

PhiladelphiaStories

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

SUMMER / 2023 / FREE



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ART



BRONZE BENCH by Sophie Glenn

Sophie Glenn is a metalworker and furniture maker currently based in Reading, PA. She has exhibited her work across the country, including exhibits with Blue Spiral 1 Gallery (NC), the Museum for Art in Wood (PA), and the Metal Museum (TN). Glenn has been fortunate to receive several grants, fellowships, and residences to help advance her career, including the John D. Mineck Furniture Fellowship in 2022. Visit sophieglenn.com



WILLIAM P by Carolyn Harper

Philadelphia based textile artist Carolyn Harper shows her work nationally. Her hand-embroidered batik and large, hand-sewn art quilt portraits have a strong social justice message. Harper's textile portrait *William P.* appeared on exhibition at Muse Gallery in Philadelphia earlier this year in *Seeking Freedom: Portraits of Mass Incarceration*. This solo show of Harper's work was dedicated to telling the stories and showing the faces of individuals who have been forgotten by much of society. carolynharperart.com



BALANCE OF POWER (CALLINGS) by Karen Bright

Artist Karen Bright earned an MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art and a BFA from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Exhibiting her work since 1981, she has been the recipient of numerous awards, project grants and artist-in-residences. Bright recently retired from Monmouth University after teaching for 39 years and maintains a studio in Newtown Square. Working in the abstract, Bright's paintings and sculptures focus on the natural world and a concern for the environment. karenbright.com



CONTEMPLATION by Barbara Dirnbach

Barbara Dirnbach holds bachelor's and master's degrees in art and art education from New York University and was a highly praised art teacher in both New York & Philadelphia. Mid-career she earned a degree in interior design/space planning from University of the Arts. Dirnbach resides in Philadelphia and shows at many area galleries and art centers where her work has been recognized with awards. She is a member of several art organizations and a board member of *Artists Equity*. arbaradirnbaach.wixsite.com



THE ITALIAN BRIDE by Tony Squadroni

Freelance illustrator and teacher Tony Squadroni utilizes a myriad of techniques and styles in his work. Drawing on his South Philadelphia roots, Squadroni's "The Italian Bride" brings the viewer back to the early 1960s and the excitement of the bride coming from her home to the wedding ceremony. squadroniart.com



OLD FASHIONED AI by Richard Mahr

Painting off and on since he was a teen, Richard Mahr resides in Radnor and is now semi-retired. He is currently pursuing a variety of art lessons with the goal of elevating his status from "self-taught painter" to "artist." This acrylic painting is meant to suggest that AI (Artificial Intelligence) is not a new concept, but one that has been evolving over many years.



INTERIOR 1 by Pete Sparber

Pete Sparber earned an MFA from Cornell University in 1980. Over the following 40 years Sparber held various senior executive roles in human resources in the US and abroad, but continued to paint, draw and show his work. In 2020, after a six-year assignment in Tokyo and Shanghai, he returned to and has permanently settled in Philadelphia, leaving behind the corporate world. His primary avocation is now to paint.



GLUE AND COFFEE 3 by Noah Hanselman

Noah Hanselman is a collage artist and musician based in Philadelphia.

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All the Places I'll Never See

Curtis Smith

I was a townie. She was a college girl picking up weekend shifts at the diner. She told me I wouldn't believe what textbooks cost. She told me about her semester abroad, the cathedrals and battlefields. A dig where she unearthed a coin from the days of Augustus. Histories so deep she felt them. "Right here," she said, a hand laid over her heart. Our first kiss behind the alley dumpster after we lugged out the night's trash. Her watermelon gum pinched from between her lips and stuck to the dumpster's metal. She smiled, then—as she drew closer—another expression, one that made me forget the cold. I'd been kissed before, but only by town girls. Kisses that didn't taste like watermelon. Kisses that—beneath their wetness and curiosity—carried a hint of the earth we shared. Our tangled roots. The graveyards littered with the stones of our kin.

"Show me the things I've never seen," she said. So, we hiked to the cave where another generation's bootleggers hid their stash. I introduced her to the Grange's demolition derby, which she loved, and the rod-and-gun club's tripe, which she didn't. Along the river's muddy bank, we dug for arrowheads. We never found any, but she didn't mind. The thrill, she said, was in the searching. In the forgetting of a hundred thousand disappointments—and in the belief something beautiful might be waiting just beyond her next breath.

The windows in her attic apartment rattled when the winds blew in from the fields. Cocooned beneath every blanket she owned, feeling more weight than warmth, we wove hazy narratives of a life beyond this town. The places she wanted to see. Pompeii. Easter Island. Machu Picchu. The languages she spoke and the others she was learning. The parents who'd always bail her out with a plane ticket home. Sometimes, as she slept, I flipped through her books. History. World religions. The blur of margin notes and highlighted passages. And sometimes I wrapped a blanket over my shoulders and sat by the window. My forehead resting against the cold glass while the snow buried everything I knew.

She left of course. That's what travelers do. They board planes. They drive into the sunset, and when they look back, their windows become frames, pictures of what once was. I've been with other girls since, but in my unclaimed moments, I think of her, a paper doll posed before a thousand imagined lives,

each shinier than mine.

Summer brings its heat and storms and the county fair, and come August, as the nights' thrum ebbs from the cicadas to the crickets, the students return. The highlight of that first weekend is the freshman walk. The cops block off Main Street, and the shops hand out their merch, and the guides stop at their designated spots to share local folklore. The band plays the alma mater and the fight song, and the drumline's jagged pulse echoes along the brick and glass.

I laze by the diner window, watching the girls, my eyes losing focus the way they do when I sit along the sun-dappled river. The manager tells me to quit my daydreaming and take out the trash. Heat from the alley's macadam, the rush of flies when I open the dumpster's lid, but after I toss in my bags, I pause. On the dumpster's side, her gum, a fossil dulled by sun and rain, and when I touch its ridges, I think about all the places I'll never see. And I think about a first kiss and a taste I believed was watermelon, but which was really goodbye.

Curtis Smith grew up in Ardmore. He has published over 125 stories and essays and thirteen books. His latest novel, *The Magpie's Return*, was named a Kirkus Indie pick of the year in 2020. His next novel, *The Lost and the Blind*, will be released this fall.

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In the Golden Hour, Cormorants

Poem by Cheryl Baldi

We first noticed the cormorant late afternoon,
the golden hour just before dusk,
black feathers and kinked neck,
a thin hooked bill, perched
on a piling facing the house as though
watching the oxygen tanks unloaded
from the back of a truck, the wheelchair
we carried up the front stairs.

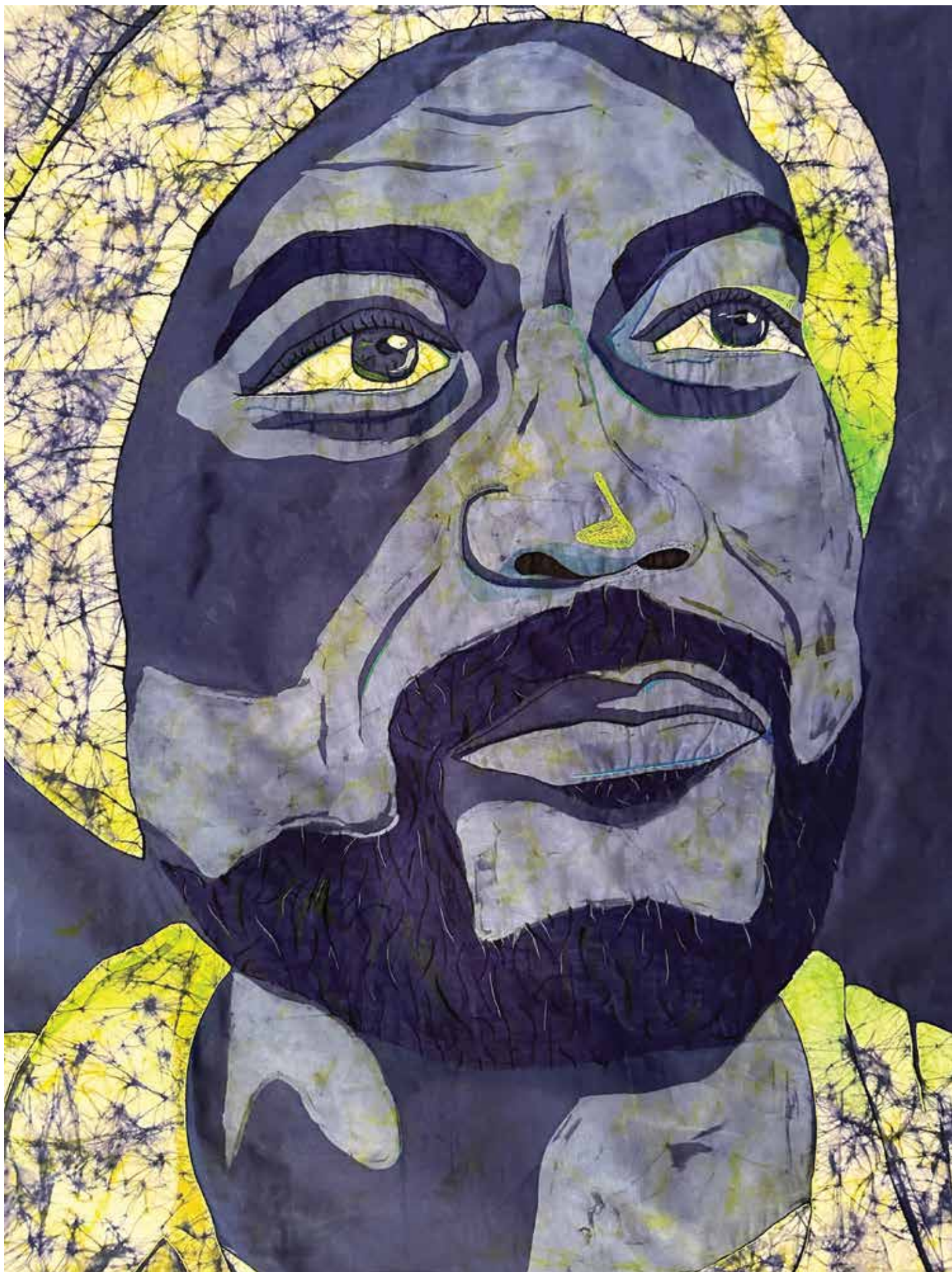
The next day there were more,
diving deep beneath the docks, feeding
for hours before coming to rest
one after another on pilings
until every one was taken.
A silent chorus, in their black robes,
and as the time we'd been given
shortened to a few days they offered comfort,

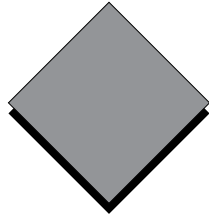
a belief that as long as they stayed
she wouldn't die, even as she refused
pudding, sweet tea, turned her face to the wall
as we moistened her lips with a wet cloth.
The last day was quiet, the water still
until her final breath when wind
suddenly kicked up. I watched
as they rose in unison, heading south
as though ushering her away.

I wished them safe harbor.
I wish them safe return.



Poet, teacher, and editor, Cheryl Baldi is the author of *The Shapelessness of Water* and a former Pennsylvania Poet Laureate. A finalist for the Robert Fraser Award for Poetry and the Francis Locke Memorial Award, she is widely published, most recently in *ONE ART: a journal for poetry*. She volunteers for the Bucks County Poet Laureate Program and the Arts and Cultural Council and lives in Doylestown, PA and along the coast in New Jersey.





Coming Loose

Cassie Burkhardt

After running errands all morning, I collapse with a hundred grocery bags in front of the fridge like one of those deflated wind socks at a car dealership. All I've eaten today is coffee. My husband texts me, "Just paid the credit card bill. We didn't save any money this month because of you." He's already done five cases today. I'm throwing out spoiled leftovers, juggling cartons of broth, wondering if I have time to return those silky dresses I bought impulsively when I broke my mom-parole last week. I look around at the kitchen. Soggy Cheerios and Pokemon cards with gnawed corners, junk mail, a blizzard of paper cutouts under stools, stained tulip petals arching their backs in a vase, poised to fall.

I shed my coat, unpeel my scarf like a bandage that's holding my head in place. I radiate with static electricity and eight years of power-mothering. My whole life feels like static cling. My kids, my husband, the house. I just want to douse it. I want to bathe and wake up new. A Bond babe exiting the ocean. Glistening, refreshed. To need nothing. Just a bikini. My life, reduced to triangles.

Am I invisible if I never talk to anyone? If I go days conversing only with my kids and Debbie at the hardware store? Am I the sum total of my past experiences or the heartbeat of my burning desires? Where do I stuff all the longing?

I catch my reflection in the oven hood. I see a dried artichoke. Or one of those clothing storage bags where you vacuum out the air. I should have done hard labor, something with chemical steam or bamboo hacking, plucking of body hair, chicken sexing, the moving of boulders in a quarry. I'm well-suited for that kind of work. I don't mind gross, heavy, practically impossible. Meanwhile, the years pile up. I survive on toast nubs and apple skins. I French braid my daughter's hair with a toothbrush in my mouth and a compost bucket dangling from my wrist. I sit with my kids during every piano lesson. My vagina dries up from underuse. I have this determination, this grit, this maniacal worker-bee mentality. I mean, my kids are worth it for sure, but what's the point? I must love it, right?

I lie down belly-up on the kitchen floor with an oven mitt over my face. When I close my eyes all I see is a jellyfish. One of those Portuguese Man-o-wars. I see its sail— this turquoise bubble, no

bigger than a dumpling in the vast blue. It's completely weighted down with poisonous ribbons and coils. Half of it lives on the surface, looking at the sky and wanting to be free, the other half submerged in water with these zooids and polyps that feed it and help it reproduce and colonize inside it. It can't escape, it's tethered, even though it wants to fly away like a teal balloon.

When I was younger, my parents said I could do anything. Anything.

The beep of the dishwasher snaps life back into focus. I stand up, gather my high voltage hair into a bun to get serious about chores, but hang on a minute, there's something in my hair, something dry and spongy. What is that? A chunk of hair? I grab hold of it, run to the bathroom mirror. It's a dreadlock, a mat— like the kind our childhood dog Jake the Newfie would get in the summer, and we'd have to pound at him with a metal rake. All that time he spent under the deck in the dark. Poor mutt actually liked the attention, the cool metal through his fur. I go cross-eyed trying to examine the knot, try to pull it apart like taffy. No way in hell. It's half my head. It has its own weather system. A thick tornado of hair with a hard, unforgiving lanyard texture that has birthed itself at the base of my scalp. How did this happen?

I jump in the shower with a bottle of Pantene Conditioner and a comb. I rip and tease and brush and pull and tear and slather, but the knot's not coming loose. In fact, I think it's getting tighter and closer to my scalp. It's more than hair at this point. It's a relentless bundle of needs. It's a flaxen rope that auto-braided and won't stop. It's a bundle of jellyfish tentacles coiling and reaching two hundred feet into the depth of the sea. After twenty minutes I get out, dripping and hunched in the cavern of our bathroom. I google "shaved head haircuts for women." Smother the knot in coconut oil. Google "How to get a matt out." Attack it with satay skewers. I break all of them. Google "hair extensions, Philadelphia." I grab a scissor, poised, ready. Its jaws open wide. Stop. Stop. Wait. Think.

I toss the scissors into the sink with a clatter. Google "therapist on the Main Line, Philadelphia." Soggy and defeated, I suddenly remember this hairdresser Megan told me about. Kyle. Yes. She has his cell number. Maybe he can help? He can help! He wants a picture. I turn around and take a selfie of my back with the nest



of hair. "Help! I'm tangled."

"Yea sure. Come in Sunday morning. Nice back," he says. Wink emoji.

I review the picture I sent him. Did I just send a half-nude picture to a stranger? It's my bare back. I'm horrified. But also delighted? A straight hairdresser? Cha-ching! I always secretly liked my posterior deltoid.

Sunday. I beg my husband to watch the kids even though he's on call and passive-aggressive-work-texting while I spin around the kitchen like a top wiping down counters. "Our kids can't have their mom walking around bald, right?" I say to him. "Yea ok, go, but keep your phone on at all times," he says. "Of course," I reply. The kids whine, *Can we watch TV?* They're heavy breathing and squealing as they build a couch fort with seven hundred blankets.

That's my cue. I'm so excited to ditch today. I feel like I haven't left the house alone since my kids were born, plus the Covid years, so basically a decade. Sometimes I can sneak off to CVS alone or get a relaxing bikini wax if my husband is between calls. And while the kids are at school, I can take exercise classes or sub at the elementary school, write a poem between 2pm and 3pm, but other than that, I always have between one and three humans with me. I know what you're thinking. Get a nanny! A million nannies, right? But I'm a masochist, like I told you. Or I fell so far down a well of homemaking I can't climb my way out. I'm out of practice. I wear the same shirt three days in a row. I'm what they call "too far gone" or as my husband says, I'm "doing great." I can't justify my free-time over mom-time or imagine anyone else driving my daughter to violin, positioning her fingers on the bow, cooking them all dinner, even if it's eggs. I can't imagine missing the exchange of all the subtleties of kid-talk at the kitchen counter. I *want* to take care of them. I love them. I just can't find anything to grab hold of in this churning ocean (except for wine) and my surgeon husband might as well live on another planet. I step on the gas, blast electronic dance music, and try to become someone cool and relaxed. I pop on my shades and change lanes and change lanes again.

I show up at Kyle's salon and it's silent, save for a vague rush of wind. Kyle's svelte assistant Suki takes my coat. I'm on the twelfth floor of a skyscraper in downtown Philadelphia and everything is sleek and minimal, concrete, white. I hear my own footsteps. The most delicious sound. No one else is here. Did he come in specially for me? I sit in front of the vanity mirror and for some reason the marquee light bulbs around the mirror make even me look gorgeous right now, like I'm the guest of honor at the Great Gatsby's party and not a housewife from Gladwyne smelling of pancakes. I'm already feeling great about coming. Kyle emerges. "Woah, what did you do?" he chuckles, starts tousling the hair that isn't a nebula. I feel his fingers on my scalp. My hair in his hands. I go limp, immediately get goosebumps.

"Don't worry, I'll get this out."

"You will?"

"Yea babe, you're gonna be fine. Lauren? Nice to meet you."

"You too," I say.

I silence my phone, take a deep breath, sink into the leather

of the chair.

"Lookin' good mama," he says, making eye contact with me in the mirror and fastening the cape around me. Is he really talking to me? Babe? Mama? The jellyfish inside me reels something up with a tentacle, drops it down again to dangle. Kyle. His eyes are black and his body movements, so fluid. He's covered in tattoos, long hair. Something inside me unglutes with a warm current. He's holding my hair in his hands. He smells like cigarettes, expensive soap, leather. One of the tattoos visible through his ripped v-neck seems to reach for me like a crown of thorns blooming into roses. I've completely forgotten about the knot and possible baldness. I'm seeing lightning bolts. I'm imagining his hands all over my body. I'm imagining how we will have to break the news to our families about how we've fallen in love and are running off to Bali together. I'm imagining finishing my novel in a bikini with him kissing my bare neck from behind. I'm imagining beads of ocean water on my bare stomach and my life as a perfume ad. He is the opposite of my husband and the suburbs and everything I hate about getting old, used, flattened, forgotten.

"Bourbon?" He asks. You seem tense."

"This early?" I laugh.

"Why not mama?"

"Ok," I say, "Sure." Suki brings it to me. I take a sip and it coats all of my ravines instantly in honey and smoke.

Two hours later. We've talked about everything. New York apartments we had, dive bars we got wasted in, leather jackets we loved, bookstores that got bulldozed, how we ended up where we are in life against our will with lots of hand gesturing. Polish poets and borscht in Greenpoint, 917 area codes we'll take to the grave. That Moroccan club Le Souk on 3rd and B. We miss Barneys, American Apparel, Schillers. We hate bankers, lawyers, doctors, Mormons, cops, Facebook. Life. We miss the Nokia age. We love food. Bloody steaks and strong cocktails. We love sex. We get really worked up and jaded and it feels amazing. His shoes dance around my body like I'm a trophy. His voice is gravel-y and seductive. His hands are fast and strong, his eyes are intense. The little nicks on the inside of his pointer fingers-the unexpected stab of a scissor point-excite me. He picks and pulls my hair with the patience of a monk. The knot is coming loose. It smells like all the coconut.

It's love at first sight, right? Has to be. I can't believe how perfect we are for each other. I don't know how Kyle's gonna break it to his gorgeous Italian wife that he is in love with one of his clients and I can't wait for the sexting to come. What to do about the kids? We'll have to alternate weekends or... But it doesn't matter. I'm so exhilarated I start chewing on the ice cubes to calm me down. His apartment probably has a view of the skyline and is dark and chocolatey and he will undress me on his Italian sofa. We will eat brunch lazily all the next day and walk arm in arm and his tattoos and my hair flip will get us into every restaurant and club. This could be good for me. My husband won't have to know. He won't even suspect! I'm somehow certain that leading a double life is the answer to my problems. I nurse the fantasy, sucking it up like the last drops of the Bulleit bourbon. The knot is almost loose.

Thirty minutes later, Kyle is done. The knot is out. My heart is



cruising down a slip n slide.

"Wow, thank you so much," I say, and he rips the cape off me like a matador. I stand up, hike up my pants, stretch and arch my spine.

"I'll check you out over here," he says. I follow his ass and his Kurt Cobain mane across the room and away to a smoky bar, an exotic island, between my legs— and I decide I'm going to go buy him a present. To thank him. To keep this going. To sting him with one of my Man-o-war tentacles and reduce him to a scaly husk.

"Hey, I need to run to the Chase to grab a better tip for you. Stay here, will you?" I say. I can't wait to see him waiting for me in one of the spinny chairs. Lit up only by the lights of skyscrapers. Suki will have gone home by then and I'll have him all to myself.

"Hey, all good Laur, you don't have to. Next time," he says with his sultry actor voice. "Or Venmo."

"No, but I want to Kyle. I'll be right back. Wait for me, k?" I text my husband: *He still needs another hour at least. Sorry. Be home soon.*

Twenty minutes later, I pop out of the elevator with gold-dusted rocks glasses in a gift bag and a bottle of bourbon, a blank note. I'm out of breath. I skip towards the salon door and all the pleasure and excitement. I can hear my heart beating. I lick my lips and turn the corner, reach out to delicious diversion. To something outside my boring life, to someone who thinks I'm hot, cool, interesting, worth untangling a hair-knot for with a single-tooth comb for hours, all that stroking and yanking and laughing. Hang on excitement! Here I come life!

The salon is pitch black. Door locked. Very locked.

All I hear is the hum of a distant light bulb, impossible to locate or silence in the vast hallway. My heart sinks into my boots. I think about all the pillow talk. I see myself in the glass. I get a text that my parking is about to expire. The jellyfish sail deflates briefly to dodge a flotilla of water bottles, then back into the ultraviolet and endlessness.

I think about leaving the gift bag at the door with a note. Hey Kyle!— but I don't have a pen and I. Just can't. I get it now.

I touch the place where the knot lived. It aches. As if it's still there and always will be, this thick rope of hair with children and minivans attached to it— my husband, me at the bottom of the well holding them up as I climb, trying to vacuum the well at the same time. I feel its nucleus pulsating, tender at my skull base now. Is it combed out or is it back? Has it entered into my brain vessels now?

What do you want to give the kids for dinner tonight? My husband texts.

I don't even know anymore I write, then delete.

I look into the dark salon for hidden shapes...a few more seconds...I smell all the exotic products and silkiness. I could bring the booze home? But I don't really want my husband asking questions about bourbon and fancy glasses, money wasted. I bolt. Press down on the elevator.

Downstairs is a dazed doorman in front of six TV screens. "Here," I say. "Want this?" I let go of the gift bag into his hands, keep walking.

The glasses rubbing together in the bag is the most embarrassing noise I've ever heard.

I drive home in the icy slap of winter in Gladwyne, PA. For the first time ever, I wish for traffic, but there is none. I'm home.

I try to come in quietly, but there's no point. The house is loud and bright, the kitchen full of squeals and spoons clanking, pencils being sharpened. A paper airplane hits me in the head. My husband's made lentil soup and the kids are slurping it up like cats. The smell of parsley gives me some freshly-hacked hope. The kitchen is a familiar disaster. "Hi Mommy!" everyone says, including my husband. I watch him swirl around a storm of lentils hectically fighting against the current, then dropping to the bottom of the pot. A glass of wine appears.

"How's your hair babe? You look beautiful," He ladles me soup, surprisingly chipper.

"My hair is good," I tell everyone, letting my daughter touch its silkiness with broth hands as I take a seat at the counter and try the soup. My husband gives me a napkin and a kiss, a tiny kiss that's kind of stupid and tight-lipped like a butthole, but I tell myself it's a step in the right direction. I think about the stupid bourbon glasses I bought and the conversation with Kyle, the butterflies I felt and get a dreamy and agonized look in my eye while I slurp. My husband smiles at me and I tell him the soup is hot and that's why I'm tearing up. I let him hug me, look at me, coat me with his gaze. His brown eyes plant roots that reach out through my entire body like firing synapses, blood, sweat and the past ten years. It's true, he's an idiot— clueless, messy, self-absorbed—all men are— but his eyes have always leveled me with a single gaze. Maybe I do love him? I could try again? After winter comes spring kinda thing? I take a deep breath, blow the soup, and taste it, letting the fantasy of today trickle down my throat and get absorbed into the mom chronicles. I'll delete Kyle's number I tell myself. Tomorrow.

Cassie writes poetry, fiction, and essays. Her work has appeared in *Rattle*, *Cleaver*, *New Ohio Review*, *Cagibi*, *Sad Girls* and *The Good Life Review*, among others. She studies with the poet Phil Schultz at the Writers Studio, based in New York.

The Moon as an Engine of Burning

Poem by Paul Ilchko

I don't want to start with the moon
but it was gloomy outside
and there was a pale quivering light
that reflected from water
and silvered the tips of branches
leaving me little choice
even as I contemplated again
the traumatizing prospect of aging
even as I stood there on the renovated deck
considering whether to walk the avenues
in order to clear my head
or to return to my laptop
with all of the tasks that I was avoiding
and as I continued to kill time
and waste psychic energy
you appeared backlit in the doorway
and as I watched you
the flames licked up from the bottom
of your dress and burned it away
your arms raising and fire leaping the gap to me
and I was lost inside moonlight
inside unbreathable heat
I still remember that night after all this time
I still bear the scars
of that unexpected conflagration.



Paul Ilchko is a British American poet and occasional songwriter who lives with his partner in Lambertville, NJ. His work has appeared in many journals, including *The Night Heron Barks*, *Tampa Review*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Sleet Magazine*, and *The Inflectionist Review*. He has also published several chapbooks.



The Care and Keeping of Roomba

Julian Shendelman

We did not set out to be overtaken by robots.

I'd just returned from my friend's cluttered Oakland apartment, where I'd been sent home with a promising gadget: a second-hand robotic vacuum, complete with accessories. Its gray plastic glistened newly beneath a layer of dust. "It needs floor-space to roam," she'd said, wistful. Though less cluttered, my own apartment was far from pristine, our tile floors perpetually gritty with crumbs and dog hair. Maybe Roomba was the miracle I was looking for.

"Zach's not going to like this," I said.

"Oh, he'll be fine." I hoped she was right.

"Won't they sell our floorplan to the government or something?" My husband, while hardly a technophobe, was raised by a conspiracy theorist. My reassurances that we were too boring to monitor did little to assuage him.

"It's not even Wi-Fi compatible. Think of it as a naked Furby."

"Fine, but what if it gets the dog?"

"It has sensors! If it bumps into him it'll back right up. No harm, no foul."

"Okay, but what if we trip over it and die in the night?"

"It has a charging dock and knows how to find its way back!" He looked mortified. "No, no that's a good thing; otherwise we'd be losing it constantly."

"Why can't we just sweep the house?"

"I mean, we can. But I won't." He nodded, defeated. "And if we hate it, we can give it back."

"I'll give it a week," he conceded.

That night, we were startled awake by an ominous WHIRRRR in the living room.

"Do you hear that?!" I whispered.

"Holy shit someone's in the house."

"It sounds mechanical, like the washer is overflowing or—" I sat up, struck by a sudden realization. "ROOMBA."

"ROOMBA?" said Zach, propping himself up on his elbows.

"I guess they had it on a timer or something!"

"Oh, for chrissake," said Zach. The whirring continued, interrupted periodically by the sound of it gently clunking into and reversing out of corners.

"Well, whatever," I said, catching my breath. "It'll just tire itself out and go home." He rested his head on my shoulder and closed his eyes.

But the whirring only got louder, closer. WHIRRRRR. CLUNK. WHIRRRRRR. CLUNK. Roomba slowly careened down the hallway toward our bedroom, navigating the alien terrain of our railroad-style apartment. It knocked against our door, which immediately swung open.

"It hungers," I said. We stared at each other in the dim ambient light. Roomba made a beeline for the bed, our eyes widening with horror as it barreled forth.

"So, this is it," he said. "This is how we die."

I clung to him as Roomba slipped under the bed and began feasting on our prized collection of dust bunnies. After gorging itself on cast-off skin cells and loose dog hair, Roomba steered back toward the door.

"I guess it's done," I said, prematurely. Roomba scooted around the back of the door, slamming it shut and trapping all three of us, four if you count the dog snoring undisturbed at our feet, in the bedroom.

"Goddamnit," said Zach.

We did not die that night. Or the next. With time, we grew accustomed to our electric boarder. Roomba was, overall, self-sufficient, but was clearly no threat to our survival. We'd find it desperately humping the threshold between the hallway's tile and the bedroom's faux wood for minutes on end, eventually passing out mid-coitus and establishing itself as a tripping hazard. "Please. Charge. Roomba," it pleaded.

When its external sensors, little plastic lighthouses we set up to keep it from wandering into the laundry room, ran out of batteries, I inevitably failed to replace them. They hadn't really worked anyway. We wandered around trying to find our automated son, only to (literally) stumble across it gagging on a fallen





sock. "Move. Roomba. To a new. Location. Then press 'Clean.' To restart," it demanded. A quick tug freed the offending sock from its rollers, but by the end of the day, Roomba would be back in the forbidden room slurping up fallen garments or a Truman Capote postcard. Periodically, we'd notice that the spinning trio of bristles had ceased to twirl, which meant Roomba had been just running back and forth across the apartment for days without sweeping anything new into its robo-maw. Still—after cutting loose the clump of hair tangling its mechanisms, it whirred back to life, resilient and hungry as ever.

The floors got cleaner. I tracked fewer crumbs into bed. Zach had not only accepted our new Jetson-ian lifestyle, but he begrudgingly began to enjoy it. We moved to Philadelphia and Roomba was assigned its own box. When we got the keys to our new house, a row home trashed by its former residents and a story of its own, Roomba helped us deal with the cat hair, pizza residue, and rodent excrement. When we adopted our second dog, a gleeful, but clumsy pit-mix, Roomba helped us manage the uptick in shedding. Frank the pit, taking Charlie the chihuahua's cue, quickly learned to ignore our roving roommate, apathetic as it bounced off his sleeping form on its daily commute around the first floor. Roomba rebounded from its past love and

developed a new relationship with a wooden threshold, collapsing in the liminal space between the entryway and living room when its sensors gave up on dislodging the permanent fixture. All was well.

I was in my cubicle when my phone buzzed. It was Zach.

"Hey, babe, what's up?" I asked, expecting one of his midday reports about drama at work or a confusing bill we'd received, or a shift in plans for the evening.

"Hey, so," he said, his voice simultaneously nervous and tired, "have you ever seen that meme about Roomba and the dog—"

I had seen the meme. In it, a blurry cell phone photo reveals the shit-encrusted underbelly of a robot vacuum, accompanied by a hand-drawn chart of the brown, zig-zagging path it'd taken throughout their home.

"No..." I implored. "... It didn't."

"Oh, it most certainly did."

Frank, bless his heart, was still adjusting to living indoors. We mostly got to his accidents quickly, scooping the offending pile into a grocery bag and spraying down the site with enzymatic cleaners to eliminate any lingering odor. But the night before,

Frank had walked downstairs on his own after we'd fallen asleep, only to find a closed door. With no yard in sight, he did what had to be done, in the kitchen. Roomba, on its never-ending quest, tried to help, but the load proved too much for its meager jaws. The turd was half-ingested, gunking up the brushes and rollers and distributing itself evenly across the house, a foul stowaway on the S.S. Roomba.

Kindly, Zach dealt with the most urgent sites, scraping and mopping the floors and airing out the stench. Roomba was set on the porch for a timeout, a child waiting for its father to come home and deliver on its mother's threats. We debated throwing it out entirely, but something inside me refused. Perhaps it was the intergenerational trauma of my grandmother's depression-era childhood, or maybe it was my own unique neuroses, but it felt both wasteful and cruel to dispense of our pet vacuum in its time of need. YouTube University came to the rescue with a video aptly titled "How to clean poop out of your Roomba." The support was twofold: a friendly woman named Victoria taught me how to disassemble the device while wearing dish gloves, and 108 commenters below reassured me that I wasn't the first or last person to encounter this dilemma.

Approximately one hour, 47 Q-tips, and a ruined toothbrush later, Roomba had been purified and was recovering on its charger. Roomba lived out the remainder of its days in relative peace, following us to a suburban rental where it had more room than ever to roam, freely gobbling up dog hair and the occasional tidy mouse dropping. Eventually, its bristled propellers stopped working entirely, and I was faced with a decision: to replace the parts and hope it would start functioning again, or to surrender and stop pouring time and money into a near-decade-old model. I packed Roomba, its charger, and its useless external sensors into a box and placed it at the end of our driveway. It was gone by the end of the day, hopefully taken in by some good-hearted tinkerer.

Roomba's absence was painfully obvious. Within days, we were overwhelmed by dirt and dander. I'd wake up every morning congested and allergic. The afternoon light pouring through our windows illuminated every particle of filth on our floorboards. We swept constantly, or at least, as often as we could, but it was no use. Even at its most decrepit, Roomba had been the one thing standing between our livable home and total chaos.

In February, I caved and bought a refurbished Eufy RoboVac 25C for \$90 on eBay. It's Wi-Fi compatible, which worried Zach, but I promised to never connect it to our network, lest it sell our floorplan to Amazon for some unknown nefarious purpose. Without connecting it to the app, the only way to control the device is with an external remote, which has a plethora of fun buttons and allows you to drive it like a toy car, albeit an extremely slow one. It gets stuck under our couch and beneath our radiator covers, it chokes on the occasional piece of string, and it has an incurable urge to hump the metal edging that lines the linoleum portion of our kitchen, which I find nostalgic. Despite its flaws, our floors are cleaner than ever. As we say at Passover each year, "dayenu," which means "it would have been enough."

I know its name is Eufy Robovac, but I've been calling it Roomba as a sentimental tribute to the fallen. Unlike its predecessor, it cannot speak, emitting simple beeps in a sequence decoded in the handbook I haven't read. It's the only member of my family that never answers when I call its name—Dayenu.

Julian Shendelman lives with his husband and two dogs near Philadelphia. After pursuing—and ultimately abandoning—an academic career as a queer/trans theorist, Julian turned his attention to re-establishing his writing practice and community. His poetry chapbook, "Dead Dad Club," was published by Nomadic Press in 2017 and his creative nonfiction has appeared in *Bat City Review*. He's been a fellow at the Lambda Lit Retreat for Emerging LGBTQ+ Writers (2012) and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts (2022). When he's not freelancing, he's running Collective Lit.

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Bic Breath

Poem by Jake Price

Breathing in fresh cancer, lighting a new cigarette
with what is left of an old one.
My burnt lungs, still smoldering,
inside my chest. Between my teeth,
reigniting through my lips,
with every exhale smoke sifts into the air.
Who needs oxygen? Why should I quit?
If everything is burning down and
turning to ash, going up in flames
regardless. That doesn't seem so bad.



Jake Price is a sophomore student at Susquehanna University pursuing a degree in creative writing. He spends most of his time reading his work to his cat, Raven, who has yet to give him any feedback. Jake has an Instagram account where he posts his poetry, @nolenprice, that has amassed over 3100 followers as of writing this. His poetry has been published in *Rivercraft Magazine*, *Poet Lore Magazine*, and *Sanctuary Magazine*. His short fiction has also been published in *Cream Scene Carnival* and *Querencia Press*.

Queen Anne's Lace

Poem by Steve Shelly

To my mother, Elizabeth Worthington Shelly

A coarse scatter of gravelly buds
with a bare wire undercarriage,
a stem like baling twine,
and the aroma of last night's dowsed fire.

No silky petals here:
you look like the doilies old ladies lay
on the heads and arms of chairs
to soak up sweat and body oil.

How cruel, they named you for a queen
when you were always a working class flower,
a Depression bloom.
There was never any luxury for you:
nobody took you into their garden
to cultivate or to coax.
You grew up in worn out fields,
in ditches along the sides of roads,
nurtured on rocks and exhaust fumes.

And that one purple dot in your center?
The one legend says is lacemaker's blood?
That's yours: shed along with your last tear
before you learned never to cry again
no matter how much it hurt.



Steve Shelly lives in Devon, Pa. and has worked for many years as a psychotherapist. His poetry has appeared in a variety of publications including *The Atlanta Review* and *Philadelphia Stories*. He works as a Volunteer Guide at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Filling Up

Poem by Wes Ward

On a winding road this side of South Mountain
which looms beside the less and less quiet valley,
we park the Jeep just past a roadside spring
that streams from a pipe fastened to a rock.
Such an insufficient description, I know,
but you don't need to see it, just trust
that today as we lift empty plastic jugs from the back
and pop the caps to fill up on the free spring,
I'm stuck in time, or maybe just seemingly so
because nothing passes—not a car, a bike, or a breeze,
not a sound from the songbird likely stuck somewhere
deep in the somewhere trees erectly still on the mountain.
I'm bound by the thought of us here, somewhere
in the muck of life and all that's falling
each day—each leaf, each dripping drop, each glimpse
of sunlight reflecting from the cascade of uncertain endings.
Someday I'll ask where this went, where it fell or what it
fell into. But if I stay here, stuck, just one moment more,
I know I'll find a way to slip this into my pocket,
zip us up, cap these jugs, preserve the roadside spring
that begs us to drink—drink from this leaky mountain,
as if we seek the answers or even know how to ask.



Wes Ward earned his MA in Writing at Johns Hopkins University. His poetry has appeared in *North American Review*, *Sewanee Theological Review*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. He was a finalist for the Bridport Prize in the UK. Wes teaches high school and college English, as well as education courses for teachers. He lives with his wife and two children in Newville, Pennsylvania.



5 X 8

Poem by Kelley Jean White

Take the afternoon train toward
forgetting.
Fill the saddlebags of your Harley.
Go in peace.

I will wait under the birch
for the owls to cry.

Hitchhike to Columbus.
Carry a calico bandana full of lightning.

I will remember the hedgerow,
the small silver trout,
the history of icicles,
the taste of juniper berries on your tongue.

Pack your trunk, take your pistol,
Measure the wingspan of a barnwood flag.

I carry a snail in my backpack.
He chases a grasshopper
under stones.

Heartsick, your highway
whispers 'tomorrow, heart,
ache'. This is a film,
twice forgotten:
a spaghetti western,
this balloon lifting
you from sleep.



Pediatrician Kelley White has worked in Philadelphia and New Hampshire. Poems have appeared in *Exquisite Corpse*, *Rattle*, and *JAMA*. Her most recent chapbook is *A Field Guide to Northern Tattoos* (Main Street Rag Press.) Recipient of 2008 Pennsylvania Council on the Arts grant she is Poet in Residence at Drexel's Medical School. Her newest collection, *NO. HOPE STREET*, was recently published by Kelsay Books.

An Interview with Michael Brix, Executive Director of Tree House

Jonathan Kemmerer-Scovner



From left to right, Jonathan Kemmerer-Scovner poses with Michael Brix, Executive Director of Tree House Books.

I came to the edge of Broad Street, Temple University at my back, then crossed from one world to the next. It was an unseasonably hot and sunny afternoon. Down Susquehanna Avenue, a group of people were browsing through a small cart filled with books and I knew I was headed in the right direction.

I walked through the front door and into a small space overflowing with books, tall shelves which lined the walls. Salman Rushdie and Philip Roth immediately jumped out at me and I flipped through Goodbye, Columbus while in the room next door, a teacher helped children with their reading.

I put the book back just as Michael Brix, Executive Director of Tree House Books, came down to meet me.

Do you remember the first book you read that made you love reading?

The Chronicles of Narnia. My mom read that to us before bedtime. That's always my go-to answer for that question.

I also loved the Beverly Cleary series with Beezus and Ra-

mona, as I was also a pest. And I read a not insignificant amount of Hardy Boys mysteries that had been my father's.

Coming down here, I realized I still think of you primarily as the head of the Yes! And... theater camp, even though that's been five years ago now.

Yeah, that was actually the second nonprofit I'd founded. The first was *The Simple Way*, a community in Kensington that deals with direct relief, taking people to the hospital, providing food and clothing... It was out of that organization that the idea for a theater camp grew, because we'd partnered with *UrbanPromise* in Camden and a few other organizations to run a summer theater program for kids. So *Yes! And...*, as we called it, spun off into its own nonprofit, and that's what I did for the next 20 years.

The entire time, however, I knew that if *Yes! And...* was going to continue, it needed to have different leadership that would allow it to grow beyond its founders. That was always the hope. So we worked at raising someone up internally, while at the same time I'd begun looking for different opportunities.

That's when I found *Tree House*, which fit my skillset perfectly.

In what way?

All the work I've done in my life has had social justice as its focus. *The Simple Way* did it one way, *Yes! And...* did it a different way, and with *Tree House Books*, literacy is the focus. All of those things are very much connected, and that was the core reason why I felt comfortable coming here, because it spoke to that passion. The passion for social justice, and the passion for community.

For example, when we talk about expansion opportunities, we're not talking about taking the *Tree House* model and bringing it to West Philly or some other neighborhood. No, we're talking about how to grow deeper roots right here in this community, here in North Philly. That idea resonated with the leadership here, so, like it or not, that's what they were getting with me.



How long was Tree House Books around before you came on board?

Since 2005. It was the brainchild of folks from the Church of the Advocate, a community staple here in North Philly. At the time, the Church of the Advocate had a Community Development Corp given to it by the city of Philadelphia. They wanted to use it to invest specifically in this corridor of Susquehanna Avenue.

So at the beginning, it was just a used bookstore, but then neighborhood kids started coming in and hanging out, and they developed an after-school program. They purchased the building next door and outfitted that storefront, which is where we now do our K-8 and teen programs, and all of our summer camps.

The Church of the Advocate had quickly realized that a used bookstore just wasn't the economic engine they thought it would be. It would have closed really quickly if they'd kept it going, so they wisely pivoted to this non-profit model, and all the classes and other activities grew organically out of the relationships between the bookstore and the people in the neighborhood.

But it's still such a great space for a used bookstore, I see a lot of my favorite writers. I can tell just from a glance that you manage the selection seriously.

Absolutely. We have books for children, teens and adults,

and back behind us, there's a section focused on African-American literacy - black authors, black characters, black stories - because that's what serves this neighborhood. We want to make sure that we're constantly stocking and featuring those titles. That's something that we feel sets us apart.

That, and also the fact that all the books are free.

And when did you... Wait, what?

All the books in here that you see, everything on our shelves, it's all free.

People can just come in here and take whatever books they want?

Absolutely. All told, we distribute about 88,000 free books a year. But that's not just through this space. We also have bookshelves in area rec centers, apartment complexes and other places. We then go around on a regular basis, restocking and refreshing as needed.

Then there's our bookmobile, the Traveling Tree House, which makes over 20 stops a week at daycares and festivals, Smith playground... they just park somewhere and put up a sign that says FREE BOOKS!

We have so many different programs, like Words on Wheels, wherein we deliver new books right to kid's homes three times throughout the summer. Then there's our online Book of the Month Club that people can sign up and read along with Kai. Last month, she was able to do an Instagram live interview with the author of the book, so it's really fun and engaging.

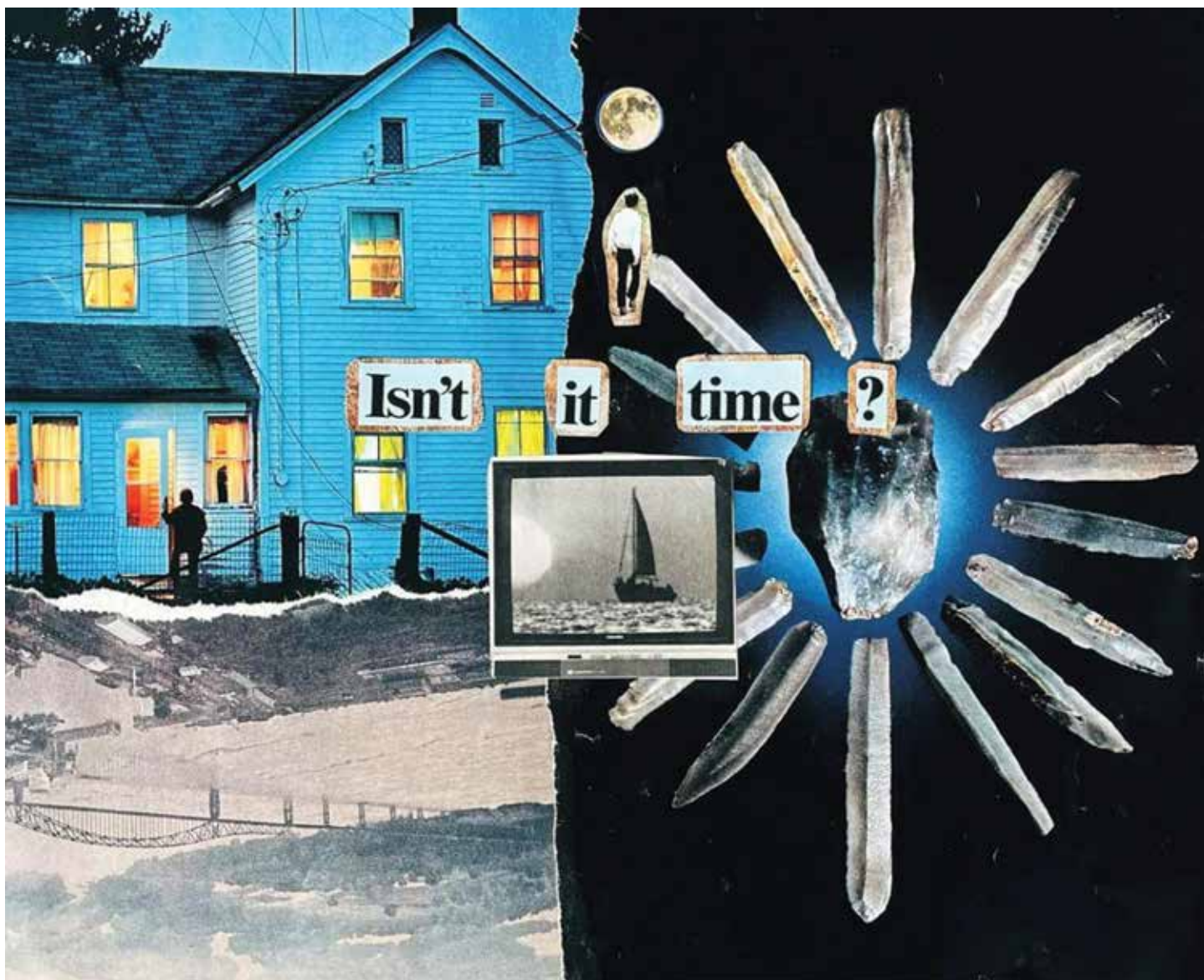
Also, once a year, we have an event that we call Philadelphia Literacy Day, which is a whole street festival. We close down the block, invite a bunch of authors to come out and sign their books, which we then give away.

So this whole neighborhood is just overflowing with books.

One of the coolest things about this organization is that it grows just by listening to the needs of the neighborhood, but our primary mission is to ensure that people have books in their homes.

I often reference this 2019 article from *Social Science Research Journal* entitled "Scholarly culture: How books in adolescence enhance adult literacy, numeracy and technology skills in 31 societies." It shows that, globally, children who are around books show an increase in their overall literacy rates, which then impacts other learning metrics.

So there *have* to be books in the homes that kids are interacting with. In this neighborhood, that just wasn't necessarily the case. The impetus then became to make that happen.



Where do the books come from?

All sorts of sources, book drives, individuals, organizations, local authors... People can buy new books from our wish lists at local bookstores, kids' books at Harriett's and adult books from Uncle Bobbie's. Books and Stuff, which used to have a brick and mortar store in Germantown, has also been a good partner, as well as Hachette and Quirk Books, which also bears fruit in the form of book donations. We always try to stay local, though, and away from Amazon.

We're a part of Read by 4th, which is the overarching literacy collective in Philly, but we're most closely related to the Book Bank, and they're awesome. They get a lot of books out to teachers and other professionals, to help build their classrooms. They operate out of Martin Luther King Jr. High School, and Anne's been doing that work for years, it's a passion project of hers. I love what they do and how they do it.

So once we get the books, we then weed out any badly

treated ones. As I said, we're careful about curating books that our community needs and wants. For example, when the Traveling Tree House goes to neighborhoods that are primarily Spanish-speaking, then we need to be able to feature Spanish language books.

That's great that you're partnering with so many local bookstores. It seems like some of them might be upset that you're essentially giving away the merchandise.

It's definitely something that I stress out about, but in general, I think book lovers are a special breed of people and they get what we're doing. We're part of the Philly Bookstore Map Project, and I told them, we're not really like the rest of you, but almost all of them understand that we're mostly serving just this neighborhood. We're not out to undercut anyone, and sometimes we can even help out.

For example, if people want to buy us new books, we have a special online-store set up through Harriett's. She holds on to those books, which we then pick up and give away.



That's a way we can divest from Amazon and support a local business at the same time.

Wow, that's really smart.

A lot of the stuff we do is organic. It really comes from the passions of the staff. The Book Swap festivals, for example, were my Managing Director of Programming's brainchild. We do four of those a year, people bring books to swap, and there's a DJ, sidewalk games, vendors... It started out as just this great pilot idea, and now it's a major part of what we do.

But ultimately, as I said, what makes us really unique is that we're here in North Philly. We may have all these connections and support initiatives all throughout the city, but our community outreach is located right here.

Are there plans to keep expanding?

I can't reveal too much, but we're looking to renovate a property in this neighborhood that we'll be able to move into, and our hope is that we'll then be able to serve as many as three times the amount of people than we do now.

The people I'm working with in terms of fundraising are telling me that we're in our silent phase, which is ridiculous, because I can't stop talking about it.

Tree House Books is located at 1430 W. Susquehanna Ave. They can be reached at 215-236-1760 and info@treehousebooks.org.



Creature

Poem by John Kucera

When my friend's tongue seized up, writhing
in its chamber, it must have reached for something,
anything, it seemed, though who was I to tell?
The hour took forever, when, out of the muck
of syllable and stutter, he said, shit, and I knew
a barrier had broken, the first bricks tumbling
out of his mouth. Out of the warehouse district
of the southern brain, graffitied in obscenities
and roses: the throat of a motor that won't clear,
won't turn over, but we were going somewhere.
Not progress as we knew it, no, but what you hear
gasp in a shattered object, or creak in the chains
of swing sets in the breeze. A little damage is always
the first to arrive, last to go. Even silence breaks
something when it breaks, and if the music's good,
your ribcage shakes, your heart flits on its trapeze.
If you are listening, you know, the way a garden
knows where to spread its net, to clutch an earth
whose body hangs over the dark of the other side.
For it is always there, the fundament, the stranger,
the midnight sky. I saw it in eye of the bewildered
creature, as we rode in the ambulance together.
Welcome back, I said, although I never heard him
curse before. Or after. Welcome back, my friend.

Coronation

Poem by Basia Wilson

Crows & their eyes' starry glint,
brassy anklets of sparrows, ruby-crowned kinglets:
among these trees all limb & lung, each is a jewel

churning hours, draping Earth in necklaces of song
that rain onto my bed of ringlets
black as crows & their starry glint.

My dark volunteers decide where they belong.
Abiding by the current of these glossy rivulets,
I shrug at the slim rings crowning my head, fussy jewels

I swear stand on end when the crows arrive each dawn.
Breezing from the trees (those gem cabinets)
the crows nearly appear to wink—that starry, starry glint.

I toss them some peanuts on the roof and lawn,
willing our adjacent lives to better bisect,
hoping they've glimpsed in this gesture a jewel

of goodness. The human shock of my face gone
softer, daily, till in beaks of black intellect
the crows carry a kinship with my own starry glint.
All limb & lung, wing & song, each of us: jewels.



Basia Wilson is a poet. She holds a BA in English with a concentration in creative writing from Temple University. A finalist for the 2022 Banyan Poetry Prize, her poetry has appeared in *Platform Review*, *Voicemail Poems* and *bedfellows magazine*. Selected for Moving Words 2023, Basia's work will soon be adapted for film in a national collaboration between writers, animators and filmmakers with ARTS By The People.

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Beyond Repair

by J.C. Todd

Review by Courtney Bambrick

J.C. Todd's *Beyond Repair* presents a solemn, resigned perspective of war and its inevitable, irrevocable toll on civilians, combatants, and their communities. Todd establishes expectations about pregnancy and motherhood as well as the shared humanity gestation during times of chaos. Throughout this book of poems, the balance between human creation and destruction reinforces the shared humanity of *us* and *them* in any conflict, across any border, but maintains that geography, history, power, and imperialism have made some bodies more vulnerable than others.

Read more of this review at www.philadelphiastories.org



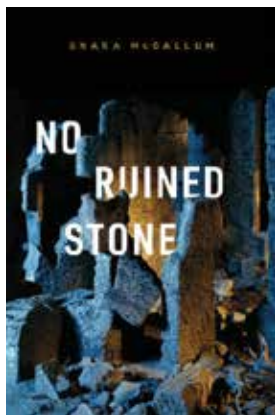
Final Touchstones

by Linda Romanowski

Review by Kris McCormick

Humble and honest in the extreme, Romanowski's debut memoir "Final Touchstones" depicts herself and those she loves in the brightest of spotlights to preserve as many of these tales as she can. By following the travels and developments in her family's story through both poetry and prose, Romanowski unites aspects of familial memories as well as the city of Philadelphia itself to serve as a homage to so much more than just her relatives.

Read more of this review at www.philadelphiastories.org



No Ruined Stone

by Shara McCallum

Review by Sarah Van Clef

Shara McCallum's sequential poetry collection *No Ruined Stone* drips in secrets of Robert Burns, an 18th-century Scottish poet popular for his known New Year's Eve anthem "Auld Lang Syne," and his decision to sign up to work as a recorder for a Jamaican slave plantation in 1786. McCallum's ability to craft Burns' voice through these persona poems creates a new thread within the embedded conditioned societal predisposition that has already been put into place about him, and forces readers to question his authenticity as an advocate for equality.

Read more of this review at www.philadelphiastories.org

June Moon

Poem by Rebecca Foust

Don't rhyme "June" with "spoon,"
unless maybe it's one
that's bent back & tarred black,
nor "moon" with "June"
unless you mean the bug big
as a car now battering my screen.
"Soon" also is suspect.
Expect it to be the same
as when pairing "breath"
with "death" in a previous line—
the poem had better
have depth in infinite fathom
& the rhyme, at least
one reason for being
besides the chime. Time is not
on your side, friend.
The end is too near to waste
even one unstressed beat
on a repeat of anything.

Yes, it will take some work.
Wait, do I hear you complain?
So you impressed yourself
slant-rhyming "duende"
with "pudendum," but look—
already been done
& more than one time. Ditto
for subbing in "dog"
for its reverse rhyme, "God."
It's true both are dead
so far as I know, but—never mind.
The point is not to repeat
a tired trope. The point is to hope
things will be better or different
—at least try to make language new—
I triple-God dare you.



Rebecca Foust's seventh book, *ONLY* (Four Way Books 2022) earned a starred review in *Publishers Weekly* and was featured on the Academy of American Poets 2022 Fall Books List. Her poems, published widely in journals including *The Common*, *Narrative*, *POETRY*, *Ploughshares*, and *Southern Review*, won the 2023 *New Ohio Review* prize and were runner-up for the 2022 *Missouri Review* Editors Prize.

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