphia. Probst is currently pursuing an MFA degree at Drexel University where he will be teaching first-year composition and creative writing.

where something happens

Poem by Rachel Betesh

how, at the trolley stop, we all have a common mountain.
morning like a tall pine the day starts with, strong and silent;

how heavy scarves and hats and gloves sleep
on our bones. that the silver tracks pull around the last stop,

by a wash-and-fold where something is always moving,
soap and water hiding the colors of soaked clothes.

how standing here is so easily understood: the patience
or impatience, the idleness of hands. how it's acceptable

just to know you're in the place where something happens,
where the route ends and then again, begins. it's possible

to ride with spare coins, barely treasure, the range of it
like peaks and valleys: to creek or city, to streets and homes.

how the waiting here is a good thing, how everyone rushes
just to be in this, this very, this very happening place.



Rachel Betesh is a nurse and a gardener who writes poems – at a wooden desk in a 112-year-old house, with the window open. Her poetry has been featured in *The New Yorker*, long-listed for the 2022 emerging poet prize at *Palette Poetry*, and is forthcoming in *Brink* magazine. She rides the #13 trolley through Philadelphia.



Her Body Lines

Leah Mele-Bazaz

You should have stayed friends with her. You shouldn't have learned about her death through social media when your yoga teacher posted a picture of her smiling on the yoga mat, looking pale and dreamy as the sun hit her face. *Rest in peace.*

You made a beeline to the bathroom at work and hyperventilated in the corner stall. You didn't have permission to feel the way you did; you were the one who cut her out of your life. All of those friendships after her, you strived to find someone like her to get that close again. You had yet to match it.

Grief has a way of making things feel like yesterday. Memories that were inaccessible in the subconscious become unlocked and flood your mind. Suddenly, you were eighteen again when she took you to your first yoga class. She drove you to class in her tan Chevy Malibu that resembled a grandmother's car and trembled when the ignition turned on. She liked to drive with the sun visor down, not to protect her eyes from the glare, but she slid the mirror open to look at herself as she drove, finding her own vanity hilarious. You bent and flexed your bodies together and trembled in the poses.

She got better at yoga. Her body could withstand the demands of the poses and the heat. Her moves were untouchable, and she made everyone stare. You watched the yoga teacher give her more adjustments in class, and you craved the touch she received, or maybe you wanted her all to yourself.

You would give her a ride to the train station for her Vinyasa training. She'd wear leotards with high-waisted leggings and leg warmers into the city.

"On the train, I feel like Nina in *Black Swan*," she said as she refreshed her makeup in your rearview mirror. "Remember that movie?"

You remembered. You'd watched *Black Swan* together. She envied the ribs that protruded out of the ballerina's leotard, and you remember the throb radiating between your legs when Natalie Portman and Mila Kunis had sex. You didn't know you could get so turned on from watching women together. You wouldn't know that you were bisexual until much later.

Once, after a few drinks, she kissed you outside of a bar. Her long and devilish tongue hooked into the roof of your mouth. You grabbed her thick hair in your hands and pulled her close.

"Do you remember last night?" You whispered the next morning with your bodies interlocked on the single mattress in your parents' house. You could hear your blood pulse.

"Nothing," she had said as she rolled off the bed, out of your reach.

A psychic had warned you, after all. He had told you someone you loved would die in an accident. You were angry at the news. This psychic had broken a code. You were a trained clairvoyant, and you would never reveal such detrimental information during a reading. You only read the good things or harmless things like past lives and forcefully tuned out the bad. What good was it to tell someone that death was coming? Death was coming for all of us.

You ran into her mother at the grocery store.

"Do you still keep in touch?" she asked with an arm full of produce.

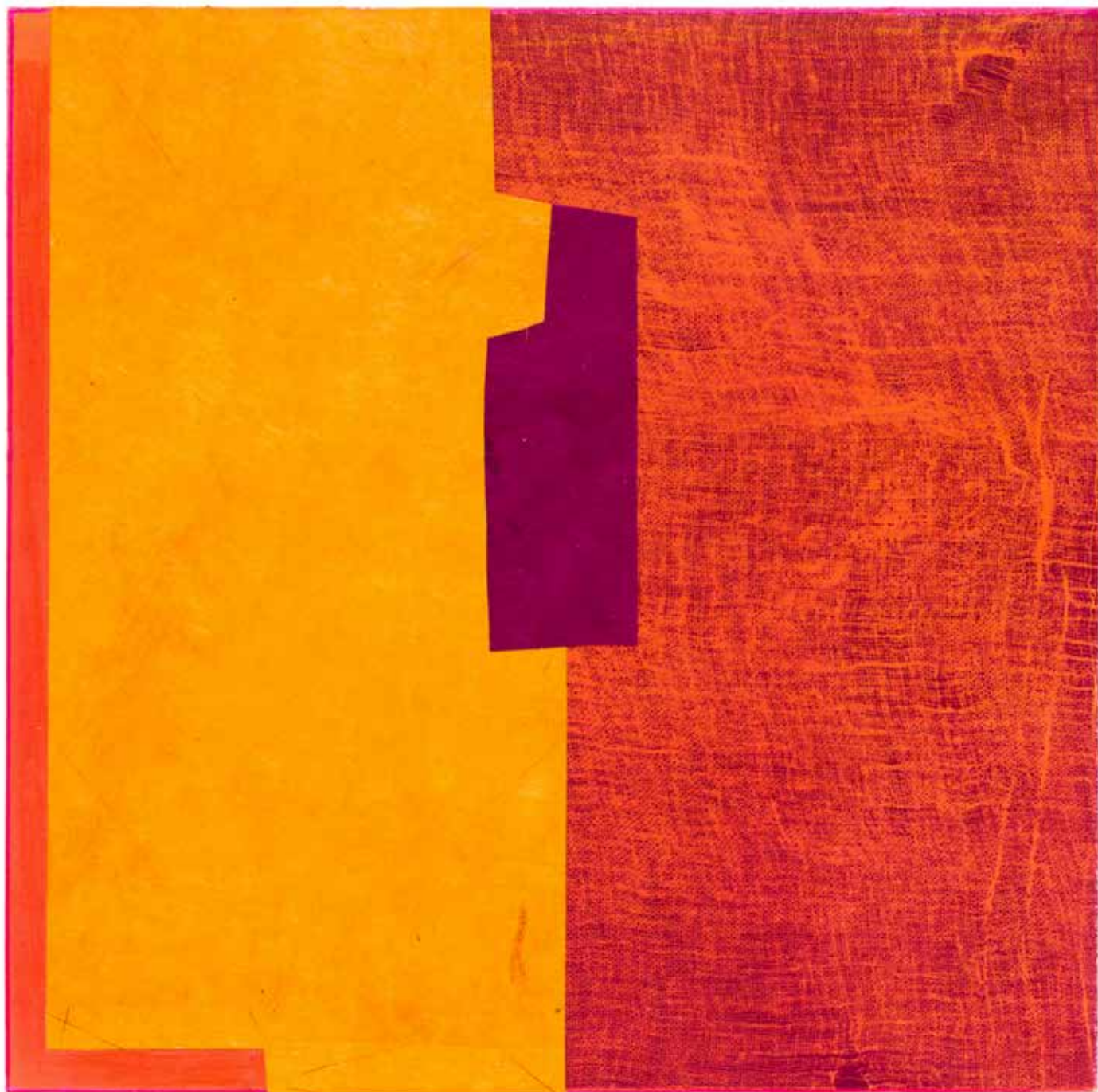
"No, unfortunately." We had a falling out. Her Chevy Malibu broke down, and she would come over to your house but then ask for a ride to her boyfriend's house. The habit kept reoccurring: each time she arrived, only for you to drop her off with disappointment. You eventually told her you couldn't do it anymore. You couldn't keep watching her leave. You wanted her to stay, and that's what ended things. But you never told her you loved her. You never knew if that would have changed anything or everything.

"She moved to Philly to teach yoga. She followed her dreams," her mother said with a proud smile.

Eventually, you moved into the city, too. You meant to go to her yoga class to reconnect, but you never did.

Now, you can't stop thinking about her body lines as she hung onto the man's back on his motorcycle. He didn't have an extra helmet for her, so her long black hair danced in the wet summer night. You wondered what the stars looked like that night when the storm rolled in after a dry summer day and made the streets wet and slippery. When the biker made a turn, she ejected into the sky. The lines her body made in the road when she landed, forever marking her end in asphalt unworthy of her perfection.

Leah Mele-Bazaz is a proud Philadelphian and the author of *Laila: Held for a Moment*. Excerpts from her memoir were shortlisted for the Eunice Williams Nonfiction Prize (2021) and a finalist for The Southampton Review Nonfiction Prize (2020). Her writing has appeared in *Schuylkill Valley Journal Online*, *Barren Magazine*, and elsewhere. In 2021, she won *Barren Magazine's* December Instagram Poetry Contest. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing at Drexel University, where she also teaches Rhetoric and Composition. You can often find her at one of her two favorite places in Philly: the Schuylkill River Trail or her local library. Website: www.leahmelebazaz.com Instagram: @leahmelebazaz/@authormelebazaz



Rapture

Poem by 王潇 / Evan Wang

i wish the world would stop for me.
in its tracks, never felt such weight
gracefully crumble onto its palms.

i've added a couple of pounds
since i started walking the hypotenuse,
driving my life with triangular wheels.
what can i say—i came out of the womb horizontal.

how to lessen the weight?
starve yourself of these earthly pleasures.
shelter a cocoon and live and laugh all you want,
but wait until the world doesn't glare anymore,

then the roads are open to rapture.
run as you will—lose more weight,
but swallow that impossible feeling.
it will be weightless gain.
full, impossible to hate again.
i swear i don't miss the empty well,
where every sip of water is an echo in a spacious cave.

to be perfect is to cut skin and bone
and i no longer have to do so.
i am ever-molding surface no more.
my thinning love rhymes with pounds and mounds
and one day i'll be loved and give love,
but still wonder if the jawline is sharp enough to cut.

when there is a way to measure how heavy,
learn to step down from the scale
and keep your worth (or weight) inside you.
after all, even a word sounding as nasty as rapture can mean bliss.



王潇 / Evan Wang is a 15-year-old poet from King of Prussia whose work has appeared in *Juste Milieu*, *Bleeding Soul Poetry*, *The National Poetry Quarterly*, etc. He is the recipient of the Youth Appreciation Award and a featured artist in the Our America Now festival. Evan is spellbound by the catharsis of the moving language and worships the pens of Savannah Brown and Ocean Vuong.

Grief

Poem by Andy Macera

I wanted to grieve
but the garden
was in such a good mood
and the bubbly
blue sky
kept calling *C'mon! C'mon!*
and I swear
the wind lifted me
like a toddler
onto the burning back
of the sun
galloping in such
a wild and
unbroken way
that not once
did I think of
my mother's ashes.



Andy Macera has received awards from *Plainsongs*, *Mad Poets Review* and *Philadelphia Poets*. His work has also appeared in *Pearl*, *California Quarterly*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Straight Forward*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Old Red Kimono*, *Passager* and other journals. He has lived in West Chester, Pennsylvania since 1998.

Codependency

Poem by John Kucera

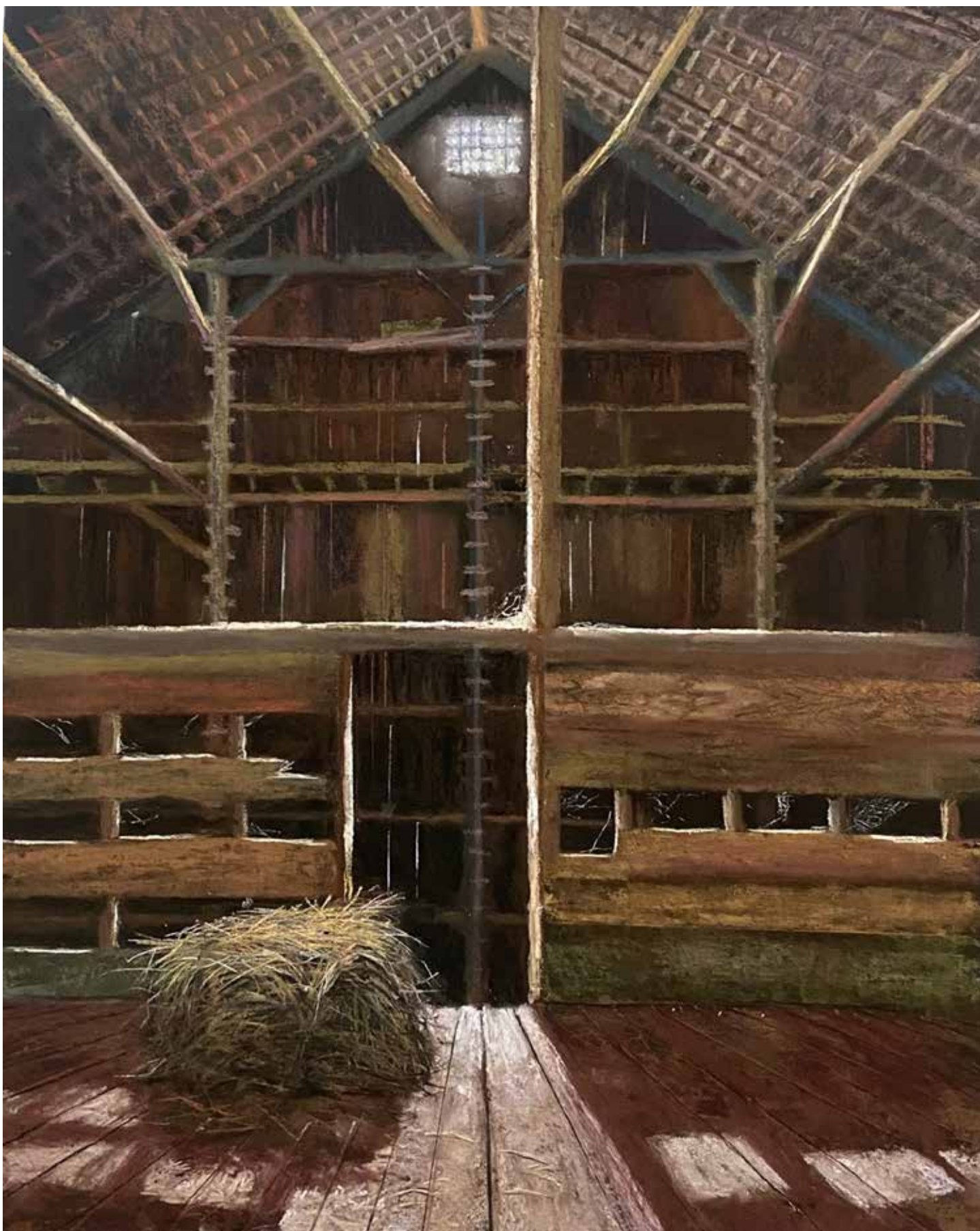
Your words sound like my grandmother's now
she speaks with her dead voice from your vocal cords

the sharp vowels try to pin my conscience
strong consonants devalue my power
the words themselves leak resin—

wife and children—escape her teeth
trying to catch me she cannot understand
I don't want either

Her pyramid-scheme
of love is ancient. She drives to me

with prayer and I turn her away with fire.





Dear Alice

Jeannine Cook

Dear Alice,

If you are reading this, it is because yet again the Great Listener has deemed my seeking worth finding. I am placing in this letter a few questions which I hope to learn your thoughts. It is May 31, 2022. I am sitting with news of massacres. I have spent the last few months with your writing, rereading *The Color Purple* and rewatching the movie of the same name. Checking your website for new blog entries.

Earlier this month, I interviewed you after reading your newest book, *Gathering Blossoms Under Fire*, 50 years of your journal entries. I am a little over halfway done with *The Same River Twice*, playing Quincy Jones' *Color Purple* movie soundtrack while I write you this letter with dreams of someday hosting a live listening party with you and Quincy as our special guests. We would chat music, the *Color Purple* soundtrack, and review copies of Quincy's new book--*12 Notes on Life and Creativity*, alongside your extensive catalogue. Big dreamer. I know.

I wrote your staff requesting an opportunity to share space with you at the beginning of the year, and I get that I am one of a billion people who have that same prayer, so when I didn't hear back I was not astonished, just patient until Sara Lomax Reese, head of the oldest local radio station in Philadelphia, calls me up and asks if I'd like to interview Alice Walker, I say: YES! And then cut a step. Yes to the Great Listener. Wave my hand in the air. Yes to fate. Close my eyes. Inhale. Yes to Alice.

You won't believe this but on December 31, 2021, I wrote down all my wildest dreams for 2022 and right on top of my list, under complete my memoir, was your name--have tea and chat with Alice Walker. The tea didn't happen just yet (but I have hope). Our chat began at 6 pm on May 12th at the Comcast Technology Center. But how does one squeeze a lifetime of questions into a 45-minute interview where I must share half the questions with a co-host and 15 minutes of the interview on audience questions. The day before the interview, my sister said, "Just make sure you have one good question because that might be all you get." And she was almost right. I got to ask you about love, flowers, reparations, finances, and fame. But I still

have so many other questions.

I will not write them all here today. Just one: I want to know your visions for the future of this world and how you see us getting there. After reading the journal entries in *Gathering Blossoms*, I am challenged on how to teach folks, especially young folks, how to practically apply the lessons the book so eloquently layers in. For instance, I just finished watching a documentary on Hulu about XXXtentacion, a young rapper with millions of fans who was shot dead at 20 years old during the height of his tumultuous career.

I wanted to understand XXXtentacion more because my 18-year-old son damn near worships him. "XXXtentacion to me is what Alice Walker is to you," my son explains. In the documentary, XXXtentacion, like Mister_____, like your grandfather, has a deep mix of undesirable qualities alongside great fragility. These qualities are attractive to millions of young people who listen to XXXtentacion and feel heard. And I am aware that in Philly, it's the 16–24-year-olds who are both the most at risk (highest murder rate, highest suicide rate, highest rape rate) and share the highest opportunity for growth. I am aware that the young person who shot and killed elders in a Buffalo grocery store was 18 years old. That the young person who shot and killed babies in a Texas elementary school was 18 years old. That the cadre of conductors working in our shops come there to restore their belief in connection. And these are young people who just came out of years spent in the captivity of a global pandemic. I just want to know from your perspective how to love them better. How to reach the otherwise unreachable. How to get as many of your books into desiring hands as possible. How to get us writing letters like Nettie. And freely expressing ourselves like Shug and Sofia. And restoring ourselves like Celie.

I believe that your books are medicine, a soul rejuvenating elixir that will protect and guide us through the days to come if we read, hear, and apply the wisdom.

signed a revolutionary petunia,
jeannine

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.



WE DIDN'T WIN THE LOTTERY

Poem by Kimberly Ann Southwick

& now I'm google searching something like
good songs to recommend for someone trying to kick

heroin & clearing the oldest iPhone I have, deleting
my past life photo by photo, stopping at the one you sent me

when you had your first baby & I was at the Kimmel
listening to a live jazz band with Alex, & your son,

he was all tubes & wrinkled, so I kept the picture
to myself. he will be three in April & it feels like he should be

younger. the internet keeps recommending the same song,
some same stale drama, so I play it once, again,

but it's all puppets
with their strings visible, like,

we're on two street & you're
pulling on my pocket & you're asking

for the flask & I don't even remember telling you
that I brought one.

my dad's dad hated the mummies.
he called them feather merchants.

everything feels like giving up.
let's steal a rifle & pick off the next

& then the next planet's moons one by one
until we're even, until it's simple or simple again.

I really thought we had a chance this time.
I just had that feeling—you know?



Kimberly Ann Southwick is from Cherry Hill, New Jersey and currently an Assistant Professor at Jacksonville State University. She is the founder and Editor in Chief of the literary journal *Gigantic Sequins*. Her full-length poetry collection, *Orchid Alpha*, is forthcoming from Trembling Pillow Press. Find her on twitter tweeting about being a Philadelphia Eagles fan: @kimannjosouth.

The Jewel of Berks County

Poem by Ken Fifer

There are ten categories of competitive yodeling.
When I ask why, she purses her lips.
If it has to be said at all, she wants it yodeled.
Dot is dot.
She's a daughter of the dotters of wisdom
and winner of the Under Twenty Hill to Hill.

Her voice carries all the way
to Lyons from Blue Mountain Motors,
where she's bending over the hood,
leaning in, yodeling to the engine
in her polka-dot Capris,
the Jewel of Berks County,
trying to get the old Dodge tuned.

Even now, as far off as Macungie,
old men on benches reading children's books
with very hard eyes and almost no lips,
on hearing her voice look up
and press their tongues to gums for spit,
bracing themselves for the eleventh yodel—
part rescue and part lift,
part egress and part crypt,
part substance and part mist and itch.

And when I dream I'm Paul Cezanne,
a poor man who's overspent on wallpaper
with no way to make ends meet,
her voice is there to comfort me.
Listen, she says.
With two large fries from Sheetz,
one for now and one as needed,
you can forget about l'Orangerie
and picnic baskets along the Seine.
La Santé has actual food fights
with Apollinaire and the Algerians,
with Jean Genet and Paul Verlaine.



Ken Fifer's poetry collections include *After Fire* (March Street Press) and *Falling Man* (Ithaca House). His poems have appeared in *Philadelphia Stories*, *Barrow Street*, *Epoch*, *New Letters*, *Ploughshares*, and *The Literary Review*. He has a Ph.D. in English Language and Literature from The University of Michigan.



An Interview with Jennifer Rieger

Curtis Smith



Jennifer Rieger is a public educator and college professor in the Philadelphia area. An advocate for her students and graduates, she dedicates her time to empowering others through reading, writing, and acts of love. Jen has been honored with the Franklin Institute 2020 Excellence in Teaching Award, the 2021 Philadelphia Phillies All-Star Teaching Award, and was a semi-finalist for the Pennsylvania Department of Education Teacher of the Year. Along with a nomination for the

2020 Pushcart Prize for Literature, she's also been published in Chautauqua Literary Journal, Wisconsin Review, BUST Magazine, Philadelphia Stories 15th Anniversary Anthology, among others. Jen holds an MA in English Literature, an MFA in Creative Writing, and spends her free time bragging about her son, students, and thousands of graduates.



Instagram/Twitter: @MsJRiegs
www.HerVerse.org

To purchase:
Minerva Rising Press,
minervarising.com, Amazon

Curtis Smith: Congratulations on *Burning Sage*. I really enjoyed these essays. Can you tell us about the book's journey and how you ended up working with Minerva Rising?

Jennifer Rieger: Thank you so much for the opportunity! I would say that the Genesis point of the book was with an essay called "The Meantime." I had not been in my MFA program for long, and to be quite honest, I started the MFA as more of a pastime. My son had just left for college, and there I was, this 38-year-old empty-nester wondering what was in store and if I could use some of my newfound freedom to revisit, as Cheryl Strayed calls it, the "ghostship" that drifted away eighteen years before. I

desperately wanted to be a writer when I was younger, but as a young mom, teaching seemed to be the more stable path. Two decades and a Masters in Literature later, and I was sitting in this MFA Creative Nonfiction Workshop class with Anne Kaier writing about stigma, and those two decades of studies, and teaching, and motherhood just poured out of me. I had never written anything of substance in such a frenzy before. That first piece was called "The Meantime"—because that's what all of those years felt like. Who knew that little essay would get published and start a brand new journey for me. Little by little, I started connecting and crafting those years in journals, during weekends, holidays, summer breaks. What started out as a manuscript called *The Meantime* transformed into *Burning Sage* and became my MFA thesis, and I submitted it to Minerva Rising when they publicized their memoir contest. The rest has been a whirlwind of decision making, editing, pandemic delays, imposter syndrome—you name it.

CS: Was it always creative nonfiction first for you? Or did you start your creative work in fiction and then find yourself drawn to CNF? Do you find writing both fiction and CNF helpful? How would you compare their toolboxes? Their processes?

JR: I actually started the MFA as a poet. It didn't take me very long of workshoping peer pieces in my cohort to realize I was severely out of my league. (Laughs) Everything I wrote turned into these prose poems that grew longer and longer. The charade had to end. However, with that, this lovely sense of self-actualization resonated—I *did* indeed have a story to tell. I just had to finally give myself the space and freedom to admit that mine was worth telling. I was also grateful for those poetry workshops and continued to take them. My prose grew sharper, more lyrical. My favorite poet is Sylvia Plath, and I'm drawn to her poetry much more than her prose; however, I teach her novel *The Bell Jar* and each time I read it, I am in awe of how cadence and melody slips into each scene, each description. (What I would give!) So, I try. I dabble. With each poem I write, I ask myself, what is the story behind this? What is deep inside of me that I'm veiling in metaphor? How can I rip off the bandage and dig into the story? It's scary. And it's beautiful. Having said that, there are things in life that I find much too painful for prose—some things that I'm not yet ready to bring to the world of storytelling. And that's when poetry is there for me.



CS: I've been talking to my students recently about access points and how we initially find our way into our holidays and summer vacations pieces. Did you have a go-to access point in these—memory, concepts, images? Or was each piece its own journey?

JR: Curt, I just wrote. (*Laughs*) At first, anyway. Every spare moment I had, in the creative writing class I teach at Upper Merion or when gridlock turned the Schuylkill into a parking lot, I bled into my journal. But after awhile I started seeing these patterns. When I wrote about the strong women in my life (typically my grandmothers) they would invariably match up with student stories that stuck with me. In the early part of my MFA, I just tried to get the stories down to see where the writing took me. After some workshops with CNF writers like Jillian Sullivan and Kristina Moriconi, I began honing in on images—a mink coat, a bundle of sage, a spot of blood—and I let the image propel me forward. There's piece in my book called "The Fix" that started out as a story of a fairly introverted boy who used to sit in this tattered, old blue upholstered office chair in my classroom and share joys, fears, anxieties, past hardships—everything in need of purging from a high school senior's mind. It was a sweet story of our unlikely little friendship; but his wasn't the only story that

chair held, and he wasn't the only student to give me purpose. I expanded the piece to what I had buried deep down, to what the blue chair represented, to why those kids were such a "fix." I cried the whole time I wrote the first edition, and the whole time I transformed it thinking about all the different definitions of the word *fix* and how I fit into each one.

CS: We first met at Rosemont's MFA program. Deciding whether or not to pursue a MFA is a decision many writers face. What did getting a MFA do for you as a writer? What advice would you offer anyone who is considering attending Rosemont or another MFA program?

JR: I know there's a lot of controversy as to whether writers need an MFA. I get it. But every writer is different. Personally, I would not have sharpened my skills, learned the rules of getting published, participated in public readings, or had any kind of writing network had it not been for my cohort at Rosemont. There's an accountability and comradery that comes with the right MFA program. Carla Spataro, the director of the program, has been able to create this kind of environment, and I'd still be scribbling in my journal without it. My advice? Do some soul searching and

some research. Are you self-driven? Do you have time in your schedule to actually be self-driven? I find life to be mentally exhausting and needed an instructor assigning work to me and giving me feedback. Some might not need that.

CS: I have two questions about structure. The book is divided into five themed sections. Was this idea with you from the start? Or did you find yourself with separate pieces and then discover these currents in them? What do you think this organization brings to the book? And second, a number of the essays begin with an epigraph of one form or another. At what point in the process did these come into play? Were some part of an essay's origins? Or did you find yourself discovering what the piece was about as you wrote and then finding an epigraph that fit? What role do you think these epigraphs play for the reader?

JR: By the time I wrote the title piece for the book I started to see and understand, like a sage plant, my own growth process that brought me to that place. The story of "Burning Sage" brought me to that reckoning—it's letting go of three students who showed up in my class at just the right time, at the peak of my career. My son was in college at that point, I became Department Chair, felt confident teaching my Advanced Placement course, and I was writing again after two decades of fragmented thoughts. I knew then it was my peak, my own personal blooming, and I still know that now. The story examines that cusp in life—that jumping point—and how we handle it. I'm not sad about it anymore, because like the sage, I was taken from *Bloom* to *Burn*. It was and still is a new place for me to lay bare everything I learned and use it to the best of my abilities. Don't get me wrong though, I don't confuse this place with some kind of personal teaching Nirvana. I might have the experience of a veteran teacher and the wherewithal to be assertive in life, but I make mistakes on the daily and have a great deal more to learn. I love that. My kids teach me that every day.

Concerning the epigraphs, those didn't come into play until the very end. I've been fascinated by Medieval mystics and visionaries for most of my adult life. I was researching some of the writings of Hildegard of Bingham, and interestingly enough for an 11th century nun, she loved to study infection, psychology, and human sexuality and explore natural remedies for both minor and severe ailments. I came across something she said about sage:

"Cur moriatur homo, cui salvia crescit in horto?"
Why should a man die, whilst Sage grows
in his garden?

This not only became one of the two main epigraphs of the book, but also inspiration for further medicinal, spiritual, and historical study on this magical little plant. The more I learned, the more I understood how all these facts about sage could provide me with the access points I was seeking. And they made sense. There's so much in nature that corresponds with the human condition. It's amazing how often we either forget that or ignore it.

CS: As someone who taught high school for many years, I really enjoyed your essays about teaching. I think it can be a challenge for someone who edits or teaches writing to go home and then shift into creator/writer mode. Has this been a challenge for you? Or do you find inspiration in your work that carries over to your writing desk?

JR: It's more of the latter, I think. To be quite honest, there was quite a bit of time when I thought I settled as a public educator. I had essentially given up on my dream because I chose to have my son at 19, and I thought teaching was the perfect career for mothers. (What a cruel myth!) But I look back at that girl wondering if circumstances were different, what would she even write about? Don't be mistaken, I know there are many young writers out there with an expansive world view and lives rich in stories. I just wasn't one of them. Having my son, and in turn, becoming a high school teacher, have been the greatest blessings of my life. They're the ones who taught me what love, compassion, and sacrifice really are. And in each piece I write, I'm writing a love letter to them. So really, I'm not a writer who teaches. I never have been. I'm a teacher who, because of these kids, happened to find her voice.

CS: I felt like many of the pieces had you considering the world from your different roles—daughter, granddaughter, wife, mother, teacher—and all these perspectives gave the book a kind of cohesiveness, almost like it was more a memoir than a collection of essays. Did this ever come to mind as you were putting the manuscript together?

JR: I think part of what creates the "unconventional" in the subtitle of the book is that all of these identities blur. We don't have to be constrained to little compartmentalized boxes. Society has blurred lines by putting greater expectations on everyone, so how can we possibly live inside such confinement? I was a daughter to my grandmother, a sister to my son, a student to strangers, a granddaughter to my professor, a mom, aunt, sister, counselor, social worker to my students—these roles blend because life has become exceedingly complicated... and these essays blend too. This was not at the forefront of my mind while writing it, but now, I see it. I think this whole beautiful and aggravating project of mine became a quest for an answer. *Who the hell am I?* And while I'm all of those identities, I know the real answer. I'm a teacher—a teacher who accidentally and begrudgingly fell in love with this frustrating job that I was supposed to have all along. A teacher who desperately wants to exist in a magical world of reliving the most beautiful and meaningful parts of life twice. But since she's not magic, she has to settle for writing about them instead.

CS: What's next?

JR: More of this journey, Curt. I'll teach until they peel me off the floor.

Curtis Smith's last novel, *The Magpie's Return*, was named one of Kirkus Review's best Indie Picks of 2020. His next novel, *The Lost and the Blind*, will be released in late spring 2023.

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GREAT BOOKS WEEKEND

AT RUTGERS UNIVERSITY INN & CONFERENCE CENTER

NOVEMBER 11-13, 2022

CONTEMPORARY CHARACTERS REVEALED:

The Country Husband, John Cheever
Revolutionary Road, Richard Yates
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, Edward Albee
The Transit of Venus, Shirley Hazzard

\$400 PER PERSON

DOUBLE OCCUPANCY,

\$500 FOR SINGLE OCCUPANCY
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FOR MORE INFO, CONTACT **JOHN DALTON @ 610.608.7711**
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Push to Publish

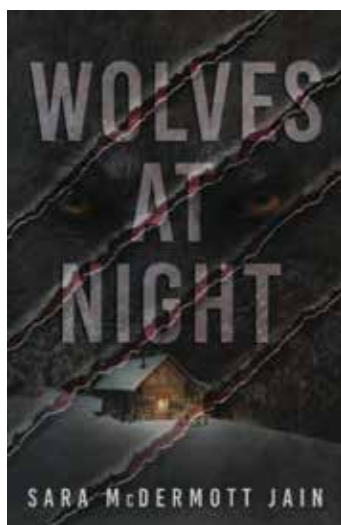
Saturday, October 8, 2022,
10am-5pm

Drexel University, Papadakis Integrated Sciences
Building, Philadelphia, PA
Keynote Speaker: **Camille Acker**

Pitchfest (online)

Sunday, October 9, 2022,
11am-3pm

For more information, visit
philadelphiastories.org/push-to-publish-2022



CAPSULE REVIEW

WOLVES AT NIGHT

by Sara McDermott

Review by Charlotte Edwards

To ensure the safety of her son and herself from the impending doom of the deadly timberwolves, young mother, Eleni, must fight against all odds to unite with their familial ties with her estranged husband, Ben Wilton. Sara McDermott in her novel "Wolves At Night" pairs intricate visualizations and intense character dialogue to amplify the story's protagonist. Eleni's is on turbulent quest in discovering and claiming her own fate in life while continuously forcing herself to combat her fears and exert her innate powers in preventing her seven-year-old son, Jacob, from being consumed by the forces of manipulation.

Read more online at philadelphiastories.org.

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