Philadelphia Stories

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

FALL / 2022 / FREE

FEATURING THE MARGUERITE MCGLINN PRIZE FOR FICTION WINNING STORIES

HERE IS AS GOOD A PLACE AS ANY ROBERT SORRELL BYNUM / **PORTRAIT OF A STRANGER** GINA ANGELONE

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

MARGUERITE MCGLINN WINNING STORIES

FEATURES

POETRY

*VISIT **PHILADELPHIASTORIES.ORG** TO READ POEMS FROM RAY GREENBLATT AND PAULA C. BRANCATO*

ART

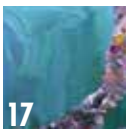
***Invasive Beauty 6* by Elynne Rosenfeld**
Elynne Rosenfeld holds an MFA in Painting from UMASS and a BA in Art from Rice University. She is a past president of Artists Equity and is currently curator of the gallery at Salus University. Her experiments with texture lend her mixed media canvases a micro-macro effect enjoyed in many shows and private collections. Most recently they were seen in a solo show at Boston Street Gallery. Visit elynnerosenfeld.com.

***Celestial Vortex 3* by Elynne Rosenfeld**

***Primeval* by Meg Boscov**
Meg Boscov's background in performing arts put her on an artistic journey that continues to focus on storytelling and on discovering the creative, emotional story in each image. Her award-winning photography has appeared in numerous exhibitions, including the Photo Review, the Shanti Arts Still Point Gallery, the Foley Gallery in NYC, the PhotoPlace in Middlebury, VT, and many Philadelphia-area galleries and art centers. Her book HAND-IN-HAND pairs her macro-photography with micro-essays. megboscovphotography.com.

***Sunlit Quarry 1* by Doug Tweddale**
An artist and educator, Doug Tweddale works primarily in pastels with a focus on plein air. He studied extensively with master painter Albert Handell and enjoys passing along the lineage of artistic knowledge to his students. Tweddale's works have garnered honors in many shows in the Philadelphia area as well as nationally. He is a signature member of the Pastel Society of America as well as the Pastel Society of the West Coast. dougtweddale.com.

***Fieldcut 2* by Margaret Watson**
Painter Margaret Watson moved from the Pacific Northwest five years ago and currently resides and works in New Hope, Pennsylvania. She holds a degree in art and design and a medical degree. Since retiring from medicine, she has painted for twenty years. Her work is inspired by the landscape. Watson uses the formal relationships between color and mark to explore abstract and conceptual space. The artist is a member of MUSE Gallery, the oldest cooperative gallery in Philadelphia. mwatsonstudio.com.



***Ancient Wisdom* by Deborah Northey**
Deborah Northey lives in Chester County. A professional artist for twenty years, her work has appeared in many juried, group and invitational exhibitions. Northey serves as president of the Montgomery County Guild of Professional Artists. She writes, "Mother nature produces so many beautiful moments to capture- the beautiful views we see every day. We forget to look. Art helps us see." Visit debnorthey.com.

***Solitude* 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 artbyjimgreen.com.

***Growth* by Joseph Daniel Mcclozkey**
Joseph Daniel Mcclozkey is a contemporary artist based in Wayne, PA working primarily in acrylic on canvas. Each painting includes the use of a roman numeral language where every number represents a letter spelling words and sentences. Mcclozkey's work is associated with businesses, nonprofit organizations and private collections. Visit mcclozkey.com

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

Philadelphia Stories, founded in 2004, is a non-profit literary magazine that publishes the finest literary fiction, poetry, and art from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware and distributes free of charge to a wide demographic throughout the region. The mission of ***Philadelphia Stories*** is to cultivate a community of writers, artists, and readers in the Greater Philadelphia Area. ***Philadelphia Stories*** is a 501c3. To support ***Philadelphia Stories*** and the local arts, please visit **www.philadelphiastories.org** to become a member today!

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Letter From the Editor

Carla Spataro – Editorial Director, Philadelphia Stories & PS Books

Dear Members of the Philadelphia Stories Community,

Once again it is my pleasure to announce the winners of the McGlinn Fiction contest and to thank the McGlinn and Hansma families for their continued support of PS and the contest. In this issue you will see the first and second place stories, and an editor's choice. The third place story will be printed in the Winter issue.

This is what the contest judge, Camille Acker, had to say about the first place story by Robert Sorrell Bynum. "'Here Is As Good A Place As Any' deftly re-imagines apocalypse not just as the outer world collapsing, floods and abandoned highways, but also the inner, alcoholism, long-term relationships, and motherhood. The writer plays with form and language to create a beautifully strange and poignant world." And this is what she had to say about the second place winning story by Gina Angelone. "'Portrait of A Stranger' plunges face-first into the frustrated voice of a daughter navigating a distant, dysfunctional relationship with her father. The story is told with heart, ending on a loving note while still acknowledging how complicated love between a parent and child can be."

Trish Rodriguez (our fiction editor) and I chose the editor's choice story, by Holly Woodward. "'Tryst' is a daring and heartbreaking story of love and friendship during the devasting days of AIDS in the 1980s."

Philadelphia Stories has come a long way since our founding launch in September of 2004. Our budget and reach have grown over the years, and we've remained open to new ideas and modes of publication. At the core of everything we do is our mission, "… to cultivate a community of writers, artists, and readers in the Greater Philadelphia Area through publications, professional development, and promotion of area writers." I know that I speak for executive director, Christine Weiser, and the board of directors when I say thank you to all of you for your support over the years and congratulations to the winners of this year's contest.

- Carla Spataro, Editorial Director

Here is as Good a Place as Any

Robert Sorrell Bynum – First Place Contest Winner

ELIZA IS SITTING ON THE EDGE OF THE CITY, on a hill from which the lights, streaming east toward the river, would've been beautiful if there were any. She is sitting and remembering.

She is remembering Daniel at the wheel of a yellow sedan the night they decided to get married, driving ten miles an hour into a stop sign. She is remembering his eyes crinkling in surprise at the impact, his too tall head hitting the rearview mirror.

She is remembering saying to Daniel, You're drunk, even though she was too drunk to drive herself.

She is remembering Daniel replying, No, just high.

She is remembering Daniel getting out of the car and looking at the pole and then the car and then back at the pole, as if trying to figure out what happened.

She is remembering Daniel saying, You know, you're right. I did have a beer or two.

She is remembering thinking I know you did, Daniel. Three pilsners. I counted them carefully. Thinking for every one you had, I could have two, the sharp crack of your new can opening an allowance for me.

She is remembering holding a cold can of soda from the vending machine at the body shop against the red welt on his forehead as it slowly turned purple. Holding his hand and kissing him carefully on the eyebrow. Getting a headache in the waiting room from the smell of oil and junk food and paint and the white thrum of the fluorescent lights as she slowly became sober. The shop replacing the window and pounding out the dents in the bumper, only charging them for the window.

The mechanic saying, You're a cute couple. Too young to die being stupid.

Daniel saying later as they drove home, At what age is it okay to die being stupid?

She is remembering, later, meeting her sister Joan at the airport and taking her to a Mexican restaurant in South Philly where they could be alone for a whole hour, and she could have a margarita without feeling a tightening in her throat. The restaurant having Joan's name at the door because Joan made a reservation everywhere she went, giving Joan another opportunity to say how much she hated her name, her 1950s housewife, hairspray starlet, dad's secretary name.

Saying, What's up with you, Joan? Holding a chip in the salsa verde so long it turned limp.

Joan saying, What's up with everyone, Eliza. My boss is a prepper who steals creamer and salt packets and silverware from the kitchen for his undisclosed-location apocalypse shelter. I can't quit my job because there's no better one, and all I can say is I'm so glad to see my baby sister.

Eliza enjoying — although she was often worried that she looked too young — being the baby sister in this moment. The sister with possibility.

Joan giving Eliza a look when she declined a second margarita. Joan saying, Back at home already in your mind, aren't you? Imagining what Daniel and Jovie are up to, and what they'll eat for dinner? Be here, Eliza, be here.

But, really, feeling right there. Floating on the warm alcohol burn in her stomach and the feeling of control, the knowledge that she could turn the drinking on and off like a tap. Thinking, it's not that I'm addicted but that drinking the correct amount seems impossible. It was either nothing or as much as I could hold. Who wouldn't want the feeling of having a combustion engine inside your chest, the ability to run barefoot over glass and not feel a thing? But that night, riding the crest without tipping over.

She is remembering Daniel's parents saying go ahead, have children. If the world is ending, you might as well get the joy of watching someone grow up, of having someone to love so much that a piece of you is always thinking about them no matter where you are. She is remembering being struck by the phrase, A piece of you is always thinking about them no matter where you are.

She is remembering the day she found out she was pregnant. Telling Daniel, You have to stop drinking and smoking, fucking around with our lives. This is real; we're adults now. Not letting him see the panic, the desire to drink and drink until tasting oblivion but not quite reaching it. Wanting a barrier between her and that possibility.

Daniel saying, Our situations are the containers that shape our lives, as he carried six-packs and office boxes full of bourbon bottles to the curb.

Asking, What does that mean?

It means we'll figure it out.

Daniel labeling the boxes:

Free, please take!

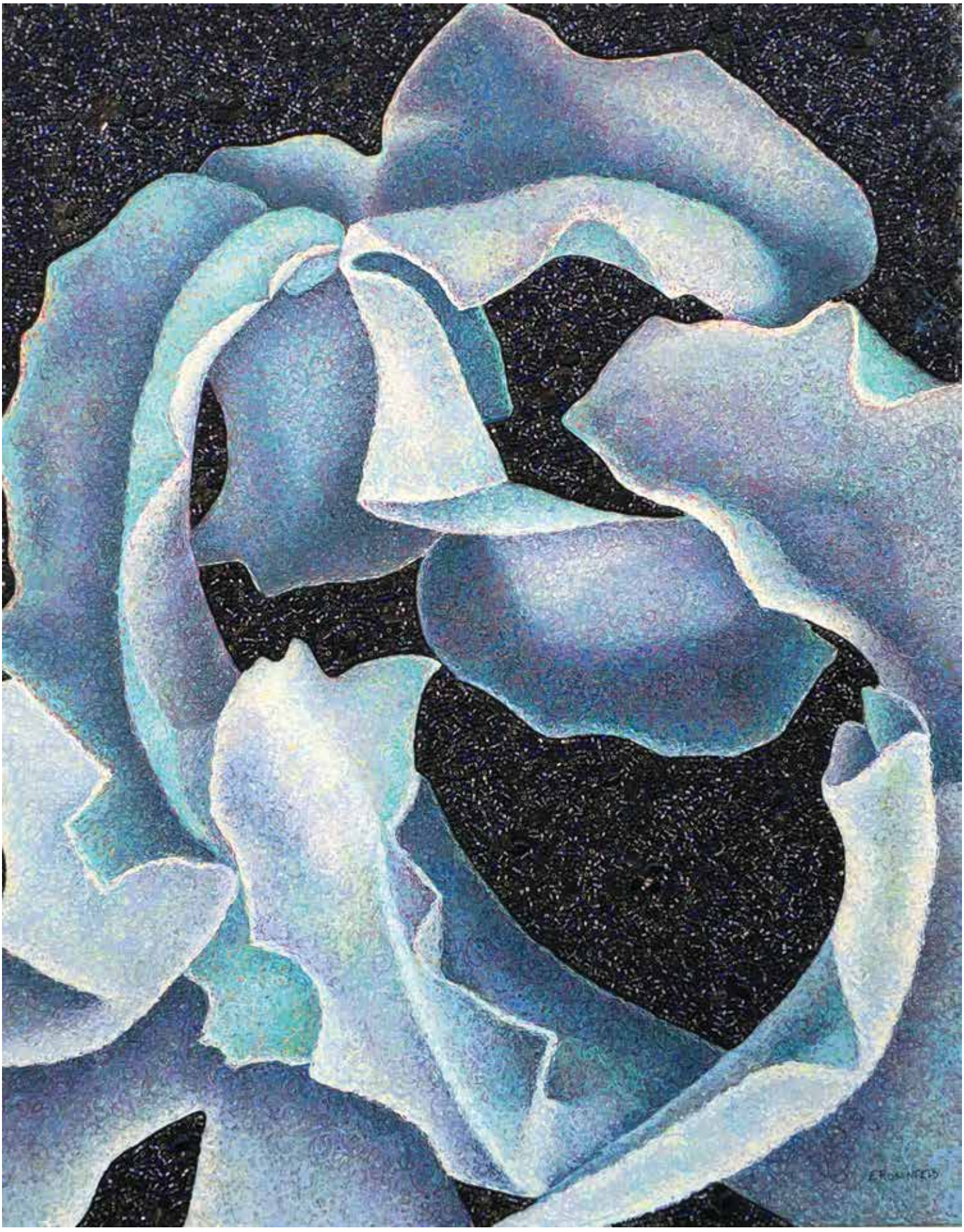
Good quality. We stopped drinking for our baby.

Save the Earth,

Your Neighbor

She is remembering Jovie crawling and then standing up and then walking.

Daniel saying, It scares me so much.



CELESTIAL VORTEX 3 by ELYNNE ROSENFELD

What? she'd asked.

Every moment I'm not watching her, and every moment I am watching her.

Saying, A piece of you is always thinking about her no matter where you are—

What?

What about your parents—never mind.

Laying at the bottom of the stairs in the middle of the night after uncounted glasses of bourbon. If she doesn't count, she can't be scared by the number. Thinking, no matter where you are. No matter where you are. No matter where you are.

Rain, rain, rain. Joan visiting for Jovie's fourth birthday. Storm drains clogged with leaves and garbage. Cars splashing water from the street onto their front porch.

Joan saying, This weather, this fucking weather. Can't let it decide what you do.

Setting up lunch at the rotting picnic table in their backyard covered with a giant umbrella. Shoes sinking into the porous ground.

Joan laughing, saying fuck it! and then slapping a hand over her mouth. Sorry, Eliza, sorry, Jovie! Jovie jumping with two feet to create the biggest splash. Four sets of shirts and pants bunched together over the shower rod like soggy, deflated humans.

The next day, hearing that the airport runways were covered in two feet of water. The lowest point in the city, practically below sea level. The Delaware could overtake it without even trying.

Joan saying, Who planned this? What idiots.

The airport delaying and delaying. Eliza coming home from work to find puzzles half-completed and dinner partly made, the sink full of dishes, Joan still in her pajamas. Jovie having so much fun she fell asleep in her clothes every night.

A week later, finding Joan in the kitchen, standing in the cool glow of the refrigerator. It was in the mid-90s and swampy, and their air conditioner was deemed non-essential by the city since there was no one under the age of 3 or over the age of 65 in the house.

Saying, You okay, Joanie?

Joan saying, Yes. The cool air just feels good on my skin.

Don't leave it open too long.

Okay. Hey, what if I just stayed here?

What?

What if I just stayed here. I like being here with you. Here is as good a place as any.

As good a place as any for what?

For everything. For being hot and going to the grocery store and playing with Jovie on the carpet.

Thinking, Is that what life is? How tedious it sounds.

Don't worry. The airports will reopen soon.

Wishing she had said to Joan, Then stay.

Three weeks later, hearing on the radio that the airports were opening. Leaving immediately from work, no explanation to her supervisor, who was sitting in one of the pleather waiting room chairs reading a novel. The internet had been down all week, no one had worked for days, but everyone who had kids still came in, hoping for a paycheck. And silence.

Taking Joan to the airport and staying with her for five hours as they got her tickets, checked her bag, waded through security. When they got near the front, saying, Here you are.

Joan saying, Yes, goodbye. Love you, too. Joan taking a folded envelope out of her pocket and handing it to Eliza. Joan saying, We'll meet there if we ever need it.

On the outside of the envelope, in Joan's loose handwriting, the address of their grandparents' house in the Poconos. On the inside, a set of keys.

Saying, But we don't even own it anymore.

The new owners live in the city and never go out there. They didn't even change the locks.

Kissing, hugging, Joan going off through the airport doors.

Bringing new boxes of liquor into the apartment. Arguing with Daniel in whispers. Saying, If the world is ending, I need something, give me this, give me this. I can control it.

Daniel saying, Fine, but I won't touch it, I can't touch it, I won't be your reason.

Saying, Fine. Fine. Fine. Fine. Fine.

Dosing out the bottles carefully. No more than a drink a day, evenings only. Weeks of tentative, joyous success before evenings became afternoons became lunch. One becoming two becoming four becoming six becoming eight.

Their yellow sedan driving into the stoop outside their apartment. Thinking who did that, was that me? How surprising it was. That was what she felt most, surprise.

The worst snowstorm in the city's history. Losing power and heat, snow so thick all they could see was white out the windows. Not even a scented candle for light. Going to the bathroom at three in the morning and finding Jovie in her coat and boots, standing on a stool to get a better look through the open window, her torso halfway out like she'd already started to fall. Grabbing Jovie by the shoulders and pulling her away from the window, then shutting it with a slam. Picking Jovie up and carrying her back to her room while she cried and kicked.

Saying, Never, ever, ever open those windows.

I wasn't going to go out; I just wanted to look! I was just looking!

Snot shining around Jovie's mouth and on her chin, dripping down onto her coat.

Putting Jovie in bed in her coat and boots, throwing the blankets over her, holding down her kicking legs. Thinking, I will love you no matter what you do, no matter where you are, but don't do that, stay safe for me, stay safe.

Staying there, like a weighted blanket, until Jovie fell asleep, and then finishing a bottle of gin and hoping her hands would stop shaking. Thinking, what if I'd been too drunk then? What if I saw her fall or accidentally pushed her out and forgot about it until the next morning? What if the next time the car hits her instead of the porch?

Remembering when Daniel grew out his beard, running his brush-bristle cheeks up and down her thighs. Daniel, Daniel, Daniel.

Receiving Joan's letter. The letter saying, *Come now. We're here already. I was having nightmares of bridges collapsing and being stuck a few states away from you. Jim is here. Just come out and see what you think, if it could work. Come now.* The postmark three weeks old.

She is remembering considering telling Daniel. Considering telling Daniel, except, except.

Thinking it's just an experiment.

Thinking he will say No, if he says anything.

Thinking he will probably not even say No—he has said hardly anything to me since I brought the boxes back—but if he did

say something, he will say It's best to be with people. He believes in the city, maybe in a way that only someone from a small town can. He believes in the power of the city to sustain itself, to keep going through sheer will, to sustain its permanence. He gets upset when bars and shops he's never been in close down. The city that's been here since before the declaration, before Washington was even born, he'd said once. There were always people everywhere in this country, she'd said. Just not white people. Right, he'd said. Fair.

Thinking maybe they will do better without me, without someone who can't be trusted to remember what she did the day before, who likes giving in and taking the drink, making a night out of it. Who prefers a string of disconnected days to long, steady hours preparing food and learning how to sew and making candles out of animal fat.

Thinking, but maybe I can become that person. Do I want that?

Writing, *A piece of me will always be thinking about her, no matter where I am*, on a notecard and putting it on the kitchen table. Thinking about changing it to say, "thinking about you," but deciding against it. Taking the boxes out the sidewalk. Writing,

Free!

Please take. Drink responsibly.

Mourning the earth, your neighbor.

Deciding to leave them the car, walking to the train station, and then walking three hours to the house. Joan welcoming her as if she'd just come back from a run, nodding towards her old room and saying, You'll be in there, of course. Where are Jovie and Daniel?

Saying, Not coming, I don't think. Maybe later. Not answering any other questions about Jovie.

She is remembering learning from Jim about foraging edible plants and tying knots in fishing line for hooks, braiding rope out of old plastic bags and long grass and bits of wool. Jim the boy scout, Jim the man's man she could never take seriously, Jim, the man who wanted to be a father so badly and will probably never be. Sifting flour and counting cans of vegetables. Stripping pine branches and bark off cut logs and leaving them to dry. To burn well, they must be dry.

The first week, then two weeks, then four weeks. Joan stopping her questions about Jovie, about Daniel, and in a way that being a blessing. The long hours of the sober day, the sober morning, the sober afternoon, the sober night. Quietness and stillness unlike any she could remember as if she'd slipped outside the whole world or misremembered that another world had ever existed.

She is remembering stacking wood, reading books about septic systems and well water, digging latrine trenches, boiling jars to sterilize them, ripping old bedding and clothes into bandages. Going on long walks to map the immediate perimeter and scout nearby houses.

Saying What if it's not enough, Joan?

Thinking what if, after all the work, the necessities of life carefully prepared, what she really missed was something that she could not find or make, like her friends or Jovie's school or her old neighborhood, its nineteenth-century rowhouses that had been built along the trolley lines, the gnarled trees that grew around poles and power lines.

A car pluming dust down the driveway. Thinking, Daniel and Jovie, Daniel and Jovie, Daniel and Jovie. Instead, a college friend of Joan's arriving with the dust. The friend telling stories of the city. A dangerous place. Full of crime and starved animals.

Asking the friend, How many people are still there?

Him responding, Who bothers to count?

What about the parks, the museums, the rivers?

Who cares about them? Buildings are rotting, and people are being killed by roof collapses, fires, lead paint, asbestos insulation, contaminated water, waist-deep floods. They started turning off the electricity after sunset to conserve resources. Some people still work during the day, and then at night there's nothing to do but sleep.

Asking, did you come from there?

The friend saying, No, I wouldn't go near that place. Haven't been in years.

Joan saying, We're safe up here. The floods can't reach us; the mountain air is clean, and the well still works.

Coming back from the toilet, seeing Joan and the friend in the forest, fucking desperately, almost cruelly. Hiding herself belly down in the thick forest loam, spongy and sharp as an old mattress, unable to look away. Joan holding a pine tree in her hands, completely naked. Joan's skin covered in red splotches. Wanting to move, to close her eyes, but being unable to translate that desire from brain to muscles. She does not know anymore where her life ends, and the lives of others start around her. And there is something fascinating about their bodies, about their sounds. They are not like the animals that live in the forest; they are loud and obtrusive, their skin and clothes cut like neon through the carefully laced background of green-yellow leaves, mottled trunks, fermenting forest soup. And in the underbrush, Eliza, like a deer, spending so much time alone has made her timid, rooted in place by the sound of human footsteps. Thinking where is the line, how do animals know when to stay still and when to run?

A knife slip while chopping root vegetables just to see. Just to test that she's still here. Seeing the slit in her hand slowly unfurl before the blood wells. Silly. Two weeks later, scraping along the jagged rocks by the lake. A week after that thrusting her hand into boiling water. Thinking maybe it is better if I'd seen what happened in the city. Thinking maybe I'd rather be dead in the city than safe in the mountains. Thinking, two years. God, how could it have been two years?

It was not the thought of any one person that compelled her to wake, to slip a children's mountain bike out of the shed, to pack the extra inner tubes in her backpack even though she was not sure they were the right size. It was simply the feeling that she was floating away from the rest of the world, from Daniel and Jovie and even Joan and Jim, from the mountains and the trees and the small, two-bedroom cabin. She was losing clarity. Her mood was unpredictable; she rarely knew what day of the week it was. The feeling of boundaries was gone, between her and her environment, between thoughts that were reasonable and those that were dangerous, between missing Jovie and Daniel and remembering why she had come in the first place. She felt like something left too long in water, on the border of dissolving.

She was worried about having enough to drink and eat, about getting tired and not being able to finish in one day, about being attacked. But mostly about something going wrong with the bike and being stuck a hundred miles away from the city. When she left, she knew she could not go back.

Riding the bike was life-giving. The air was cool and calm,

PRIMEVAL by MEG BOSCOV

and it made a sound when it whizzed around her head that she'd forgotten about. It lapped at her ears. For so long, the sounds she'd known were animal or human. But these sounds, the wind and mechanical whirr, these reminded her of the old world. Speed. Machinery on pavement. Early morning city streets slick with rain. She almost smelled coffee and plastic trash bags, car exhaust and dog urine.

She knew the highways were her best chance. Flat and straight, and hopefully not too potholed. Much better than cycling through back roads, damaging the bike, and getting lost. It took all day, with only a few breaks to eat and pee, but she didn't tire. By the time she was approaching the city, it was getting dark.

And now she is on the hill with her bike, sitting and remembering and deciding. Deciding what to say to Daniel if she goes back to their old apartment and he's still there. What do you say to someone who you've betrayed like that?

She walks east into the city, rolling the bike along with her. She's unfamiliar with approaching from this direction, through Cobbs Creek Park at the west end of the city and onto Baltimore Avenue. She expected chaos or silence. Blackened buildings, or perhaps cult signs painted onto walls. She expected fences and death, emptiness and hungry stray dogs. She didn't expect sweet night air, the droning whine of cicadas. Murmurs of conversations and shouts, live music. She thinks, People are spread out here, all the way to the river's dark edge and over that to the Delaware and over that to the sea. The city feels unbelievably large, each block a little universe. She passes friends and couples walking, people walking alone. A few bicycles click down the middle of the street, moving slowly to navigate the cratered asphalt, the protruding metal of the trolley tracks, straight and taught as guitar strings. She is used to this darkness. It is the darkness of the country, the sticky, tangible darkness that your eyes can turn to a navigable gray-blue if you stay in it long enough. A darkness clear enough for moonlight to cut through and guide your feet. Usually Eliza would walk quickly down a dark street like this, listening for footsteps behind her. But she has the bike, she can always ride away. She is slowed by the sounds, the sensation, immersed in it like liquid, that there are thousands of other people around her.

She is thinking, what if they've moved; what if Daniel is in love with someone else? Thinking, I don't care, I came back for Jovie and Daniel and even our neighbors, in whatever way I can have them.

She is walking to the front door of the apartment with a plan. A plan to say, No matter where I was, a piece of me was always thinking of you. The two of you. Always, always. But thinking that was not, is not, enough.

Daniel opening the door.

Robert Sorrell Bynum is a bi short story writer who grew up in the Midwest but became an adult in Philadelphia. In the city, he was a member of the Kelly Writers House Writers Workshop for 5 years where he first wrote and workshopped his Marguerite McGlinn Prize story "Here is as Good a Place as Any." His nonfiction, journalism, and book reviews have been published in the South Side Weekly, Mosaic: Art and Literary Journal, and Philly lit mag The Cleaver. Robert pushes the boundaries of realism in his fiction while still being deeply engaged in the dynamics, nuances, and politics of the present. He is currently pursuing an MFA in fiction at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where he lives with his partner, Elizabeth.

Baby Long Legs

Poem by Dina Folgia

I mourn two feet of hair so I arrange ragweed
in a halo until I start sneezing. Sometimes I call
myself Bulb Queen, sovereign burr-catcher,
playing house in the phlox like a big girl.
Sunlight arrives on Earth at 100 decibels
but still slips through spring leaves silent.
There's a chalk line around a corpse
in my yard that still hasn't been identified.
There's a seed pod too, hanging from a sprout
and it's probably better I lost sight of it
or I might have wanted to pluck it again.
Would you believe me if I told you that
daddy long legs aren't spiders? Don't ask
me what they are because I might say aphids,
round in the center, wreathed in knees, could
spin in a circle without moving their head.
If I thought I could stand the tickling I would
smear my scalp opilionid, something finally
living, ouroboros as head eating leg eating leg
eating leg. I don't need to be a spider. Anything
can throw a web even without silk glands, even
if tripping over joints and wayward grasses seems
like the only thing left to do. I could cocoon
if I wanted. I could suck the water from my chest
until I'm nothing but leg. I could eat my skin,
huskicide, dry like irises once bulbous, now
crisped in the shape of paper-thin wings,
translucent. I could dehydrate, too.

Dina Folgia is an MFA candidate at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her work, which has been nominated for Best of the Net and the AWP Intro Journals Project, has appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *Dunes Review*, *Stonecoast Review*, *Sidereal Magazine*, *Kissing Dynamite Poetry*, and others. She is a poetry reader for *Blackbird* and *Storm Cellar*. Keep up with her work at https://dinafolgia.com/

Portrait of a Stranger

Gina Angelone – Second Place Contest Winner

Philadelphia, January 4, 1992

I could paint his face from memory. Crinkled and putty-colored and as aggravated as a tub of stucco. Right now, he's grimacing at the newspaper, holding the front page a foot from his scowl and craning his neck all the way back like whatever he's reading smells worse than the truth. He takes zero notice as I pull up in front of the building. The doorman tells him I'm here. Waiting. I nudge a few cans of turpentine under the seat and pick a dried flake of magnesium-yellow paint off the steering wheel. He walks over to the passenger side and signals for me to roll down the window. Bored circles in the air. Like he's swinging a noisemaker with nothing at all pleasant to announce. His laser-blue eyes scan me over like a high-tech security device. I know what he sees.

He shifts his little black reading glasses up the bridge of his nose and sniffs. "We'll take my car." Then he backs away, waving me on with the paper. No hello, no smile, just a cue to move forward. With caution.

I wish I had my own daily rag to brandish, but I don't. From the rearview mirror, I see him checking his watch.

"Traffic?" His eyes still on the time.

"There was tunnel congestion and then some idiot—"

"—Let's just go. I don't wanna be late."

The keys to his pale yellow Caddy land in my fist. I straighten a kink in my spine and get in. The air is old, fraught with evidence of cigarette butts and stale cherry Life Savers. I move up the driver's seat and adjust the mirrors.

"Don't forget to put those back the way you found them. It always screws me up whenever you or your mother drive this car."

"We can go in mine."

"No." He stops himself from any further comment. There are so few things he resists saying that I take his reserve as kindness.

The light turns red, and I hit the brake pedal. The Caddy jerks to a stop.

He tenses up against the worn leather.

"Easy on your old man, little girl. Easy." The weak scaffolding of his faded plaid jacket barely props him up anymore. One false move and something might shake loose from his rafters—his Sunday jacket deconstructing. "You're already grinning and you haven't won anything yet."

"I guess I'm just looking forward to getting there. Has it changed much?"

He belches softly and stares out at the road. "Everything changes, little girl. Everything. Believe me."

He's probably right. There was a time when he was able to smile back.

We arrive at the racetrack and make our way to the upper circle of the Philly Park clubhouse, a custom he's kept from the days when even Mom enjoyed it here. She preferred not rubbing elbows with the riffraff and felt the dining room was a more sophisticated experience. A penguin-ed waiter escorts us over to a table where ice water and leatherette menus mark our places.

I don't consult the menu; I know exactly what I want. "I'll have the Caesar, please."

The server's barbed eyebrows spike at my good choice.

"And gimme a cup of black coffee, would ya? I'll get some food later." The menu gets pushed back toward our tuxedoed friend as the coffee is poured.

Coffee is the primer, a first coat before all the fiery layers of whiskey go down. He won't get any food later. He dumps half the cream in his cup, his spoon clanging as if calling for order in all the cloudiness. One sip and he summons the waiter again.

"You call this coffee? Ballentine's straight up, please."

A raw egg cracks into the wooden bowl on top of the cart and my thoughts converge on all the things about to be tossed into the air in front of me. The big, creamy Caesar arrives like a long-awaited rendezvous, but I keep my mouth shut, not wanting to spoil an old hunger.

"Here. Put this on the Tunisian trainer, would ya?" He pulls two hundred-dollar bills out of his front jacket pocket, then a third.

I take the money from his hand, brushing the frayed edges of his sleeves, limp tracks of thread circling his wrist. He always dressed impeccably, but these days the slickness and preening are missing.

"What's the horse's name?" I get up to place the bet, still troubled by his cuffs.

He hijacks a minute before answering me, filling the space with ploys of status and guessing games. The more presumptuous his mood, the longer it takes him to respond as if he's only stating the obvious. Then he tilts his drugstore specs toward the tip of his bloated nose. "Bet the one with the Tunisian trainer."

I skim through the racing form and try to identify anything

SUNLIT QUARRY I by DOUG TWEDDALE

particularly North African in the jumble of rare names and tricky statistics. I think he gets a kick out of watching me scramble.

"I don't know which one you're talking about, and all bets have to be posted in five minutes. So just tell me the name of the horse, please."

"And this is my brightest kid...." He burps in mild disgust.

I storm off with my order—but not to the ticket window. Instead, I make my way to the ladies' room, identified by a horse head with *Mares* written underneath, and proceed toward the stalls. Three hundred dollars. All that money thrown away on a horse race. Three bills delivered like a direct threat, each zero poking fun at my struggle to make the rent. Who gives a damn about Tunisian trainers? I've got three hundred dollars and two minutes before posting. Screw it.

A bony woman edges her way past me, tucking her tickets into a flesh-colored purse. I shove my bills to the bottom of my pocket, splash myself with cool water from the dingy sink and check my reflection in the mirror. Those are his brooding eyes, half-closed as if scrutinizing some lost detail. The same reckless lips and protruding chin too. It's his face, all right—the one that keeps showing up in my self-portraits—the ones I never finish because of the way they stare back.

He's holding court at the table, his gaze fixed on the racing form, his drink severely diminished. I won't put up with any more punishing laser scans or pop quizzes on Arabian horsemen. I take a seat and shoot him a disapproving look—one I've appropriated from Mom—then emphasize my choice of beverage to the passing waiter.

"Hot coffee, please."

"And another whiskey for her old man," Dad counters.

"*And they're off!*" A piercing voice pipes in over the loudspeakers. Ten thoroughbreds speed out of the gate, kicking up a great wake of mud around each miniature man in bright-colored clothing. It's de Kooning through a kaleidoscope; hues and forms ricochet until I can't make out anything, just a vast, splashy tableau stretching in front of me.

Trixie Dipper, Day's a-Waitin,' Captain of My Heart, Tam Tam, Zeus' Fire, Heaven's Door. A breathless string of non-sequiturs flies from the announcer at monotonous hyper-speed. Names and numbers and necks and furlongs.

"…Deep in the stretch…coming round the clubhouse turn and heading for home…and it's number two, Tam Tam, by a nose!"

I snap out of my Abstract Impressionist reverie. "Damnit. I thought Day's a-Waitin' had it pegged."

"Day's a-Waitin'? Did you say Day's a-Waitin'?" His program slaps the table. "You put my three hundred bucks on that piece-a-shit horse after I *expressly* told you who'd win?"

"Sorry, Dad, but you never actually said—"

"—My dear, could you tell me who the trainer is for Tam Tam?" He aims his crossword pen at the racing form, tapping it twice. *Tap tap*. I follow his pointer and read the small print next to the horse's name: *Azzedine Bahbar.*

"Sounds rather Tunisian, don't you think?" He dismissively waves me off before hoisting his glasses back into position and studying the next race.

I spend the next few races devoid of interest, searching here and there for horses with names I can relate to: Delusion's Child or Daughter 'till the Death. But all I find are names like Warrior King and Shifty Dancer. It's not a good day for the dark horse.

He collects money and whiskey in equal turns, madly scribbling notes in the margins of the form. There's a pattern in how he picks his runners: He only bets the horses with a history of excuses. So if a horse ran fourth in its previous race, but the jockey wasn't whipping the horse's left side, then that's reason enough for the horse to have lost. But whipped correctly, that same horse could win, in which case, he'll bet on him. Or if the horse lost because it rained, then he'd probably do better with no mud. A sunny day could make a difference. He mutters things like, "How the hell could the horse win with *that* rider? Today, he's got his usual boy." And the margins get filled with cryptic calculations: *rain + sub rider, ran 2nd, cold = trot.* There's always a possibility a runner can win, given a second chance. He's betting the excuses all the time.

I'd like to ask him why as I poke at my soggy Caesar.

After each losing race, he rips up the ticket and pitches it in the air. It's something I've seen him do a thousand times. Once when I was a kid, after a big win, he drove to my school, dug deep into his golf pants and sprinkled dollar bills on the blacktop. Then he threw back his head and cackled like some rich, crazed Pied Piper while money and children piled up around him. Maybe it was the scrambling that made him happy. But his showboating pissed off the principal. Dad claimed it was a lesson about survival, about groveling around on your hands and knees while some jerk offers you alms. He insisted that most kids would be doing that for the rest of their lives; they just didn't know it yet. They think the jerk is a nice guy. In the end, he said, survival was the only real lesson to learn.

He slugs back his fifth whiskey as the clubhouse waiter places a silver ice bucket on the table, and the maître d' ceremoniously waddles over to greet us. This is a man with no formal education, a man who knows how to shake hands with the left or the right, to speak enough English to charm the ladies, enough proper Italian to satisfy the men, and plenty of unspoken words for *don't worry, you'll get the best table in the house.*

"Signor Vittori, piacere verderle. A pleasure to see you." His labored speech is disrupted by a generous launch of spittle.

Dad plunks his drink down and acknowledges the familiar, dribbling gentleman. *"Rafael, come sta?"*

"Bene, bene, e questa bella ragazza? She must be your daughter."

"Si, la figlia, Mia."

I can never tell if he means "*my* daughter" or "the daughter, *Mia*." I assume it's the latter because of the extra emphasis, and for that reason, I feel dispossessed whenever he says it.

"Well, she has your face, Rex. You can't mistake that. But does she have your smarts too, eh?" Another superficial volley between men when in the company of a female.

Dad rotates toward his stubby compatriot as the air around him marinades in smoke and whiskey. "My smarts? You wanna know if she's got *my* smarts? My kids would be lucky if they got my cobwebs."

The shock of having provoked an insult seizes the jovial maître d' who looks at me with centuries of shame painted in pushpin Calabrese eyes.

I will not give my father the satisfaction of a score. "If DNA is a bunch of random strands that develop in dim, dusty spaces, then I'll bet we got both his smarts and his cobwebs." I inch my empty coffee cup forward, indicating a refill.

FIELDCUT 2 by MARGARET WATSON

The maître d' exhales, settling uneasily back into his charm. Dad nods almost imperceptibly, probably thinking, *"The kid doesn't take my shit."*

I feel vindicated and flick a pitted black olive across the table to celebrate.

The line is suddenly clear: Where I, this filly, have been sired, where I get my swift comebacks, my defensive instincts, my breeding. My twenty-eight years of lineage are not printed up in a long rectangular form with block type but are a simple read nonetheless. Grandfather: a volatile workhorse; grandmother: a strong broodmare; father: hasty runner, inconsistent (list of excuses to follow); mother: easy-rider. Vittori, Altieri, Sarono. Breeding is never just an equation of two, but of many, tracing the bloodlines all the way back. A horse's greatness depends on speed and endurance, its size and the distance it can cover while moving its fastest. The sum total of all of the strengths and handicaps add up to a stakes-winning family or not. And just like the racehorse, it seems our chances in life are tied to our own unique genealogy.

Dad remains buried in his racing form like a conjurer adrift in spells. His eyes are heavy with alchemy, turning them into hard beads of cobalt like he sees something no one else can. Then he whispers, "The grandson of Watusi. Well, I'll be damned."

"Watusi?"

"Now, that was an unbelievable horse. Brought over by a wealthy pineapple grower from Malaysia. Man, that stallion could run. They sired him good, I'll bet." He sets down the form and narrows his stare. "You and Ricky used to like him. You'd go see him over in his stall. But you wouldn't remember Watusi…"

I say nothing. A father who has no idea what I like for breakfast, which painters I emulate, what my dead-end job is all about, or why I leave Manhattan to spend my Saturday in Philly with him. But he knows the horse I bet when I was thirteen.

Of course, I remember Watusi. I can never forget him or the mare in heat that was being held for him in the breeding shed. Before the horses got near each other, a short fat man with a washcloth and solvent cleaned their genitals while a group of people clustered around to observe. A bald guy went up front to film the whole thing. Ricky and I followed.

Let's hope we get another champ! That's what the breeder said when he let Watusi in the stall with the mare. The stallion was colossal in his state of excitement. Ricky was too embarrassed to watch. I couldn't peel my eyes away. Watusi mounted the mare, pulling himself up with his teeth and hooves. A massive black leather cape protected her coat from the sexual mauling. The guy with the camera looked like he was shooting a porno. When it was over, he wiped the sweat from his shiny head and subtly held the camera in front of his crotch to cover any sign of arousal. All the men were probably feeling the same, thinking about whom they'd like to do that to and when, comparing their own prowess to that of the noble steed.

They took a sample of the stallion's sperm to test his fertility and better gauge the probability for real success, as opposed to a quickie in the shed. The breeder made sure he left with the videotape as proof of his professional matchmaking. Everyone was in a congratulatory mood when the job was finished. They were all picturing the finest outcome—another Secretariat or War Admiral—and pretending it was all so civilized. As if successful breeding comes from nothing more than a series of staged rapes and arranged marriages.

It shook me to the core. I knew something irreversible had just happened, and I could never erase it from my mind. It would haunt me every time I'd encounter a horse, or a big man, or a defenseless woman or a black cape or large teeth. It would plague my sleep. And all these years later, I thought I would not be vexed by disturbing images of dominating stallions and captive mares and that I wouldn't fall prey to my father's games. But here I am all over again. A willing victim.

"I remember Watusi."

"That stallion was a king, believe me. A king! Now let's see what his grandson is up to.…"

Races eight, nine, and ten, I play only the favorites.

He examines my choice for the eleventh and final race and rolls his eyes. "Samothrace?"

"Yup."

"Another favorite?"

"Uh-huh."

"Excuse your old man for asking, but didn't you pick chalks for the past three races and lose them all?"

"That's right. All the favorites lost."

"Your father may not know much, but he *do* know horses. Now, let me ask you: Do you know why the favorites don't win?"

I exaggerate my exhaustion.

"I'll tell you why. Because if the favorites won all the time, then there'd be nothin' but white people. Think about that." He smacks his lips to suck at the souvenir of whiskey and slams five-hundred dollars on the table with emphatic, end-of-lesson punctuation.

"Now go and play the number-two horse for your father. I'm gonna risk it all, little girl, on the least favorite of all: the darkest dark horse, Nevermore." His voice gets low and literary when he says it.

The knot in my stomach slips downward as I use my last bit of strength to walk away from the table with the remaining stack of bills.

"Nevermore," I hear myself say to the cashier as she takes my bet. Nevermore to win. Nevermore to place. Nevermore to show. There it is: five-hundred dollars on the longshot. I feel a sudden pang of sympathy with the horse, knowing there's always someone on his back, riding him, leading him on, forcing him round and round, even when it's certain he'll lose. Solidarity is my only consolation as I slide the money under the metal gate.

The eleventh race comes and goes. Dad jabs out his cigarette with a decisive party's-over twist.

"You know, I went to the track last week and bet a horse in the eleventh called Writer's Daughter. Had terrible odds. The worst. Guess what? It won. Can you believe that? Writer's Daughter. It was just a hunch." He tries to sound enthused, but habit makes him cough instead.

I say nothing.

"You wouldn't understand.…"

I understand. The writer, the one he dreamed of being. And me. He was betting on us. I get it.

An awful rattle rises in him, which I pretend not to notice. As he bends over, spitting yellow globs into his napkin, I can only think about one thing: The Taiwanese businessman who came for dinner. He tried to impress Dad by drinking too much wine and devouring Mom's meal. But he turned green after the sau-

sage and peppers. He opened his jacket and regurgitated the antipasto in the inside pocket, then kept on talking as if nothing had occurred. It was masterful. Dad sat there respectfully conversing and continued to eat, mopping up the lumpy red sauce with his bread. Mom panicked. Ricky did imitations. And I learned something useful: Almost anything can be ignored if you try hard enough.

Dad coughs for the hundredth time, amassing sour contents in the table linen. I continue to disregard it, but his skewering blue eyes knock me off guard. They leave me with the terror that I might not always have them around. He lights up yet another Marlboro in front of them.

"Why can't you stop?"

A protracted draw on his cigarette. "What difference does it make?"

"Could be life or death."

He pats at the corners of his mouth, coaxing the words to come out dryly, carefully. "You know, there are a lot of scared people in the world flapping around like fish, hoping that they won't get hooked—hooked on smokes, hooked on booze, hooked on horses. And the ones that get caught think they'll get released. They think they can beat the odds and make it. Make what? I look around, and I don't see any winners. All I see are gutless corpses. So don't try and sell me on life, little girl."

"But what else is there?"

"There's sacrifice. Like the saints and martyrs and Jesus. Just consider *His* actions. There he was, washing the feet of his apostles before his own crucifixion. That's like going to the racetrack broke and paying for everyone else's debts."

"Well, Dad, Jesus must have had a hunch of his own...."

A lengthy silence. Furlongs of stifled reflection. But now he's the one scrambling. He discards the racing form with all its tiny markings and smooths back a few pewter strands on top of his thinning crown. The restlessness drains out of him; the bluster dies down. What's left is unraveling.

It's time to forget all desires and disappointments, steady myself against the musty headrest of his pale yellow Cadillac and drive him safely back home.

A green Chevy swerves in front of us. The guy is leaning on the horn and yelling something nasty. Dad croaks *"Va fa'n culo"* from a half-sleep. My hero.

I turn on the radio and change lanes. The first bare notes of music drift through the speakers. A searing soprano elevates the score like a flock of birds lifting off a wire. He likes opera. The Italians mostly: Verdi, Puccini. I don't think he gives the Germans a second thought. Not since World War II. His favorite singer was always Lanza. He'd belt out imitations of Canio in *I Pagliacci*.

I slam on the brakes, nearly missing the exit. The jolt wakes up my passenger, who crows "*Nevermore...*" under acid breath. He lost the big race and is going home a bit broker than he was when we left. But he's used to that.

I pull into the Lincoln Society Tower with its burgundy and gold sign in lavishly flowing script like a giant wine label. The sign is supposed to make the people living here believe they've made a tasteful choice in choosing to inhabit a concrete high-rise off Route 1. Dad settles into the dependability of his plaid blazer as the engine goes off and the mirror and the seat are adjusted to their original positions.

Searching out my own car keys, I come across the crisp three hundred-dollar bills in my pocket and feel the burden of my keep. "Listen, Dad; you remember the first race? The one with that Tunisian trainer?"

"You mean Azzedine Bahbar?"

"Yeah, well, I didn't put your money on Day's a-Waitin'. I didn't put your money on any horse." I take the bills and press them into his palm.

He chuckles at the stowed-away cash and shakes his head. Then he plucks two tickets from his jacket. Tam Tam, the winner of the first race, is printed on both. "I bet the horse myself. Just in case. Besides, I wanted you to go home with a little something."

I feel more guilt than gratitude as he folds the bills back into my hand. My own second chance. "I'll put it toward art supplies. I'm working on a new portrait."

"Any good?"

"It's turning out okay."

"I'll bet it is."

As he turns toward the light of the building, I take in the jagged angles of his profile, the embattled trenches that have burrowed into his brow, and I sense, perhaps for the very first time, that I look nothing like him.

"Thanks for taking your old man to the track." He waves his newspaper, clearing me for departure. Then a stolen look back.

I say goodbye, noticing the place where his scowl resides, a small smile taking hold. His first of the day.

Born and raised in Philadelphia, Gina Angelone became a global citizen at age seventeen and has lived, worked, and traveled the world as a film director, producer, and writer. Gina's TV work is the recipient of two **Emmy** awards and multiple nominations. Her documentaries have garnered top festival prizes and notable grants from the **NEA**, **Philadelphia Foundation**, **William Penn Foundation**, **Graham Foundation**, **New York Women in Film**, **Speranza Foundation**, and the **American Academy of Arts & Letters**, among others. Credits include founding Producer of **Bravo's** "Inside the Actors Studio," Writer/Director of the original series, "Defining Beauty" (**Disney**), and Writer/Producer/Director of feature documentaries "Connections" (**PBS**), "René & I," (**NBC**), "It's Better to Jump," (theatrical release). In addition to her filmmaking and screenwriting, Gina is a published author whose cinematic viewpoint informs much of her fiction. After decades living in NYC and LA, Gina has happily returned to her hometown of Philadelphia.

My Father and His Sky

Poem by Dina Folgia

Lead foot in a Lincoln, nothing stops an object
so completely in motion.

My father has seen cornfields bigger than
the sheeted sea of my bed,

vast as ever, vaster without him.

He used to sit on the edge of my bed
and talk about the sky.

He'd throw constellations like pop-flies
through the windows,

stipple clouds with his swollen hands.

Children listen to sky stories as long
as they end in sunrises.

I didn't beg the curtain of dawn from
his grinning mouth—

I wanted something newer than mornings.

My father isn't new anymore but his car is,
black and big-rimmed.

He rattles a century of coins across
Pennsylvania,

shaking them loose every mile.

I watch him in the curve of the Earth now,
a flickering corona.

He is the reaching horizon or someone
reaching for the horizon,

loosed by the wind and a rest-stop coffee.

I think he might still sing with the radio
like the leather seat is me.

I think he hears the hills sing their mappings
in return, their topography,

the echo of blue dreams in the brush.

Men can fly in the open like this,
wingtips splayed.

They tell as many stories of the sky
as the hot asphalt

is willing to listen to.

Dina Folgia is an MFA candidate at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her work, which has been nominated for Best of the Net and the AWP Intro Journals Project, has appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *Dunes Review*, *Stonecoast Review*, *Sidereal Magazine*, *Kissing Dynamite Poetry*, and others. She is a poetry reader for *Blackbird* and *Storm Cellar*. Keep up with her work at https://dinafolgia.com/

Tryst

Holly Woodward – Editor's Choice

NYC, Winter 1985

I thrashed against the pillows, fist twisted into the linen, leg braced on a column of my canopy bed when my telephone rang. I kicked the satin coverlet over the phone to muffle it and plunged back into the fantasy of the hunk on a deserted island. On the cruise, I'd rebuffed him as beneath me, but now we were stranded together. I brought him a lobster; he dropped it. Night after night, I stupidly handed him rope with which he tied me to a palm tree. His betrayal flinted my anger. I scratched his neck and licked the blood, then savored the metallic aftertaste. His bronze chest gleamed, clean-shaven despite the fact that we were shipwrecked.

Giancarlo Giannini was about to fuck me when my answering machine clicked on.

"Stop masturbating and pick up," Max said.

How did he know that? I stayed in bed. Let him talk to the tape.

"Are you still fantasizing about getting hammered by that hunchback blacksmith?"

I wanted to wring Max's neck. I should have never told him that twisted fantasy; he mocked it, so he'd ruined it.

"Cause I realized he's the ancient—" Max coughed. "Hold on. I'll call back."

"Vulcan," I finished his sentence. Never thought of that. I buried my head in Mother's satin pillow and tried to recapture the torrid scene, but the rope on my wrists slackened—did I have to instruct the shipwrecked lunk in proper nautical knots? He'd lost interest—even my imaginary lovers didn't like me. In a coup de grace, the lobster I wanted more than the man crawled toward the surf, dragging its large claw. My Swept Away daydream swept away.

The phone rang again, and Max spoke to the machine. "EZ, I need you. Please, I have nobody else."

"Whose fault is that?" I asked the answering machine.

"I only get one call."

I talked though he couldn't hear me. "Are you in prison?"

"I'm in Saint Vincent's Hospital, and the nurses are killing me, which is completely unnecessary. I'm dying as fast as I can."

I laughed. Max was a complete hypochondriac; he worked himself into hysterics, prognosticating the direst illness whenever he was constipated, calling me at seven in the morning to discuss the problem. But when he really fell ill, he refused to get help. I'd told him to get that cough checked out; it had sounded bad last time we met, the night he dumped me, two months back. It was freezing this February. He needed to stop cruising on the windy piers off Christopher Street at night. Let the doctors treat him. If I visit, he'll only demand that I spring him.

The answering machine tape ran out. Max rang a third time. I struggled to my elbow and brushed the hair stuck to my lips.

"Dear Elizabeth, please pick up. I don't have a phone, and if they catch me using this one, I won't be able to call again."

I reached down and answered. "You win."

"Thank you. You are my true friend. I can't say what I want on the phone; I need to see you. I wheeled my bed into someone's room to use their line, but there will be hell if the nurses catch me contaminating the receiver."

"Can I call someone for you?"

"No. It's like Moscow in the Thirties. People vanish in the night."

"Let's not get dramatic." I looked out my window across the park and the tumbledown conservancy gardens.

"Listen, you have to help me check out. I can't afford this."

"You don't have insurance?"

"Of course not. Who can get insurance? Anyway, it's no use. Chekhov said doctors are like lawyers, except lawyers just take your money, while doctors take the money and kill you."

"You have to submit to their regime—"

"I did. They keep adding medicines to counter the side effects of the last dose. Chekhov said if many remedies are suggested, you can be sure there is no cure."

"Enough Chekhov."

"He was my pediatrician. Mom gave me his stories when I fell sick."

"Chekhov died young."

"Could you come soon?"

The phone rang again as soon as I dropped the receiver. The real estate agent left a message that she wanted to show Mom's apartment to people who were "dying for it."

I dressed and counted the money I'd saved from working. Three thousand. Not enough for rent and two months' deposit, broker's fee, and utilities, but I could split Max's rent. This was a good moment to spring the proposal, with him incapacitated. I'd have his flat to myself. I grinned at my conniving as I left Mother's house, crossed Fifth Avenue, and entered Central Park.

In the late afternoon light, I walked into my own shadow as I

SOLITUDE by JIM GREEN

crossed to the West Side. Above the tree line, the wilderness of Manhattan raised its prickly head. I rushed through the woods I'd gazed out at from my childhood room, nights, sure that wolves lurked on the great hill and watered at Harlem Meer by moonlight.

Last Valentine's Day, Max had taken me into this deserted corner of the park and given me a red velvet cloak "to warn the wolves." Lined in satin and edged in brocade, an extravagance he could ill afford on his Radio Shack salary. As he draped it over my shoulders, he shivered. "Virgins scare the wolf more than anything." As dusk fell, he built a fire by the lake. He roasted pomegranate-marinated shashlik, which he fed me; I nipped his fingers.

To that evening rendezvous I'd carried my grandmother's pistol—winter nights, police didn't patrol the park except in cars, their windows rolled up. Grandma had brought the gold-filigreed Remington by train from Denver; she'd tucked it under the pillow in her Plaza suite, and her new husband had said, "Darling, I don't think you need this in Manhattan." Times had changed. A mugger had shot Max's KGB friend on the meadow; the doctors at Bellevue had sewn him up.

Standing close to the fire for warmth, I held the revolver's pearl handle engraved with Oma's maiden initials. I grilled Max on irregular verbs. "Burn, burned burnt."

"Shoot, shotted, shut," he tried.

"Nyet."

Max baited me. "I slept with a Brazilian."

"You slut! How many is a Brazilian?" I hefted the empty gun at Max, who stood in the snow in his grey army coat. I drew a bead on his drop-dead face, but the gun could not touch the Siberian distance of his eyes. He had smuggled his beauty out of the Soviet Union into my world. The moment hovered, eerie, romantic as a duel in deep snow—except I alone had the pistol.

He flinched in my gun sight.

"Don't you trust me?"

"As far as I can throw Lenin's tomb."

I squinted down the barrel. Any minute now, he'd slip into the woods of the Ramble to squander his handsome looks on a stranger in the dark while I stomped the coals of our dwindling fire.

His eyes flashed. "I can see the tabloid cover. Little Red Riding Hood Kills Wolf."

I didn't want to kill him, I wanted to seduce him, but you can't tame a wolf with a gun.

This week, a cold snap had hit the city; I crossed the park swiftly. Over me, the branches encased in ice rubbed against each other with a grim sound like an animal chewing a limb caught in a trap.

I vowed to give up my grudge against Max as I crossed the path where, one afternoon, he'd noticed my limp. "Just a splinter," I'd said. I had kicked my empty bed, and a sliver had lodged in my big toe. I'd offered him a pocketknife. "Could you cut it out?" He had me sit on a park bench while he knelt. He'd worked at it, ignoring the knife I held, and then he'd sucked the wood from my foot. Passing that bench, I turned and walked backward. If only I could go back in time and unwind what went wrong. I tripped and turned forward. One can't unhurt someone. Can't unlove them, either.

Ice sheaths from the trees lay shattered on the sidewalk outside the park, glinting like broken bottlenecks in the streetlights. I rushed down the subway steps at Columbus Avenue. On the downtown subway platform, I watched the rats on the tracks. As the rats fled and the rails clattered, I thought of a joke to amuse Max: A casket walked into a bar, and the waiter said, "We don't serve dead people here." The casket pulled itself upright and said, "I'm not dead, just coffin."

The train downtown screeched to a halt. I studied the sign, blackened by graffiti, and guessed it said B. The R didn't stop here, except on occasions when the N/R line was diverted because of a body under the B or something. The car I boarded was empty except for a man whose swollen feet were bound with stained bandages. I scooped all the change in my pocket and poured it into his hands. The coins slipped between his fingers to the floor while I stared at his black palms. I glanced at my reflection in the subway pane above him: pallid, feral.

He looked up, mouth agape as if asking me to place a coin on his tongue so he could cough it up to pay Charon.

The train doors opened at my stop, and I stepped off. On a station bench, two figures intertwined under dark, heavy coats. Grotesque, insectish. I hurried past.

At a deli on Fourteenth Street, I brought white lilies, wrapped them in a tabloid, and headed for the hospital's jutting white edifice and jagged black gap, a steel grimace. I went to St. Vincent's old portico and, as I entered, wondered which room Dylan Thomas had died in.

The receptionist gave me Max's room number, and I went to the isolation ward, ignoring the signs on the doors. The acrid scent of disinfectant stung my nostrils. Gurneys lined the walls like railroad cars shunted to a sidetrack. On each cot lay a thin figure, asleep beneath blankets.

I asked an orderly as he passed, "Where are the H rooms?"

"Here. H is for hall."

"H-6?"

He gestured toward a torn bit of masking tape with 6 written on it, stuck to the wall over a bed. Yellow tape marked a small rectangle on the floor, a pretend room.

The thin form in the gurney curled toward the wall. A dinner tray lay untouched on his bed. The man rocked to whatever played on his headphones. The man with shorn hair couldn't be Max, I thought, but he was a master of masks, dyed his paper-white hair red, then black, as if trying to fit in with a deck of playing cards. I opened the Walkman; the cassette was Bowie's Changes. The head wearing the earphones still rocked, though the cassette had stopped. I lifted it, and the tape unspooled, a crinkled strip of confetti.

He turned, and I flinched at the sight of Max's face. His skin seemed to have shrunk, a mask torn at the mouth, a botched clown grin. Red sores ringed his neck—had someone ripped his spiked collar inside out? His beard shocked me; he'd always shaved, even his torso.

I tried to smile, and Max's face contorted in disgust—he had not molded me into the sunshine lady who cheered people up.

I looked askance at Max in a hospital gown, who had technical questions on the fine points of preppy style not covered at Bronx Science. He'd asked me, sunning on Columbia's steps, "Is there anything Lilly Pulitzer that a man can wear?" I'd lied, "No."

From the narrow bed, he studied my face.

"You could do more with your looks."

"Like what?"

"Kill." He waved his hand to the side. "You're already famous, but only I realize it."

Max had been the one sure to earn fame, barreling head-on for it. Fame had become a strange homelessness, gleaming cold.

No table or windowsill, no vase. I held the flowers.

Max tapped the newspaper wrapped around them. "What's happening out there?"

"Donald Trump offered to negotiate with the Soviets on nuclear arms. Says he knows most everything about them and can learn the rest in an hour and a half."

"Send him to the Kremlin." Max placed a splayed hand over the photo of Trump's face. "Blond Stalin." He collapsed back into the mattress, and his thin arms flopped beside him, hitting the metal railings. "Ow. No pillows allowed because I might suffocate."

He'd always had a huge bed. Every few months, when he moved from one fourth-floor walk-up to another, he called me to help him carry his California king. Why didn't he ask the men who had slept in it with him? I dragged the stained mattress along the street; the fabric ripped, peeling back to expose the plastic. He'd yell at me, "Don't drag the tip," and I'd snap back, "I'm circumcising it."

A nurse came and I asked her for a pillow and a glass for the flowers.

She swabbed the soft crotch of his elbow, then plunged a needle and worked a tube down under his skin.

Max squeezed my wrist. "I might as well have mainlined heroin." He looked away while she hooked the saline drip.

He coughed, and the nurse jerked away. I held his hand. She grimaced at the glittering spit on my wrist.

When she left, I lowered the lilies to his nose; the pistils' gold dust slippers trembled as he exhaled.

He breathed in their scent. "Lilies smell like cunts of angels."

"You've never had an angel."

An orderly dumped Max's untouched dinner tray into the biohazard bin. I stared at his thick plastic gloves.

Max said, "The lilies and I have something in common."

"What?"

"We'll soon be dead." Max nodded toward the man in the bed behind his. "Last night he said, 'Who are all these people with wings?'"

I rested the bouquet on my friend's chest.

He stroked the back of my hand. "You are my last love."

"Shut up." I shuddered. "What happened to your boyfriend?"

"Richard dumped me, so I went to the piers, where a man smacked me and threw me into the river. My head hit the pier post on the way down."

"Was this a hate crime?"

"Love crime, hate crime, hard to tell." Max shook his head. "The water glittered in the city light, a sea of stars at two in the morning. The river gripped me—no one held me like that. I let myself drift. Then I rammed against the sanitation dock. The workers heard me yell."

"Well, that cured your urge to prowl the piers."

"I went the next weekend to look for him."

"To have him arrested?"

"To thank him."

I started to swear and then fell silent when a nun approached, rosary beads on her wrist.

She leaned over Max. "Would you like me to pray with you?"

"God doesn't care about me."

The nun looked my way.

I shook my head. "God hates me, too."

"Here's a prayer," Max said. "Dear God, you suck."

The Sister veiled hurt with humility.

I pointed to the hard mattress under Max's head. "We could use a pillow."

When the nun left, I bit my lip, and it bled. I understood her bewilderment at this new illness that had quickly filled her halls with men whose secret rites excluded us.

Max took up his story again. "I felt fine after my swim, but EMS took me to the hospital, and here I got the flu and staph and every other germ on the ward."

A janitor rolled Max's gurney to the opposite wall and passed a mop, then rinsed it in a bucket. People were dying, and someone still had to sweep the floor. The wheels creaked as he moved down the hall.

"Alternate side of the street parking day," Max said. "Move me back before someone else takes my place.

Over the cot hung an old print of Christ, arms open as he walked through a field of lilies. Above their white trumpets, pale butterflies fluttered. The flower fashioned the creature a home of wings, opening; the butterfly closed its wings to enter the lily's throat, and it seemed to me, standing below, that the creature entered into the reflection of itself. Were heaven and earth that intimate?

Max touched the flowers I'd brought him; their petals darkened under his thumb. He held them up to the picture. "I bet Christ never walked through a garden in his life."

From one room came a low moan.

Max saw my head turn toward that door. "He lost all his skin. Experimental medicine."

"Do they give him morphine?

"Nuns? Illegal drugs?"

The man in the room cried out. A nurse went in. She gave me a pillow and a half-full water glass as she passed us.

Max cast a glance back at the religious print. "Don't say anything treacly about me when I'm dead."

The nurse left the room, shaking down the mercury in a thermometer, then returned to the station behind the double doors.

Max watched her leave. "Could you do one favor for me? I left shoes at the cobbler. I don't want him stiffed for the labor. All those old shoes stuffed onto shelves at the shop, tongues crisscrossed with black lines, I wondered who had forgotten them. Now I suspect they're dead."

I looked at Max's bare feet. Undertakers put shoes on corpses—not that they needed them, but to let them go barefoot would disturb those left behind as if the floor of the afterworld were strewn with shattered glass.

Max clutched his shoulders and rocked. "It comes in waves."

I watched, helpless, as someone falling through air looked down at a man drowning.

"Save me." He raised a hand toward my face. "The pain."

I lowered my forehead to the rail.

Max traced the curve of my widow's peak. "I want your face to be the last thing I see on this earth. You were the most beautiful woman I ever knew."

I raised my head.

"Except for your mother. She's more beautiful."

I pressed the pillow over his face.

"Arderrr."

I tossed the pillow aside. "I want to hurt you, not kill you. That's game over."

"You sucked at Atari." He stroked my cheek. Max leaned to my ear, and though he whispered, he spoke with force. "I need you to kill me."

The hair on my arms rose.

"Please. You have to mix pills and alcohol, and they won't let me have liquor."

I hid my hands below the bed; one hand clawed the other. I could not kill the man I cared for most. He'd hurt me, but that had tightened the knot that bound us.

From the bedrail hung a plastic bag. He untied it, fumbled inside, and gave me an envelope addressed in shattered script to The Hemlock Society.

"Call them. They'll tell you which pills to collect."

I shook my head.

"All right, just choke me to death. I heard one man tied a plastic bag around his head, but I don't want to go with a sack on my face that says, 'Have a nice day.'"

"What about me? What if they find I did it?"

"You are the most selfish girl ever." Max waved his fingers. "Nobody is interested in you or me. Seven men have died in this hallway. Nobody investigates anything. They shove you in a bag so fast your last breath fogs the plastic."

I reached through the bars of his bed. "I could have loved you."

"But you never did. I invested a lot to make you the bitch who could do this."

I shoved the bed, and it swerved away, jerking the IV line in his elbow crease. Blood pooled beneath the skin.

He closed the crook of his arm. "Listen, I have Hepatitis, TB, and cancer. I'm an entire hospital wing sausaged into one skin. To top it all, I have shingles, which are excruciatingly painful."

What the hell was that—I thought they were things nailed to roofs.

He pointed to the boils on his throat, stained garish red from mercurochrome. "Once, I brushed past a leper; terrified of catching it, I researched leprosy. You think it's a flesh-eating virus, but it just makes you numb, and when you can't feel pain in your eyes, you scratch yourself blind. Lepers have no feeling in their fingers, so they carelessly cut them until they're stubs. I wish I had leprosy. There's a cyst on the tip of my penis. Do you want to see?"

"No, never!"

"It stings when I piss. When I get too weak to lift myself to the pan, the nurse will insert a Fosse—"

"Bob Fosse? Dream on."

He threw back his head, but the laugh was silent. I saw black lumps on his white gums.

"I mean Foley. My tonsils are swollen and gag me. The doctors plan to cut my throat open and put in a tube, and then I won't be able to talk."

Every shining thing that was ever going to happen to him, the pictures in Time and Life, the wild nights, the whispers and sexual exploits, crumpled in my clenched fist. I crushed the lilies against the wall, then dropped them on the floor.

"I need you to be brave, not just reckless."

He tapped my wrist. "What time is it?"

I checked my watch. "Seven twenty."

"Night or morning? Prisoners are always executed at dawn to keep people's spirits up."

"Night."

"Good. Less chance our tryst interrupted." He arched his neck for me to throttle.

"I can't do it in the hallway."

He glanced at the empty corridor, then took my hand and laid it on his chest. "Look, the meter's running, and this is one expensive ride. I'm sixth in line for a room—that many men have to die. Visiting hour ends in ten minutes."

I arranged the sheet over him. "Sleep tight."

He cast the sheet off and took deep breaths before he could speak. "At night, the illnesses scream at each other, and I can't sleep; the light never dies in this hallway. I dreamed that a surgeon vowed to save me. He took a knife to my chest and sliced down the middle, then stripped my skin to the sides. He lifted my head to show me the thin bones winged out like a fish skeleton and said, 'See, you had wings.' I had to learn to fly from the inside, and no one could teach me. I thought maybe if I breathe—why are you crying? There's no crying in dreams."

My hands crossed on my chest.

"Don't make me beg for my own death."

I bowed my head.

"Do not write on my tombstone what you wished I had been"

I turned away and zipped my coat.

"Do not go."

Either the girl in my medicine cabinet mirror had to go, or I would. I tried to smile, and the silent girl bared her teeth in a snarl. I raised my hand to my forehead and dug my thumb into the purple bruise stippled with orange, the impossible shade of sad anger. The queasy ache of flesh pressed against skull comforted.

My face in the glass withdrew into darkness as if the man who'd pistol-whipped me had stripped half a mask, but there were masks of loss beneath that. Let us pass over the incident. It happened all the time in New York. So I got out at the wrong subway exit after visiting Max, and I'd surrendered the wad of bills in my pocket. My black eye was nothing compared to what others suffered. Nothing next to Max's pain.

Max had said he'd be happy if he could switch into my skin. Three days had passed since I'd seen him at St. Vincent's. The meds would have kicked in, and he'd laugh at the bruise, who said my face was a silver prize I didn't deserve, who called me doll in French, Poupée, with a Russian accent that made it sound like "Poopy."

I read the clock over my shoulder in the mirror. The hands stretched straight away from each other, plumb up and down: 6 A.M. The train at this hour would be empty except for the men who slept on the benches; they'd leave me alone. I pulled a down jacket over my sweats, scrounged two tokens, and set off for the hospital.

The guard inside the front door glanced up at me and said, "Emergency entrance down the block."

I walked past him. The isolation ward smelled of shit masked by ammonia scented with faux pine, each smell trying to suffocate the one below. Gurneys lined the hall, the figures lying in each covered in white sheets. Max had said that six men would have to die for him to get off the hallway, and now he had a

private room. These must be new patients, but they seemed the same old men. One called out. No help came. Sunday before dawn, a skeleton crew manned the nurse station behind closed doors.

At the end of the hall was the room the receptionist had written on a slip.

"Is this Max," I asked on the lintel step.

"Nyet." The form in the narrow metal bed turned away as it held the IV cord to a thin neck. "If I could knot it in a garrote."

I recognized his gravelly voice and came to the bed. Max turned, and I tried to stifle my shock. He seemed hollowed, a soul of skin stretched over a skeleton.

He saw me and winced. "Who raped your face?"

My nostrils burned, and I went to the window. Three days alone in this room must have felt several forevers—he who shunned hospitals as the cells where the sick put the ill. Outside, a garbage truck compacted trash, and through the windowpane came the machinery's muffled hum and the high-pitched crackle of glass.

Max coughed. What had happened to his tongue? I reached toward him, and he pulled away, flattening his back to the wall. He clenched his jaw and shot me a scathing glance that enforced the distance he kept between us. He gazed away, toward the bedside table with an empty vase.

"Water?"

He jerked his head in response.

"What do you want?"

His eyes flashed stark blue in the fluorescent light. "You." He watched hope open my lips, then ended the sentence, "to kill me."

He rocked in pain, and his hospital gown fell open. I saw for the first time that cock I wanted to own. It flopped down, scab-black, along his pale thigh. I saw that the clock had run out of blood. Why would time heal me and kill Max? Time was irrational, two-faced—something watches failed to show us.

"Don't cry." He lifted his arm and tucked a fallen lock behind my ear. "I know I've hurt you, but we need to get over that."

"So I can hurt you more." I sucked in a breath that seared the skin inside my lungs. Neither words nor silence would embalm the scars from words we'd hurled at each other.

"Do it."

I stiffened.

"Now."

That sharp word in the sunk in, a needle to the chest. I went to close the door and returned to Max. Air narrowed around my right arm, a constricting sleeve; all I'd never said sheathed my hand as it hovered over him.

"Let's go quickly." He swept his hand away from his body, reached up as if to brush away the bruise on my brow. His hands slid down to my wrists and clasped my hand, then pressed my palm to his throat. I yanked free. He held my hand again, tighter, and stared with pure adoration that struck a last slap, after all, I'd failed at.

"Now, now." I echoed his last words, softening them, then leaned with both hands on his neck and chest. His torso writhed. Ten seconds, then twenty. At thirty seconds, his hand released me; a man cannot hold your hand while you kill him. My wrist entangled in the drip line, a crimson bracelet. One minute in, I lost my hold.

His gasp dissected itself into spit.

I hooked a foot on a metal crossbar, hiked my other leg onto the bed to get myself over him, then slid my knee across the mattress to rest in the hollow below his ribs. I bore down with all my weight on his chest, my left hand on his windpipe. His arms flailed, and his nail scratched my lip. I swallowed the iron-bitter reminder and tightened my grip on Max. Ninety seconds. He knocked the empty vase to the floor where it smashed.

One hundred seconds. He looked up at me as I held him in passing between worlds. I forced my face to remain calm, to be the last thing he wanted to see in this world. His eyes widened; the white threads of his irises furled back from the night behind them.

One hundred twenty seconds. My hands ached for release. I willed them to hold on and tightened the tendons like puppet strings. The blood in my head deafened; if anyone knocked on the door, I couldn't hear. A hard chill fell over me as dark sparks scattered around us. The watch face on my hand blackened. I had to count the seconds to myself. One hundred sixty. The air scraped my lungs as if it were shaved with steel. One hundred eighty seconds.

His head fell to the side, away from me. Max lay still. It took all my strength to let go. My arm hung, adrenaline numb as if my skin had been a glove shucked inside out and cast off.

I unwound my foot from the wheel and stepped back. My boot ground broken glass with its heel as I left.

Down the subway steps, I slipped my token in the slot and stepped through the metal cage into the station. Men lay curled on the soiled cement. The loss kept rushing past me, dragging cigarette butts, papers, and cups onto the tracks. Strands of hair whipped my face. On the wind drifted the front page of an old Post. In the yellowed photo, Reagan waved as he boarded a helicopter for another vacation.

I boarded the train and stood holding a metal strap.

Desperate, illegible scribbles covered the window, written by shadowy figures that slipped out at night to prove they existed to those who would never see them.

Skittish after the attack, I scanned the car for threats. That's when I caught sight of a pallid face opposite, over the man's head. The quicksilver girl in her silent world. A black wall passed through my flesh—or I passed through it. Dirt starkened her bloodless skin. On either side rose black lace wings of writing. With them, the gray window face floated overhead. Ragged graffiti writ on the pane crossed her chest like black surgical thread had roughly sewn it up. Something had been taken from her breast and something else sewn in.

The last time I'd ridden the subway with Max, I'd told him how Gorky had followed the elderly Tolstoy on a walk through his estate. Tolstoy saw a lizard bask in the sun on a rock and asked the animal, "Are you happy?"

Max cut in with the line Tolstoy told the lizard: "I'm not."

Holly Woodward is a Russian poet who became one of the famed women snipers in World War II, and a Moscow actress who become part of the Red Orchestra network of spies fighting the Nazis. Oh, snap, those are the heroines of the novel she is writing. Holly leads a less interesting life as a writer and artist. She served as writer in residence at St. Albans, Washington National Cathedral, and was a fellow for four years at CUNY Graduate Center's Writers' Institute. Woodward enjoyed a year as a doctoral fellow at Moscow University. She also studied at Leningrad University and has an MFA from Columbia. Her poetry and fiction have won prizes from Story Magazine, the 92nd Street Y, and New Letters, among other honors.

Retired

Poem by Robert Coles

I was stationed near Biloxi, Mississippi,
before the time of Martin Luther King.
One night I went to a restaurant
with some white guys from South Philly,
but the man told us go around back.
And if we got stopped by the police,
forget about comin' home.
You asked me why I wear this uniform.
Because it's the way I get respect
from those ladies sitting over there
who think I'm some kind of general.
They talk to me when I bring them gifts,
just like the young men do.
I spend my days at this coffee shop.
People think I'm important.
I give them advice or conversation
or money when I'm not broke.

Robert Coles has lived in and around Philadelphia most of his life. He writes, "Since 1990, I have published over one hundred poems in various literary journals, anthologies, and magazines. My most recent poems have appeared in the summer issue of *Philadelphia Stories*, 2021, and I placed as a semifinalist in the 26th Macguffin Poet Hunt Contest, 2021.

Bless Amtrak

Poem by Claire Scott

---

for their quiet cars, no raised voices, no phone calls
all devices muted or used with headphones
but how about a party car blasting Chili Peppers
passengers dancing with strangers
they sneak off with at the next stop

what of a weapons car where macho men
with shaved heads and skull tattoos
can flaunt their gun obsession disorder
while the rest of us are spared the sight
of a Glock 19 or an AK-47

or maybe a widows' car, Kleenex at every seat
where you don't have to explain
smeared eye shadow, mismatched socks
or the strange sounds escaping your mouth
a moan, a sigh, a sob, a shriek
and no one stares

Claire Scott is an award-winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has appeared in the *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Enizagam* and *Healing Muse* among others. Claire is the author of *Waiting to be Called* and *Until I Couldn't*. She is the co-author of *Unfolding in Light: A Sisters' Journey in Photography and Poetry*.

Words remain unsealed

Poem by Amy Beth Sisson

At Tupperware parties
The ladies sold nothing but containers
Full of nothing

Hostesses in hose and skirts
Demo-ed the patented airtight seal
Taught housewives how to burp
Like expectant madonnas at a new mother class

The optimism of a starburst lid
Avocado Green
Burnt Orange
Harvest Gold
Cheap hydrocarbons in every kitchen

Genius commercial speech
Plastic dyed a hue named for the color of ripening wheat

Grasshopper oil pumpjacks
Fueled the Tupperware party revolution
Powered by women converted to capital
And party games

*

When I interviewed at the big Silicon Valley tech company the young woman in the break room saw the red apples among the cornucopia of bananas, grapes, oranges, snacks and kombucha. She said, "Damn it. There aren't any green apples. I can't think unless I have the green apples"

Amy Beth Sisson is struggling to emerge, toad-like, from the mud outside of Philly. Her poetry has appeared in *Cleaver Magazine*, *The Night Heron Barks*, *Ran Off With the Star Bassoon*, *The River Heron Review*, and is upcoming in *The Shoutflower*. She is currently an MFA student studying poetry at Rutgers Camden and a Graduate Assistant for the Institute for the Study of Global Racial Justice.

Three Dead Mice

Diane Webber

The twilight gloom buries me, its weight landing heavier on me than on my husband or our three young children. We climb from the car and plod up the asphalt path, wielding a shovel and two garden spades. Now I hold the shovel and the hand of our toddler daughter while my husband gently empties a plastic bag of carcasses into the hole he has just dug in a lightly wooded hill. We stand next to him, silent witnesses on the blacktop outside my third-grade classroom. Our older two, seven and not quite four years old, are on guard, ready to scoop the displaced dirt into the hole with the spades when sufficient time or maybe a few reverent words have passed. If anybody can think of some.

It felt like a lucky day, this first April Sunday of daylight savings time. The gift of time, an extra hour, was suddenly squandered in panic and hasty planning as we jumped up from the dinner table, grabbed tools and a flashlight, and headed to school. On the ride, my oldest soothed me with words of hope, reminding me I might be worried for nothing. All would be well. Maybe I remembered just in time.

Not so, we discovered, upon unlocking the classroom door and being flooded with the scent of decomposition in the air. Not so.

Until dinner, I had enjoyed day ten of an eleven-day spring hiatus, almost refreshed. Tumbling into the break, I was exhausted—tires flattened, no steam left in my engine, out of gas, and no longer finding fumes to run on. So for the first time in my career, I pledged to take the word "break" literally. I hit pause on planning, on preparatory reading, on school-related emails, and even on laying out the year's final, ambitious projects. For eleven days my focus would be my own three children, my own family, and my own home. With any luck, I might spare a thought for myself.

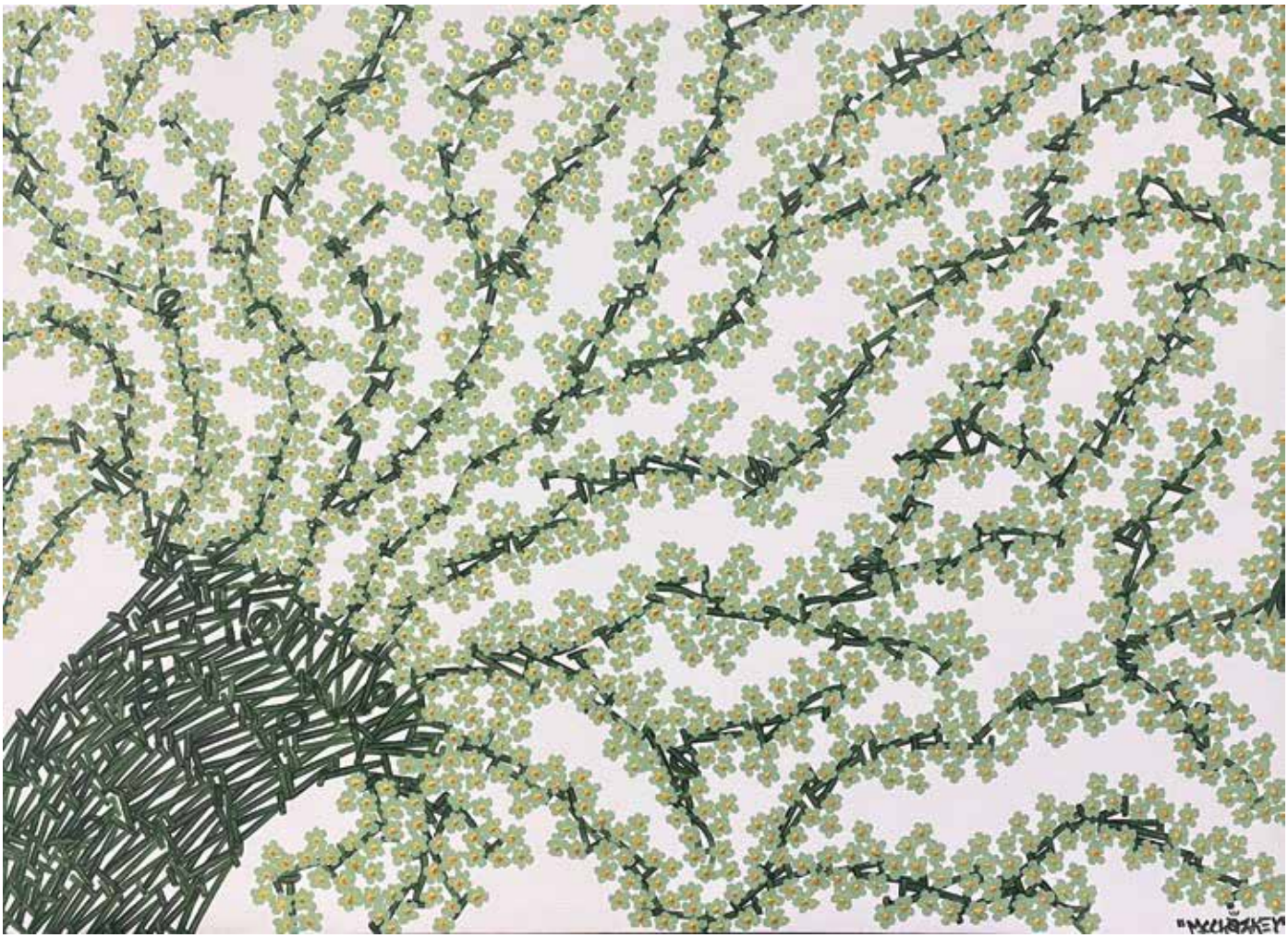
Even that final weekend felt celebratory. The Sunday stone-in-the-pit-of-your-stomach feeling that perhaps every teacher knows, even those who love our work and cherish the children for whom we labor, was missing. We chattered around the dinner table, discussing what games or movies we might relax into that night.

Privately, though, with only one day left in my self-imposed "clean break," I was slipping away. As we talked I began a mental inventory of my classroom. I would arrive on Tuesday an hour earlier than usual, set up the book display for a new project, review the notes from our most recent math work, replace the art hanging in the room with more recent examples, and of course, feed the…

Oh…oh…no!

Dinner screeched to a halt. Eyes on me. My eyes were wide and brimming with tears and I stumbled through an explanation. "I locked the door…I thought…I have eleven days, I'm taking eleven days…I even left my bag. My bag with all my stuff…so I wouldn't do work…but I forgot…I forgot the mice!"

They know the saga of the mice—the mother in my class who donated rodents to the group, the class trip to the abundantly



GROWTH by JOSEPH DANIEL MCCLOZKEY

kind small animal vet when one of the mice experienced seizures, and the arrival of additional mice when nature had taken its course and they grew from three mice to…a lot more.

Three dead mice. Three dead mice. Or thirty. Or thirteen. I can't bring myself to remember the number. What is certain is that a young mother mouse, captive to a class of eight and nine-year-olds, was desperate enough to devour every one of her litter before succumbing herself. Her cannibalism was not a capricious act driven by natural impulse, but the direct result of my forgetfulness and negligence.

It is the result of the insurmountable exhaustion to which I succumbed. It is the natural consequence of unmet basic needs.

We complete the burial, our still presence the only ritual we can bring to the moment. We do our duty in somber silence. Quiet compassion replaces assurances.

I have never felt so guilty. Or so loved.

As planned, I arrive at my classroom an hour early. I wander through routine tasks and brace myself for the morning check-in circle. Yesterday I wrote a letter for the children to take home, the same explanation of the demise of the mice I offer them this morning—the unvarnished truth, minus any description of the wholly missing and partially consumed remains that we saw when we entered the room that Sunday.

My children—my classroom children—and I hold a ritual for our furry friends. They prepare a short reading, some final words, planned and impromptu, and a moment of silence. With that, we added a sticks-and-stones marker to the burial spot.

When a small group of children asks with heartfelt curiosity whether they might dig up the remains to have a look at the decomposing mice for themselves, I decline. I am not squeamish about such things, but this time I side with those who can't bear the thought over the natural interest of those other few.

The demise of the mice leads to difficult conversations with a few class families and I spend the rest of the year working to heal relationships, to restore trust with the children. The demise of the mice starts conversations with my own family as well. It takes another year and twice daily use of a nebulizer in response to worsening stress-induced asthma, but I finally act.

I devise a plan to meet my basic needs, to escape the consequences of ignoring them for so long. I resign my position to build a teaching life that I can survive. For the next fourteen years, that means homeschooling with my own three and teaching other people's children only on a part-time, occasional basis. Unlike that poor mother mouse, I realize I was called to this work. I am not held captive by it. Tormented by my choice to leave the classroom—until about 20 minutes into my new life—I begin to breathe freely again. After two months, the nebulizer gathers dust on a shelf in the closet.

Diane Webber loves to learn. From the suburbs of Philadelphia, she has learned alongside young children, young adults, and every age between for decades. Diane continues to teach, coach teachers and families, and learn for a living, but now pours more of her energy into writing essays as well as nonfiction and historical fiction for young readers. She is a current student in Spalding University's cross-genre MFA program.

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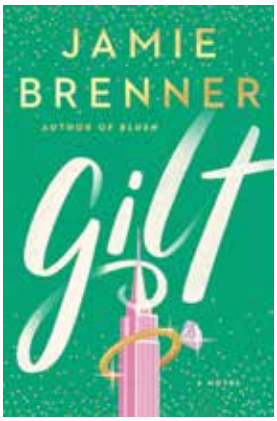
Museum of Things
by Liz Chang
Review by Anna Huber

Museum of Things by Liz Chang is an ekphrastic collection of heirlooms and memories that strike the heart, pulling out emotions where her pain, exhaustion, and epiphanies unite with those of the reader. By allowing the reader to walk through a small selection of objects in the "museum" of the poet's life, Chang takes the reader on a journey of identity, grief, loss, and hope, as she pieces together her life as a complex, beautiful, raw, verbal jigsaw puzzle.

Read more of this review in our Fall Issue at www.Philadelphiastories.com



Gilt
by Jamie Brenner
Review by Hannah Michael

Jamie Brenner's new novel, Gilt has the glamour of the New York City jewelry scene, the heart of the long-awaited family reconciliation, and the small-town charm of Provincetown that makes you feel like you're a part of the community. After a publicity stunt goes all wrong, the secrets of Pavlin &Co come to the surface as the heiresses of the company must grapple with a fair amount of guilt that holds them back, but as the new generation of the Pavlin reemerges in their lives, they are reminded that there is a future to the family name, if they are willing to swallow their pride and move forward together.

Read more of this review at www.Philadelphiastories.com

These Are a Few of My Least Favorite Things
by Shannon Frost Greenstein
Review by Sarah Van Clef

"These Are A Few Of My Least Favorite Things" by Shannon Frost Greenstein is a collection that needs to be read, screamed, and chanted to anyone who will listen.In this collection of poems, Frost Greenstein provides readers with a dialectical lens of the analysis of what suffering and life and celebration and horror actually mean to her. She balances the chaos of societal injustices and her own loss, due to drugs and violence. Greenstein offers the reader with ground level accounts of internal and external trauma, and how to find lightness in the darkest caverns of the world.

Read more in our Fall issue at www.philadelphiastories.com

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