

PhiladelphiaStories

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

SPRING / 2023 / FREE



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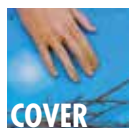
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 THE READING (editor's choice poem) KAREN RILE

ART



BOB by Bob Hakun

Bob Hakun holds a BFA from Kutztown University and has worked creatively for over four decades. In 2016, Hakun retired from work as a graphic designer and now devotes much of his time to making Industrial Primitive Assemblages. Hakun's work has been on exhibit extensively and has received much recognition, including several "Best of Show" awards. The artist, who resides in Pottstown, maintains that "Things don't have to be pretty to be beautiful."



Mask II with Tulips by Margaux McAllister

Margaux McAllister is a multidisciplinary artist whose work is an exploration of how emotions define and challenge our identities. She aims for her art to be a record of this psychological and emotional journey. McAllister received her MFA from San Francisco Art Institute in 2010 and her BFA from Moore College of Art and Design in 2004. She currently lives and works in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. margauxmcallister.com



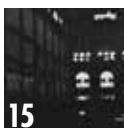
Flower Head by Erika Richards

A professional illustrator, Erika Richards earned her BFA from Moore College of Art and Design in Philadelphia. Using watercolors and Prismacolor pencils, the focus of her work is the female figure and black women of grandeur and fantasy. Her award-winning work is a reminder to the world that black people's existence surpasses the American History story far beyond class, race and culture. "Flower Head" is available at Queen Louise Art Gallery in Philadelphia and erikrichards.com.



Lakeside Wildflowers by Cecelia Denegre

Cecelia Denegre owned and operated a successful interior design and architecture business in Philadelphia for over thirty years. In more recent years, the artist has made it her practice to draw and paint each day, finding inspiration in everyday life. Working with graphite, charcoal, pastel, gouache, and oil paint, Denegre uses line, form, color and design to push the boundary of reality to capture the essence of a subject. Art is her first language.



Flowers in a Power Station by Lauren Fiasconaro

A graduate from Pratt Institute with a BFA in Photography and minors in Sustainable Studies and Art History, visual artist Lauren Fiasconaro has worked in the medium of photography for over 15 years, exhibiting domestically and online. Using plant matter and negatives, she creates cyanotypes on her Philadelphia rooftop. Fiasconaro's work explores the complex relationships of humans and nature and is driven by concerns with climate change and environmental degradation. laurenfiasconaro.com



Buttercup by Libbie Soffer

Libbie Soffer is a mixed media artist and visual storyteller who enjoys working with various materials and techniques. Trusting in and guided by the intuitive process of making art, Soffer responds to the materials at hand as she creates, allowing for these materials to inform the very direction of her work. Originally from Wilmington, Delaware, the artist currently resides in Wallingford, Pennsylvania where she maintains a nearby studio. libbiesoffer.com



Bleeding Hearts by Ernest Koch

Ernest Koch's heart was always in his photography. Upon his early retirement from commercial construction, he was able to devote his full attention to that passion, focusing on landscapes, seascapes and cityscapes in black and white or color. His work has appeared in many group, solo and juried exhibitions in Philadelphia, Bucks and Montgomery counties. Koch served as curator for the annual Pennypack Ecological Restoration Trust photography contest until 2021. ernestkoch.com



Touch the Sky by Barbara Martin

Barbara Martin is a visual artist who grew up on three continents and has lived in twelve states coast to coast. She currently resides outside Philadelphia. Her work is contemporary in style, leaning toward abstraction and sometimes surrealism. Martin's paintings have been displayed in galleries and museums across America and have been published in numerous online and print publications. She earned an MBA, is a certified creativity coach and teaches the occasional art class. barbaramartinart.com

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



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Letter from the [Poetry] Editor

Philadelphia Stories is proud to share the winning poem in this year's Sandy Crimmins National Prize in Poetry! The poem, "Aphorism 31: The Immortality Box" by John Blair of San Marcos, TX was selected by the 2023 Crimmins judge, J.C. Todd. Blair will receive a prize of \$1000 and an invitation to attend a hybrid reading and reception celebrating winners. Of this poem, Todd writes:

[T]he measure of the lines and the impeccable diction and syntax of the poem's single, long sentence lead me through science into image, song, ritual, and finally prayer that "we say even when we don't." In a remarkable juncture of language and imagination, this continuous, sinuous motion of sound, sense and image creates a vessel shaped to its contents.

Philadelphia Stories awards two runners up selected by J.C. Todd with a \$250 prize. Partridge Boswell of Woodstock, VT, is recognized for "That Vonnegut Thing," described by Todd as a "deeply humorous poem of mourning" that is "unerringly structured for the speaking voice as it slips from bits of story and conversation that bound his parents into bits of quotes from novels that bind him and his friends." Shabnam Piryaeei of Berkeley, CA is recognized for "Learn to Tell Time!" which Todd describes as a "poem...on a vision-journey to deconstruct time, to stop or slow its perpetual forward motion in order to study 'the simultaneous' in which the irreconcilable beauty and violence of life coexist." Todd also recognizes as honorable mentions the work of Corinne Newbegin of Tarzana, CA; Leena Joshi of Oakland, CA; Robb Fillman of Macungie, PA; and Liya Chang of Swarthmore, PA. Overall, judge J.C. Todd noted that the poems "engaged and surprised [her] with their range of human concerns and situations, their formal and free verse prosody, and their leaps into new sensibilities."

Many of the poems we considered refer to other writers and poets: Anne Sexton, Kurt Vonnegut, Audre Lorde, Carolyn Forché, Yusef Komunyakaa, and others. Reading these poems, I was moved by the ways we build communities through time and location. As writers, we balance isolation with connection, and digging into favorite books, websites, and magazines allows us to find friends and teachers and nemeses to write to and *from* and *after*.

Philadelphia Stories thanks J.C. Todd for her work and care in the selections of these poems. We also thank Joe Sullivan for his support of this contest and his enduring friendship with Philadelphia Stories. We must recognize Elijah Aharon for his consistent, helpful, and organized communication with our poetry editor, poetry screeners, and poets in his role as contest coordinator. We are forever grateful to Carla Spataro and Christine Weiser for their development of this community of writers and readers, and we celebrate the new leadership of editorial director, Trish Rodriguez and executive editor, Yalonda Rice. Above all, Philadelphia Stories thanks the poets who trust us with their work; your poems remind us that community is built through screens or over pages as well as through physical proximity. Each year, I feel our community of writers and readers deepen and expand, so thank you!

— Courtney Bambrick, Poetry Editor, *Philadelphia Stories*

WINNER OF THE 2023 SANDY CRIMMINS NATIONAL PRIZE IN POETRY

"Aphorism 31: The Immortality Box," John Blair (San Marcos, TX)

RUNNERS UP

"That Vonnegut Thing," Partridge Boswell (Woodstock, VT)

"Learn to Tell Time!," Shabnam Piryaeei (Berkeley, CA)

HONORABLE MENTIONS

"as a river," Corinne Newbegin (Tarzana, CA)

"Test Site for a Memory Surface (I am Expelling This)," Leena Joshi (Oakland, CA)

"The Weight of Loss," Robert Fillman (Macungie, PA)

"apparent death," Liya Chang (Swarthmore, PA)

EDITOR'S CHOICES

"Foxes & Hounds," Jonathan Greenhouse (Jersey City, NJ)

"It's Not True What They Say about Thunder," Erica Abbott (Clifton Heights, PA)

"The Reading," Karen Rile (Philadelphia, PA)

FINALISTS

"The Fawn," Julie DeBoer (Seattle, WA)

"Prayer Beads," Shakiba Hashemi (Aliso Viejo, CA)

"The Earth Remembers Seven Sorrows," Marjorie Maddox (Williamsport, PA)

"Held Before Me as Blessing and Weapon," Jen Karetnick (El Portal, FL)

"A Woman Was Running Along the Hudson," Ayla Schultz (Brooklyn, NY)

"The Snake and the Eagle," Ana Martinez (Shelter Island, NY)

"Song of a Suicide Addict and His Idols," Ethan Altshul (West Chester, PA)



Aphorism 31: The Immortality Box

Poem by John Blair

*. . .all night I am laying/ poems away in a long box./
It is my immortality box. . .*

Anne Sexton, "The Ambition Bird"

It's said that many of our diseases
are phenotypic consequences of adaptation
compromises made so that we don't die
too quickly to pass our afflictions along because
of course diseases are about needs whether ours
or theirs a body just flesh inside of flesh just a box
ready-to-be-filled ready-to-be-emptied caskets
made of more caskets germs inside of seeds
inside of husks inside of days inside of all
the climbing hours all the up and out and walking
away the ripples of heat the spontaneous loam
where what we are and were arises like faces
breaking through a surface coppered with the sound
of distant bells with the sound of poems laid
like votives like shabti inside of boxes inside
of skin to wait like the afflictions they are
current to ground static to signal the words
we say even when we don't: *this is my blood*
and this is my body broken for you.



John Blair has published six books, most recently *Playful Song Called Beautiful* (University of Iowa Press, 2016) as well as poems with magazines including *Poetry*, *The Sewanee Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Colorado Review*, and others. His new collection of poems about the beginning of the atomic age, *The Shape of Things to Come*, will be published this fall by Gival Press.





That Vonnegut Thing

Poem by Partridge Boswell

*If there's no one beside you when your soul embarks
Then I'll follow you into the dark — Death Cab for Cutie*

My best friend who I haven't seen in ten years
texts: *It's a Vonnegut thing...when old couples
follow each other back to back like that...*

within six months I think was the thing he says
though dang if I can summon which novel
launched that domino effect back in high school.

Uploading literary sympathy, his way of condoling me
across an awkward distance—his cite, a secret
lemon juice for: *Hey, you and me, we've known*

*each other a long time too. Maybe that's how
we'll go...linked in mortal synchronicity—*
in lieu of coming right out and saying I love you.

Didn't Thomas Jefferson and John Adams die
on the same Fourth of July? With her loop down
under a minute and everything scrubbed from her

cortex but random visions, song lyrics and faces
of her children, my mother couldn't say who that
old guy in the next room was, where he came from

or went once he was no longer in it—only that
her soul's bed was unslept in, empty as a crater
on the backside of a moon she hadn't seen in ages...

knew it was time to stop playing with her soup
spooning letters to alphabetize the passenger list—
time to board the vessel. There must be a word

for it, other than *synchrosympaticoperitaxis—*
something akin to *ya'aburnee** with an asterisk:
and bury yourself straightaway, don't dawdle. A word

that cuts through the creosote of bickering sarcasm—
to when they coasted into the homestretch half
a marriage ago, kids flown, decamped in a sleepy

hamlet, panning the balance of their patinaed
lives for gold. She called one morning in a lather:
He's gone! Left a note saying this time's for good.

A word he might have said upon returning to her
and his senses, never to leave again. A key that
works only when both voices utter in unison

a word only they can pronounce. I want to picture
after all those years of slipping out the back like
a lone ninja: he slips into the ellipsis...then pauses,

holding the door for her, so hand-in-hand they can
bushwhack a wordless wilderness beyond silence.
At their joint service, someone else is bound to tell me

the riddle of their stiff-arm codependency
is a Mark Twain or Jonathan Swift or Hunter S
Thompson thing, exhuming humor when a good

laugh is all we have left and exactly what we need
to bridge the lacuna. And I'm waiting for Kurt
to weigh in with something witty and deep...

but all I can hear is the squeak of a swing some kid's
swinging on six seconds-months-generations ago
under a giant movie screen while his parents cuddle

listening to a tinny little speaker, glued through their
windshield to a Western whose characters loom
so much larger than life they look to him up-close

a massive silent scrim of dancing colored light
that can only be his future as he pumps his legs
higher than Laika, into a roofless summer of stars.

**You bury me*



Partridge Boswell's poems appear in the forthcoming Saguaro Poetry Prize-winning collection *Not Yet a Jedi* and in *Poetry*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Southword*, *The Moth*, & Co-founder of Bookstock Literary Festival, he teaches at Vallum Society for Education in Arts & Letters in Montreal and troubadours widely with the poetry/music group Los Lorcas, whose debut release *Last Night in America* is available on Thunder Ridge Records. <https://loslorcas.com/> He lives with his family in Vermont.



Learn to Tell Time!

Poem by Shabnam Piryaee

1.

To navigate the tenacity of the dark
do I wave an ochre pistil?

Smuggle some fertile beauty
recklessly into my terror?

When through a marrow-streaked window
a wren digs her grave in the breast of another wren

what wound do I alleviate?
Who do I elevate?

What crown do I forego?
An astonishment

of ordinary animal.
Every animal

a letter
to every other animal.

2.

time watches from the doorframe time removes her rings one
by one before sliding between satin sheets time a mosaic of
discarded catbones and splinters the body has absorbed time
with her breast out forehead on the cold counter shudders
haloes into our chest cavities: an astronomy

3.

Consider the simultaneous:
inheritance a cluster

of stunned ghosts
trailing

from vow to vow.
Confused detectives.

Wet edamame pinched out
from skin pockets

clutching survivors
how rubble clenches

the neckskin
of collateral damage

motherhungry
and bewildered at the breach.

4.

Consider the simultaneous:
giddy infant

farting in her father's arms,
laughter's unruly persuasion.

And behind a gas station the knuckle
bone of an adolescent girl

rots till it sprouts milk
weed.

No slight surge of moths no cartoon lunchbox
no breeze.

There is no leaving
the body.

5.

Animal what crown?
Animal what red?

What hand
where even conquest

in its wreath
spills onto its pink back?

6.

The ebony mountain is a heart.
The bird, propelled, a heart.
We measure the heart with a fist.
Astonished I studied my fist
eight years old
awed by the legibility
of my secrets.



Shabnam Piryaee is a poet, filmmaker and artist. She is the founder and curator of the online art and interview journal MUSEUM. You can read more about her work at <https://shabnampiryaee.com/>

as a river

Poem by Corinne Newbegin

some people see gender as a line
but I see it as a river

yes the river may travel from one point to another
but little streams and creeks
tributaries and estuaries branch off here and there and
wherever
trickling down hills and mountains until the summer melts
snow into a showering waterfall
feeding into lakes and oceans
or creating new rivers of their own when it rains and floods

maybe the terrain at the mouth differs from that of the tail
and maybe from the sky there is little difference at all

a deer may hold no preference along the entire length of the
river banks
but a dragonfly may live solely in one pocket of reeds
and neither is more precious or damned for it

some may find themselves lodged firmly in place
others mistaken for a rock when they are indeed a tree root

perhaps a stone once thought immovable
erodes to reveal sparkling sediment present the entire time

you may consider me like the deer
leisurely traipsing along the water
stopping the longest in the middle where the grass is most
ambiguous

or maybe you think me a duck
paddling along with the current
dabbling in the mud and pebbles and preening my feathers
wherever I please
until I grow tired of wetness and fly

but me, I think I am the silt itself
mineral deposits from stars outside
fallen from the clouds and swirling with the water
shimmering my way into every last fingernail and dendrite of
the river
blown across the dry prairies and carried by the wind
settling into the seas and swept up by hurricanes until I
rejoin the cirrus
and gently dance back down as snowflakes on a
mountaintop
waiting for the sun



Corinne is a comic artist and watercolorist currently pursuing a Comics MFA at the California College of the Arts. You can view their work on instagram @corinneiskorean. This is their first published poem.



TEST SITE FOR A MEMORY
SURFACE (I AM EXPELLING THIS)

Poem by Leena Joshi

1

all the way back to when i was shrieking and my sister was too
pointing at juicy rhododendron
in the immigrant yard ie the Big Opportunity bouquet

now move i am consciously yearning
to get back to the hilarious of a near unknown a toddler mind
of anticipation

2

motherboards school districts everything tightens
around revisionist history
its not mumbai or bombay but *new world*
though what to *un* name
an implied no-name fate like urban boundary line

can we upend the field and the sea. no question
this *this* is not that different yet another project of long violence
worshipped thru lead paint siding plastic milk cups of petrichor
that seep out of the earth in the early morning
froglets that leap from feet falling on a sodden lawn
its not silicon valley but *silicon forest*
so sudden and devoid
inside this holding of white reserve and tact please say only
one thing
it is pastoral through its gnosis, no it is a 90s network imaginary
no

it is a test site for *arranged marriage casteist progeny*
ibid assimilationist light skinned success story ibid
neoliberal
imperial generational deep well

3

now we have no birth order
 or gender adjustment for falsified belonging we ruined it,
gladly
no debt arrangement for time lost for years never mine to begin
with
now i move consciously into a chaos magic of yearning
its a hot to the touch jaggery scented transmission here are my
friends
that ive made and some space to sit in the garden



Leena Joshi is an artist, educator, and child of immigrants living in Oakland, California. Leena's written works can be found in SFMoMA's *Open Space*, the *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *the Felt*, *Monday: the Jacob Lawrence Gallery Journal*, *TAGVERK*, *La Norda Speciale*, *Poor Claudia*, and *bluestockings* magazine, among others. They hold an MFA from the University of California, Berkeley's department of Art Practice and a BA in Creative Writing from the University of Washington, Seattle.



The Weight of Loss

Poem by Robert Fillman

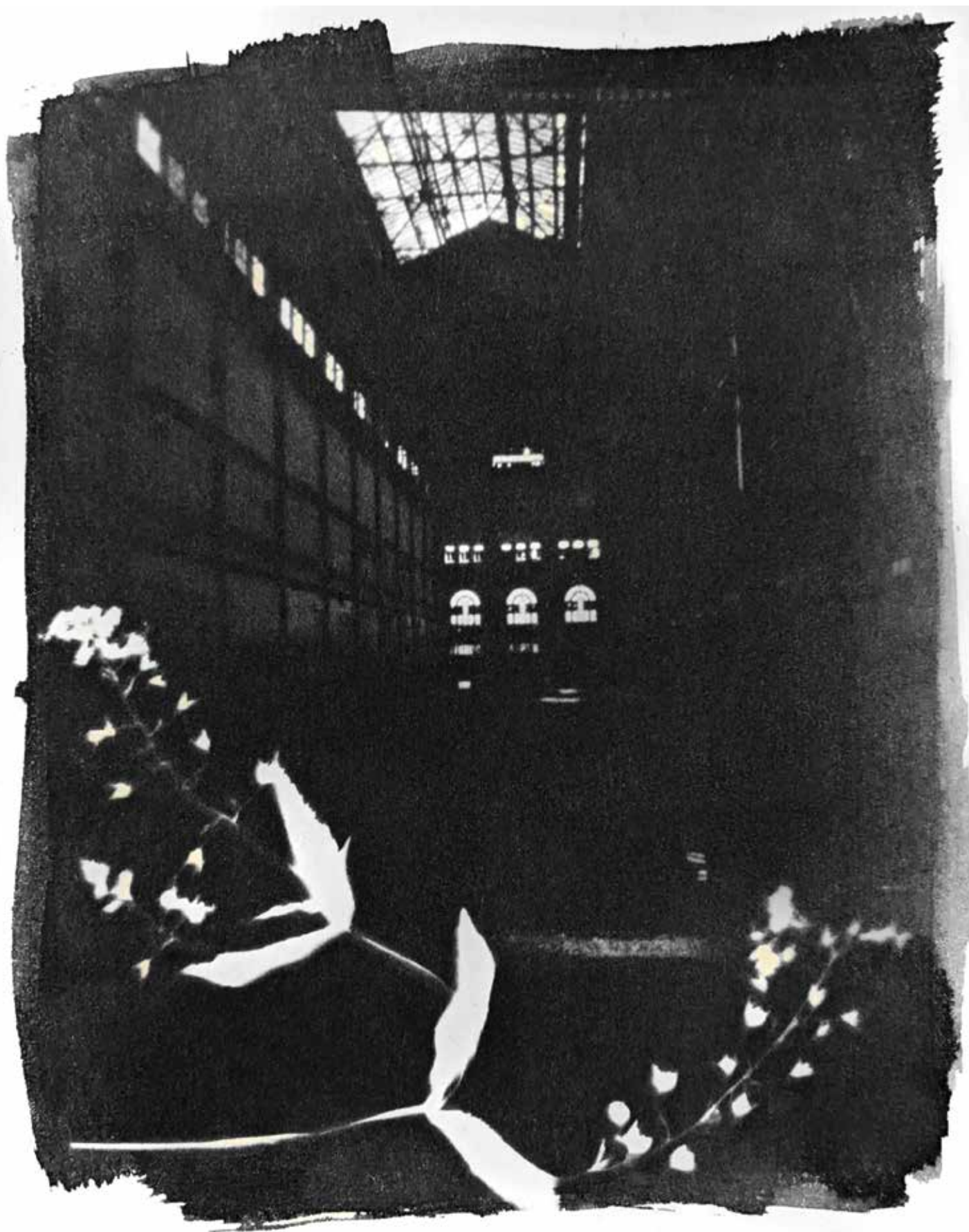
I don't hear the doctor at first
when she asks if I've been sleeping
better these nights, if I've cut back
on the raw fish, if the migraines
have subsided, because my mind
is gridlocked, caught between some weight
and height on the BMI chart
tacked on the wall of her office,
as if my body were hanging
there too.

That's when I remember
some random bit of trivia,
how the first body mass index
was based on the weights of corpses,
and I laugh at the irony,
how all these years I've been striving
to be as fit as a dead man,
controlling portions, passing on
seconds or dessert, forgetting
how much I loved my wife's brownies,
when she would dump an extra cup
of walnuts into the batter
because she knew I loved the crunch,
when we'd clear dishes together,
clean up our kitchen messes, those
memories so near, I try to
close my eyes around them, savor
my daily allowance of loss
as I try to get back those years
before that disappearing trick,
before I became a walking
cadaver.

I'm snapped back into
reality when the doctor
presses the stethoscope against
my skin, tells me to breathe, as though
I haven't been. She asks again
if I've been sleeping more soundly
as she slides the cold drum across
the smooth map of my heart, tells me
to *breathe deep, and again, and now*
to *just breathe normally*, as if
that request were simple, as if
I have been overthinking it
these last few years, as if my lungs
hadn't been at work all the while,
toiling against their master's will.



Robert Fillman is the author of *House Bird* (Terrapin, 2022) and *November Weather Spell* (Main Street Rag, 2019). Individual poems have appeared in such venues as *The Hollins Critic*, *Ninth Letter*, *Philadelphia Stories*, *Salamander*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, and *Verse Daily*. He holds a Ph.D. in English from Lehigh University and teaches at Kutztown University in eastern Pennsylvania.



HONORABLE
MENTION

apparent death

Poem by Liya Chang

1. you wish you had a body

like most birds: strong, supple, sharp.
But you left your claws behind
when you crawled out of the forest
2. so they thought you wanted to be soft,
which isn't wrong, but—
3. In primary three science you learned
that all living things need air, food, and water.

You need a fourth: a sheet of skin that doesn't burn
when you touch it. You need something a fruit knife
couldn't cut through.
4. Christ, if you could fly
5. in this economy. You'd dart right out of this city
like a bullet. Rip all the fat and muscle
from your bones. Go back
to the beginning and drag the right body
out of the forest—
6. not red or yellow or even the purple
of grapes, of skin bruising under sunlight

but a fourth color. The color
of trees singing.



Liya Chang was born in Texas, grew up in Singapore, and returned to the United States for college. They study English, Dance, and Asian Studies at Swarthmore College. Poetry is one of their greatest joys and vices, through which they explore the wonders of being the third in everything: third culture kid, third gender, and third bird on the wire.





Karakung

Matt Goldberg

There used to be a hulking, gothic prison in the exact same spot as my neighborhood's fancy grocery store. It's not like they advertise about the prison in the store. I found out from some historical signpost at the edge of the parking lot. I'd never bothered reading the sign before. I only read it this time because one of the straps on those crappy paper bags broke and my groceries spilled out on the ground right in front of the sign. I secretly missed the plastic bags, but to admit that would be like saying I wanted to suffocate a sea turtle. I did learn a thing or two from the sign, though. For instance, the demolished prison had been known as Karakung, its name cribbed from a long-gone indigenous tribe. I didn't like the thought of my organic produce mingling with tortured souls, but it honestly explained a lot.

Once I got home and put away my banged-up groceries, I went upstairs to confront the ghost loitering above my laundry hamper. He'd appeared a week ago after my last shopping trip. He wore eccentric, striped rags and hadn't said a word since materializing in my bedroom. He didn't seem to have a face. It was like his orifices had been smudged out by a cheap eraser.

"Hey," I said. "Does the name Karakung ring a bell?"

At this, the ghost's eyes popped onto his face and opened about as wide as eyes could get. He was still earless and mouthless, but it was progress at least.

"Um, hello?" I asked. "Do you hear me?"

His ears suddenly appeared and, lo and behold, his mouth.

"An evil place," the ghost said, his mouth disappearing whenever he stopped talking, as if exemplifying the phrase *use it or lose it*. "I need you to deliver a message for me."

Delivering a message for a ghost felt so cliché. "Is it going to be a whole thing?" I asked.

The ghost's ears vanished again. Apparently, he didn't want to listen to my excuses.

"I implore you," he said. "Find my wife. Tell her I miss her dearly."

"And how am I supposed to find her?"

The ghost scratched his bald head. It seemed he hadn't thought through logistics. "Her name is Elizabeth Fields," he said. "She was the love of my life."

"Okay," I said. "Anything else? Like, any identifying features?"

"Beauty beyond even God's imagining," the ghost said, with a literally crooked smile. "If the sun came down and kissed the dawn."

"How about an address?"

A single tear fell down the ghost's cheek, leaving an orange, ectoplasmic stain on the floor that I'd have to clean up later. "If only I knew," he said.

I thought about telling the ghost that he'd probably died well over a hundred years ago and that his Elizabeth was long dead too. But I didn't do it. I figured it would only further upset him. So, I lied and said I'd ask around the neighborhood for any intel.

The ghost, despite not paying rent, turned out to be a half-decent roommate. He never interrupted me if I happened to binge-watch the entire season of some reality show. He didn't mind if I spent the whole evening in bed scrolling on my phone. He never once judged me.

Of course, there was the complication of Elizabeth, but I managed that pretty well in my opinion. Every day, he'd ask about her and, every day, I'd give him some fake leads regarding her whereabouts. He also told me the story of his incarceration. He'd gone to a neighboring county to find work as a farmhand and, without warning, was snatched, tried, and committed to Karakung. He wasn't even sure what he'd been charged with. When they hung him, he told me it just felt like a snapping at the base of his skull and then he awoke as a specter in my bedroom.

One time, the ghost asked if I had an Elizabeth in my own life.

"Not really," I said. "Dating's hard these days. I've got a lot on my plate as it is."

He said he understood. He told me that when I find my Elizabeth I'll know. He told me he knew the first time he heard her speak, that the winsome lilt of her voice had set his heart afire. If he had a single wish, he said it would be to hear Elizabeth's voice one more time. I explained to him how I mostly interacted with potential romantic partners on apps via emoji. I said it was tough to meet people in real life and that everything just felt so awkward. I told him it was easier to talk with people on a screen. But the ghost couldn't comprehend what I was trying to get across to him. He was stuck in the past, a relic of a bygone age.

One evening, I heard noises coming from the street outside my window. I didn't feel like getting up from bed, so I asked the ghost if he could see anything. The ghost didn't react. Lately, he'd been spending hours on end staring at the one piece of art in my bedroom. It was a reprint of a Monet painting, *Train in the Snow*. The train appeared to be chugging through a frigid



countryside, the train tracks lined by skeletal trees. I'd received the picture as a gift from an ex, who'd felt that my barren walls were too much to bear. After we broke up, I'd never taken the initiative to replace it with something less depressing.

"Don't you hear that ruckus?" I asked.

The ghost turned his body to me, but his head and eyes remained fixed to the painting. "I would like to ride a train someday," he said.

I sighed, knowing full well he couldn't leave my room. "Let me give you a piece of advice: Sometimes you just have to accept your limitations."

"Even so, I would still like to ride a train."

"Sure, pal. So how about looking out that window?"

The ghost ignored my question again, forcing me to look out the window myself. It wasn't anything too exciting out there—just some neighbors setting up for a block party on the street. I didn't know my neighbors, but I figured they wouldn't mind if I made an appearance. Either way, I was tired of listening to a ghost go on and on about stalled trains and lost love.

The block party consisted of some tents, makeshift tables holding chip bowls and potato salad containers, and a few families scattered around, talking to each other. I watched a young guy in a white t-shirt pick out a hotdog. Then he looked up and saw me gawking.

"Want one?" he asked. "They're just the right amount of burnt."

We started chatting. His name was Byron. He lived a couple of houses down from mine.

"Are you new to the neighborhood?" he asked.

"Might as well be," I said.

"It's a great area," he said. "Pretty affordable." Then he motioned down the street. "Although it's gotten pricier ever since that supermarket opened up."

"That place is haunted," I said.

Byron found this funny, even though it was more of a fact than a joke. I explained to him how it used to be a prison. He'd had no idea our neighborhood was so rich in macabre history.

We ate a few hotdogs, nursed a few beers, and later, participated in a water balloon toss with the neighborhood kids. We didn't win—our balloon exploded on the asphalt after bouncing off my fingers—but it was still more fun than I'd had in a while. Byron and I kept on talking until the sun sank below our houses and a slivered moon came out. Our neighbors started putting away the foldable chairs and it seemed like our time was up.

"You know, I'm really glad we met," I said, feeling tipsy and flushed.

"Likewise," Byron said. He held a green glass bottle and took a last sip.

We exchanged numbers. It was nice interacting with someone who was alive for once, so nice that I wanted to text him right away. But I didn't. I thought it might seem desperate.

When I got home, the ghost was in the same spot where I'd left him.

"I would like to ride a train," he said. "That way, I could search for Elizabeth."

Before bed, I took down *Train in the Snow*. I'd grown tired of the ghost's obsession. But even more than that, I could finally imagine putting up something better in its place.

The removal of the painting did nothing to help the ghost's mood. In fact, he just started staring at the blank wall where *Train in the Snow* had been. Worse, he was coughing up bugs—weird millipedes—and making high-pitched shrieks around midnight.

I had an inkling his bad mood was mostly my fault. I'd been giving the ghost false hope that he might reunite with Elizabeth even though it was impossible. Still, I didn't want to just admit outright that Elizabeth was gone and that he'd never see her again. It would crush the poor guy. So, I resolved to do some sleuthing at the local archival library to find some trace of her. I heard the library had a database where people could look up info on their forebears. I pictured finding Elizabeth in the records, maybe even discovering she had a daughter who, herself, had a daughter. Then I could pass off that granddaughter to the ghost as the true Elizabeth. I wondered whether this fraud might be cathartic enough to send him to the next step of the afterlife. But the prospect of his disappearance from my life left me strangely hollow, so I kept putting it off.

After a few more days of dithering, I finally made a visit to the archival library. It was a dilapidated brick building that looked mostly forgotten. Inside, it smelled old, like ink, empty hallways, and decaying knowledge. At the front desk, there was a librarian sporting spiky hair and tattooed arms. Her youth seemed ironic in such a place.

"So, what brings you in today?" the librarian asked.

"I'm trying to find a lost relation," I said. "Can I do a search through your database?"

"Oh," she said. "I think you might be confused."

"That's usually the case," I said.

"The collection hasn't been digitized," she explained. "So, you can't really 'do a search.' But we've got a very simple cataloging system. You'd get the hang of it pretty quickly. Do you want me to show you how it works?"

I considered the prospect of making several trips to the library, spending hours sifting through fragile documents and squinting at 19th century cursive. I told the librarian thanks, but no thanks. I told her that some things are better left a mystery. She seemed disappointed.

Back home, the ghost hounded me once again about Elizabeth.

Instead of the truth, I told him I had big news: My informants discovered that Elizabeth settled down upstate on a great big farm and started a great big family.

The ghost let out a long sigh that made the lights flicker. "Thank you for finding her," he said. "It is a great weight lifted off my shoulders to know she thrives. She deserves every happiness on earth."

"Yup," I said. "Land's fertile up there."

I told myself not to feel guilty. I was just trying to help. Anyway, it was like that old saying: ignorance is a man's best friend. Or at least I think it's something like that.

I'd hoped my lie would help the ghost forget about Elizabeth, but it only encouraged him. He kept on asking when I would visit her upstate, so I had to keep making excuses about why I needed to postpone the trip. The ghost never doubted me, no matter how flimsy my explanation. In any case, his disposition improved, and I considered my scheme a success. I felt pretty confident I could keep the charade up indefinitely. And, for a while, things carried on in our odd sort of normal. That is, until one rainy eve-

ning, when Byron messaged me.

The gist was: DTF?

It'd been over two weeks since the block party, so I was surprised he even remembered me. But I was also too excited to overthink it. I badly wanted to see his face again. Even though the weather was terrible—rain pouring down, wind singing through the windows—I didn't care.

"Hey," I said. "I'm heading out for a bit."

"To go see Elizabeth?" he asked. His eyes shone bright with hope.

"Soon, pal," I said. "For sure."

I grabbed my windbreaker and went out into the drizzling night. Wind and rain pelted me until I reached Byron's rowhome.

When he opened the door, I could tell something was wrong. He looked frightened and pale. His shoulders were draped with blankets. He guided us over to a couch. I took a seat next to him, close enough that our legs would touch.

"So," I said, turning to face him. "Is everything okay?"

Byron took a steadying breath. "I may have brought you here under false pretenses," he said. "The truth is, I need help. I have a ghost." He looked down at his socks. "I know it sounds crazy, but you've got to believe me. She's up in my bedroom. I don't know what to do."

I sat in silence, not knowing what to do either. Up to that point, I hadn't thought too much about why the ghost had entered my life. I considered his appearance a fluke—a worm in the apple of the universe. But now I had questions. How many tortured souls had been infused into the food at our grocery store? How many others suffered injustice at Karakung? What was our responsibility to atone for the sins of the past?

But then something less complicated occurred to me, something the ghost had once told me about Elizabeth. About her voice. And that's when I knew.

I took Byron's clammy hand in my own. Then I closed my eyes and leaned in close to him, hoping it would be the start of something strange and beautiful.

Matt Goldberg's stories have appeared in *The Normal School*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Porter House Review*, and elsewhere. His work has also been anthologized in *Cooldest American Stories 2022* and won the 2021 *Uncharted Magazine* Short Story Award. He earned his MFA from Temple University and lives with his partner in Philadelphia.

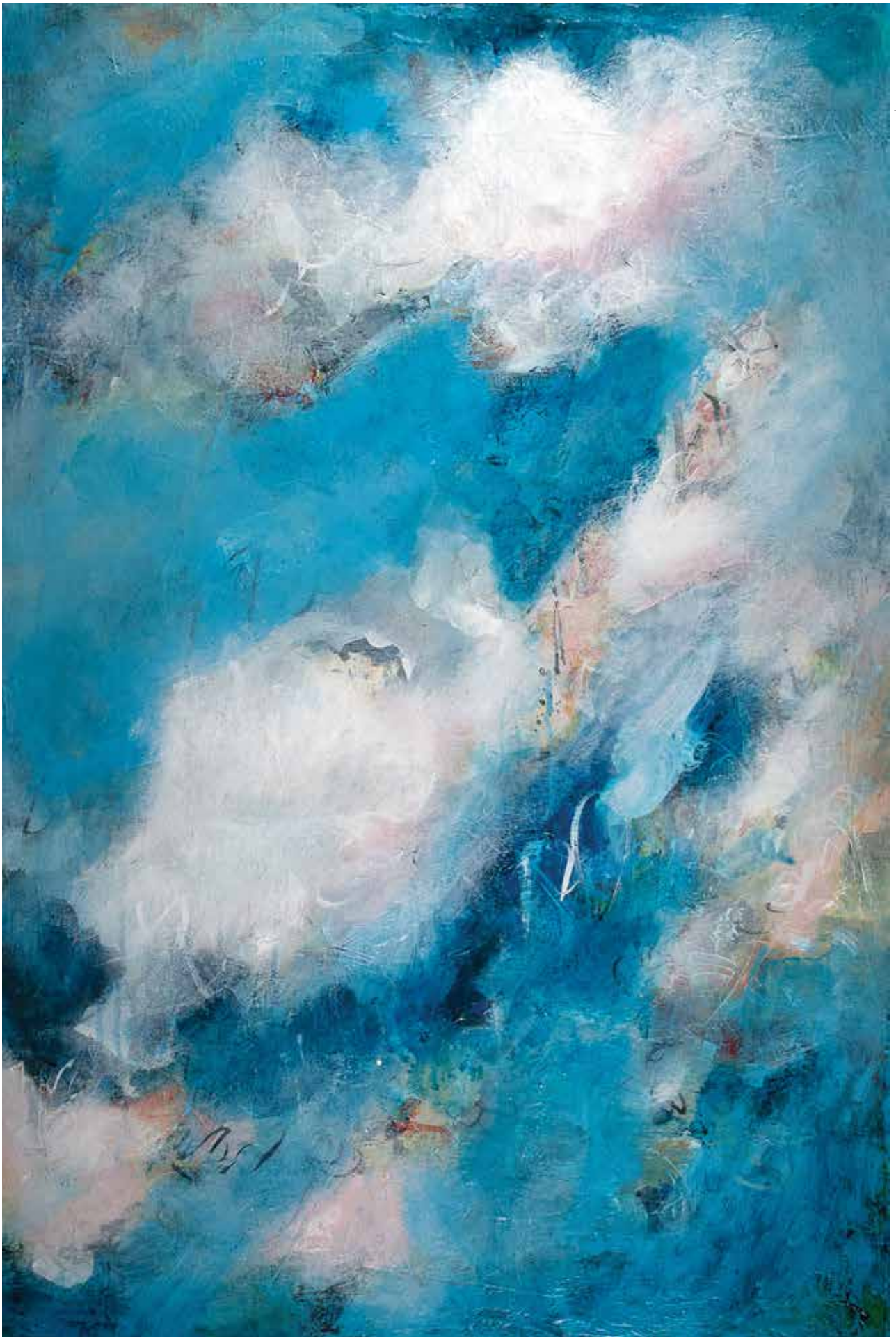
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The Dilworthtown Oak

Genevieve Hilton

The first book assigned by my new book club in Hong Kong, meeting half a world away from the action it described, detailed the life and career of the Marquis de Lafayette: he who, at the age of 19, had left France to join the Continental Army of George Washington.

But I didn't need the book club's assignment to teach me about General Lafayette: I had grown up in the shadow of the great man's influence. Just a few roads away from my childhood home, a fieldstone covered with white stucco, stood the venerable Dilworthtown Oak. My parents had told me this extraordinary tree had already been full-grown at the time of the Battle of the Brandywine in September 1777, when American troops had been routed by British forces under General Howe.

The Marquis de Lafayette, wounded, had sat in the shade of the Dilworthtown Oak to recover, tended to by a local Quaker woman whose name was not recorded.

The redcoats went on to set the city of Philadelphia ablaze. The Continental Army fled to nearby Valley Forge, where they spent a horrific winter of suffering and deprivation—a dark time, when they could not yet see the future, and did not yet know that they would ultimately prevail.

I learned somewhere that the General's reputation during the American Revolution had been so great that one of the first acts of the US Postal Service after the war was to call a moratorium on towns naming themselves Lafayette. Thus do we find, today, the map of the Eastern United States dotted with place names like Fayetteville, Lafayetteburg, and Fayettestown.

By the time I arrived on the scene as a little girl, almost two centuries later, what I found most interesting about the Dilworthtown Oak was the fact that although it still stood, it was rotted out inside, hollow. Its sides were strong, and every fall it rained down acorns, meaning that a lawn keeper had to ruthlessly root out oak seedlings from the surrounding area each spring. At some point in the previous twenty years, the local historical society had put up a bronze plaque, confirming what we locals already knew of the mighty Dilworthtown Oak's glorious history. They installed a screen on the hollowed-out front to prevent irreverent and blasphemous teenagers from throwing trash into the dark oaken cavity on Mischief Night.

For years, my older brother told me stories about creepy things that lived behind that screen and would come out at night, mostly to prey upon little girls who messed with their older brother's baseball cards or comic books.

Whenever someone from the city came out to visit us at our little stone house in the country, we would take a walk to the top of the hill to see the Quaker Meetinghouse, built in the 1600s, and the one-room Octagonal Schoolhouse, unused for decades. Behind the meetinghouse, in the Birmingham-Lafayette Cemetery, lies a mass grave of the men and boys who died in the Battle of the Brandywine two hundred years earlier. While the mass grave itself was marked, the names of the individual soldiers—British and Yankee, lying together—were not. As our visitors pondered this sobering fact, we would tell them proudly that not far from here, you could see the Dilworthtown Oak, where Lafayette had sat, wounded—an implausibly young general, a teenager, really, no doubt wondering if he would live to see his native France again. Later, at home, my brother would show the city visitors his collection of musket balls. Even then, a few would turn up every spring when the fields on the other side of the creek from our house were plowed.

For the bicentennial of the Battle of the Brandywine in 1977, a re-enactment was held. Local history buffs converged on the upper hayfield, sweating in the late summer sun, to wear tri-cornered hats and play with fake muskets. A month earlier, my father had mown a path through the hay, using the sickle-bar on his tractor, so that I could visit the little boy about my age who lived on the other side of the field, without getting ticks and burrs on my way. We all laughed when the "Revolutionary Army," a little unclear on what had actually happened during the battle, marched boldly up the pathway my father had sheared, towards Coley's house, as the man playing the part of some officer—a local guy who had a horse—tried ineffectively to turn them back toward the actual field of battle.

My mother told me that confusion and muddle like this were probably a more accurate representation of the battle than what we read about in the local hagiographies. (She probably didn't use the word hagiography, since I was only four at the time, but her point was clear.)

My brother, who loved dressing up in costumes, begged to be allowed to join the "troops." Drummer boys, he insisted, could certainly have been as young as seven, and anyway, General Lafayette was only 19 himself—and our parents finally relented. My brother was NOT to wear the dusty, half-rotted tricorner hat from the attic that some ancestor of ours had left around, no matter how appropriate it might have been. But he could dress up in a little soldier's outfit and follow the "army" up to

Coley's house if he wished. While he was scampering through the hay and ragweed, a documentary filmmaker on the scene for the day asked if my brother would like to be in his movie. This, my mother absolutely forbade. It was a source of dinner table conversation for years afterwards: had my brother been saved from a horrible pervert or denied a glorious film career?

I learned the word "Bicentennial" that year. Bi - like the two wheels on the bicycle I had not yet learned to ride; and cent - like the 100 cents in a dollar, and a century, which was 100 years. For the first time, in contemplation of this new word, I saw the vastness of centuries opening before and behind me. One hundred years later, I learned, would be the tri-centennial. The hayfield, the creek, the sunny hill, and the mass grave, shaded by maple and yew trees, might still be there. But out of my whole family, I myself would be the most likely to survive that long. I might arrive at the tri-centennial re-enactment, a 104-year-old woman with white hair, and tell them what I had seen, and be interviewed on the radio.

As for the Dilworthtown Oak, I never doubted it would still be around. For years, whenever I drew a picture of a tree, it was always an oak, with its characteristic hand-shaped leaves, surrounded by acorns, and a mysterious, dark hole, covered up with a screen. Sometimes I drew Lafayette languishing beneath the tree.

Thus, it was an enormous shock to hear from my mother, in a letter she wrote to me when I was at college, that the Dilworthtown Oak had fallen. Not to old age, nor to the pernicious rot that was eating its insides for so many years, but to a cataclysmic bolt of lightning during a violent summer storm. The great natural monument had cracked in two, and although part of it might have been able to hang on for a few months longer, the local historical society had pronounced the Dilworthtown Oak dead on the scene.

Once again, just as I had when I was a tiny child, I saw the immeasurable stretch of years before and behind me. But this time, the sense of permanence and continuity was gone. If the Dilworthtown Oak could fall, what else might happen? Would the plaque be removed? Or changed, to say, "Here once stood ..."? Would the screen be tossed into the old scrap metal heap by the creek? Would my parents one day move away from the Brandywine Battlefield? What would Lafayette have thought?

Out of curiosity, in 2019, when I was about to order the book, *Lafayette - A Hero of Two Worlds*, for my new book club, I looked up the Dilworthtown Oak on Google. I wasn't expecting much; a local curiosity is nothing in the grand expanse of global history. Still, I thought, there might be a few references to Lafayette.

After filtering through page after page of listings for "charming homes" on quarter-acre lots in Dilworthtown Oak Estates, I finally found two references to the actual Dilworthtown Oak.

The first one said the oak was famous for the legend of three rapists from the British army of General Howe, who had been hanged from its branches in the period of chaos and looting that followed the Battle of the Brandywine, and that the tree had fallen in a windstorm. The page asserted authoritatively that the oak was known to one and all as the Haunted Hangman's Tree, and that ghosts had been spotted there as late as the 1980s. The information was taken from a self-published book by someone called Phyllis Recca, wholly unknown to me. Confused, I looked at the other reference.

There, the great Dilworthtown Oak was relegated to a sin-

gle phrase: "a Penn oak" (in other words, an oak that had been alive when William Penn founded the colony of Pennsylvania in the 1600s) "that had failed to make it to the 21st century." The main article, a review of famous trees in the area, spent most of its effort glorifying the so-called Lafayette Sycamore, a tree that "towers 100 feet on the west side of Route 1, about 50 yards north of the entrance to the Brandywine Battlefield State Park." The article enthused, "According to legend, the Marquis de Lafayette rested during the Battle of the Brandywine under this very sycamore," but "Historians dispute this, pointing out that there is no way of confirming if Lafayette was anywhere near this tree during the battle."

By this time, my own son was nearly the age Lafayette had been when the great man either was or wasn't wounded, and either did or didn't sit under a tree, which, for all I knew by this point, might as well have been a sassafras or a poplar. I knew that my son's memories of stories I told him when he was very young were not strictly accurate. Were my own memories just as muddled? All the same, I felt as if a final door had been shut on my childhood. My parents had moved to the Allegheny Mountains for their retirement, my brother had made his career in New York City, and I had spent more of my life in a skyscraper in Hong Kong than in a stone house next to a hayfield.

The other stories of famous oaks and sycamores were just legends themselves, I rationalized at last. Why should the story I thought I heard not bear just as much credence as those? Each year, in any case, the story of how my brother was almost a movie star gained more and more details, and the provenance of the tricorn hat became more and more established, at least in my father's mind.

No, the Dilworthtown Oak was better remembered as a place where a kind but nameless Quaker woman, despite the roar of the surrounding battle, tended to a desperate teenager burdened with enormous responsibility but frightened out of his wits, freeing him to fulfill his destiny as the hero of a great revolution and the namesake of 100 podunk towns.

I took up my phone and typed happily in the WhatsApp group, which was self-mockingly named, "Serious Book Club HK."

"Lafayette?" I typed. "Cool! You know, I grew up right around a place where he fought. When he was wounded, he sat under this oak tree to recover, and it was still around when I was a child."

My version of the story would live on, not as dry history, but as a personal treasure. Like a musket ball or a dusty old hat to show to friends and family—both on the old battlefield itself, and halfway around the world.

Genevieve Hilton was born and raised in Chester County, Pennsylvania, on the site of the Brandywine Battlefield. She has lived in Hong Kong since 2000, and writes science fiction novels and stories as well as political and business stories.

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Count Each Breath

by Maria James-Thiaw

Review by Jaimee D. Cali

Maria James-Thiaw's poetry collection, "Count Each Breath" focuses on black women and their unique position within society amidst the chaos during the 2020 global pandemic and onward. She opens a door into history that forces readers to stare society in the face. In these powerful poems about change, James-Thiaw rages with beauty and grace as she illustrates that women who rage are the ones that bring change and that the evolution of women empowerment and the black female experience are more powerful than illness.

Read more of this review at www.philadelphiastories.org



Burning Sage

by Jennifer Rieger

Review by Kris McCormick

Nothing is hidden in Jennifer Rieger's essay collection *Burning Sage* as she chronicles her life as a young girl attempting to understand life, love, and loss before an unexpected pregnancy at 19 years old. The throughline of unvarying strength of self-love overwhelms the reader as it speaks to the heartbreak and happiness of motherhood in all forms. She encapsulates the struggle and salvation of teaching, the battle and blessing of being a woman, and the grind and grace of it all.

Read more of this review at www.philadelphiastories.org



Monsoon Daughter

by Mandy Moe Pwint Tu

Review by Ollie Shane

In her debut collection *Monsoon Daughter*, Poet Mandy Moe Pwint Tu uses figurative language to evoke not only generational trauma and tragedy, but also the consequences of immigration. Pwint Tu creates an intimacy that marks the reader beyond the final page. The collection emphasizes on the speaker's pre-existing socioeconomic, racial, and gendered statuses and how the narrator, Moondaughter, must face these adversities throughout the course of her life.

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