

# PhiladelphiaStories

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

WINTER-SPRING / 2024 / FREE



**POETRY ISSUE!** / POETRY PRIZE WINNER: **A SONG FOR ANNA MAE** LAVONNA WRIGHT

**DUGA** ELIZABETH ROSEN / **FINDING PARKING, A PURPLE COUCH, AND A HOME IN PHILADELPHIA** STEPHANIE ABRAHAM

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## ART



### Serene Simplicity by Lee Muslin

Lee Muslin has participated in well over 300 exhibitions throughout the United States, including 25 solo shows. Many New York and Philadelphia gallerists and museum curators have selected her art for juried shows. Muslin has been privileged to receive 36 awards. She attended the University of Delaware as a fine art major and subsequently received a degree from Parsons School of Design in New York City. [leemuslin.com](http://leemuslin.com)



### Thoughts in Flight by Kelly McQuain

Writer and artist Kelly McQuain has been a Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Fellow, a Lambda Literary Fellow, a Sewanee Tennessee Williams Scholar, and a National Endowment for the Humanities participant. His poetry chapbook *Velvet Rodeo* won the Bloom Poetry Prize, and his portraits of writers regularly appear in *Fjords Review*. McQuain's work, including *Thoughts in Flight 1* was featured in the 28th Annual Art Ability exhibition at Bryn Mawr Rehab Hospital earlier this year.



### Iowa by Nancy Herman

Nancy Herman works in several media, translating music to color, wall hangings, needle felting and painting scenes from travels on Google Maps. Herman's *Iowa* is from that series of work where she tries to capture something meaningful in each state. This abandoned church caught her eye as it stood alone on the empty plains in the setting sun. It seems to speak of the country as it abandons formal religious practice. [nancyherman.com](http://nancyherman.com)



### Soliloquy No. 1 by Bill Sweeney

Bill Sweeney lives in Chadds Ford area and has been painting since 1981. He is a member of the Pastel Society of America, and a signature member of The Philadelphia Watercolor Society and the Maryland Pastel Society. His work has been included in notable exhibitions with the International Association of Pastel Societies, the Philadelphia Water Color Society and the Philadelphia Pastel Society and has received numerous awards. [billsweeneyart.com](http://billsweeneyart.com)



### Winter at Fischer Park by Sharon Wensel

Sharon Wensel studied advertising and design at Hussian School of Art, and painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. In January 2022, she committed to working as an artist full-time. She resides in Skippack and is a member of the Philadelphia Sketch Club, In Liquid and Art Queens. Her work is held in private collections throughout the US and may be found at the Skippack Gallery, Regina Marie Fine Arts and Crafts, on Instagram at [sharonwenselfineart.com](http://sharonwenselfineart.com) and [sharonwenselfineart.com](http://sharonwenselfineart.com).



### Project Funway, Vitto by Linnie Greenberg

Linnie Greenberg is a self-taught maker of things. She finds joy in creating something different out of everyday somethings. Her first love is collage, but she also dabbles in photography, assemblage and book arts. Her *Project Funway* series was inspired by binge watching every season of the "Project Runway" TV series.



### S. 4th St Church by Norka Shedlock

Ms. Norka Shedlock is an artist who lives in Center City Philadelphia. Before retiring, her career involved working in higher education, nonprofit arts organizations and culinary arts. She has studied painting at the Baum School of Art in Allentown, PA and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Besides living in Philadelphia, Shedlock spends time each summer at the shore in South Jersey. She works in oil, watercolor, charcoal and pastel.



### Delicate Pleasures by Suzanne Comer

Suzanne Comer explores the use of digital photography as an art form. She is especially known for using elements of her photographs to create award-winning photomontages. These works, as well as her unmanipulated photos, have been selected for exhibit in numerous juried shows each year. See more work at [facebook.com/suzanne.comer](http://facebook.com/suzanne.comer). artist.

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# Duga

Elizabeth Rosen

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Swinging his skinny legs out of his narrow bed, Olyinyk sat on the edge, momentarily suspended in the dream space between prayer and sleep. Then he rose and turned on his electric kettle, preparing a mug for his tea. As he waited for the water to boil, he thought of the strong black tea of his youth, a taste that still filled his sense memory though he had not tasted it for decades. America was a place that promised to fulfill any desire, yet it had been unable to fulfill his for the simple black tea of his childhood.

If someone had suggested to him when he was a young man that he would be where he was today – brewing weak American tea in his skivvies, an uncertain man of God and regrets – he would surely have thumped him. Back then, he had believed mostly in the Soviet State and the strength of men. Faith was a weakness, blander than the tea he now sipped, and regrets were like the pills of fuzz on his secondhand sweaters, something to be picked off and flicked away. Back there, weakness and regrets were not something one could afford very easily.

With face bent over his steaming cup, the chaplain stood lost in the details of his dream. The dense forest near Chernobyl he had once hunted in. The immense over-the-horizon radar installation called Duga that rose out of the Ukrainian forest's midst. The wounded dog with the torn ear. The memory of the animal prompted his first prayer of the day. When the dog resisted banishment, Olyinyk continued his prayers, lips moving minutely with a different passage from Matthew 6:14. *For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

Olyinyk took a sip of his tea. He had come to believe that his dreams of Duga, a spiny super-structure that stretched 700 meters in length and rose 150 meters into the air, were a message from the universe – God, if one were so inclined –telling him that he must pay attention and similarly scan the atmosphere for signs. Olyinyk had more reason to believe this than most.

This thought reminded him. He rummaged through the pocket of the coat hanging over the back of the lone chair at the kitchen table. Olyinyk tugged his mobile phone free, pushing the gum wrappers and grocery receipts which also came out into a pile on the scratched Formica table top. He dialed his daughter.

"Papa," she answered. Her tone was clipped and by this he knew that she was distracted with the other business of life. It was the curse of these cell phones that one could use them while

doing other things. If the contemplative portion of his conversion had taught him anything, it was that this busyness, what the Americans called "multi-tasking," was just another way to keep one's mind unquestioning. It annoyed him that his daughter, old enough to remember how her own people used work to do the same, had so easily fallen under the sway of her new culture's sleight-of-hand trick. He heard her cover the receiver and say something muffled, then her voice was clear again. "Papa, good morning. Is everything alright?"

"Yes, fine, fine."

"You're still coming to the school? I've already told them you're coming."

He could tell from the way her voice was near, then far away, that she must be moving around. He imagined her phone wedged between her ear and shoulder. He heard a dinging sound that made him realize she was getting into her car, and then the metal *thunk* as she closed the car door.

"Yes, yes, *zayushka*. I will be there," he told her quickly. He felt annoyed again that his daughter's scurrying about was making him feel rushed. "I called only to say I had not heard from Maksym about picking me up."

"Max, Papa," she corrected him. He heard the vague metallic rumble of a garage door going up. "He knows. He will pick you up from work and bring you to the school this afternoon."

The irony of Nadya asking him to talk to her students about the Soviet Union, the irony of Nadya teaching world history at all, was so rich he sometimes found himself pursing his lips as if it were one of the overly-sweet desserts these American children loved. It had been Nadya who slipped away to Hungary after her conniving mother – here he said a quick prayer for forgiveness again– had facilitated her marriage to a Party *apparatchik*, even though the girl was just sixteen. For Nadya's escape from her husband, she had relied only upon her own cleverness and courage while on one of the junkets across the border, not long after the chaos of the revolutions of '89. From there, she had escaped to Poland, chaotic with newfound freedom, and it was here that she had found her second husband, an American businessman with some dim attachment to the trade division of the American diplomatic corps there, something to do with coal. Olyinyk didn't even know if she'd told this one about the first. She certainly had not let the legal technicalities interfere with her plans. He had to hand it to the girl; she had been single-minded. But then she was his daughter and he would have

expected nothing less. When Nadya's letter offering to help him join her in the United States had arrived almost a decade after her departure, he'd had to look up where Pennsylvania was.

He couldn't find the words to express the multitude of meanings he saw in his daughter's request that he speak to her class, and so he grumbled about his grandson Max's lack of protocol instead.

"He should confirm with me," he said.

"Papa. He knows. He has even planned to stay to listen. Is there anything else? I really have to get going. We can talk more this afternoon, afterwards."

"Maksym is staying?" he asked. In the silence that followed he heard the curtness of his own question, heard again the fierce man he'd once been who had frightened his wife into going to live at her sister's, that man of ropey muscles and sunken cheeks. Was his daughter's silence an apology or fear of offending? Worried, he swept the trash on the table into his palm and crushed it in his fist. Only then did he speak.

"No, no. This is fine, *moya malen'ka lapka*. Only I did not know."

"He wants to know more about you, Papa," Nadya said. "More about our lives before."

Yes, well, no man deserves punishment for his thoughts, Olyinyk reminded himself.

On the bus ride to the nursing home where he worked, the chaplain gazed at the sturdy apartment buildings slipping past the window. As he so often did, he noted the people on the street with their similarly well-constructed clothes and their confident strides. He once would have walked with such confidence, too. Even four years before his daughter's letter, he would have ignored it, still proud at being a skilled-enough hunter that the government had assigned him to deal with the animals in the exclusion zone around the failed Chernobyl.

But by the time he got her invitation, his comrade Bondarenko's hair had fallen out from wearing a rabbit-fur hat he'd bought at a market in the exclusion zone. Hunting was no longer the pleasure it had once been, and the animals, even the turtles and fish in the aquariums in the empty flats, had all become frequent nightly visitors in his dreams. By then, too, he had killed and gutted more than one wild boar from the Zone for some old woman looking to feed a gathering, and he had seen how the animal livers melted in his hands like pudding. So even before receiving her letter, Olyinyk had begun to think that a new country devoid of the killing cynicism of his own might be worth considering.

The chaplain sighed and pulled the string above his seat to indicate he wanted to get off at the next stop. Nadya was well-aware that the story of the botched containment was a sort of shorthand for a larger story of the strong, proud country he had known collapsing with the same terrifying results as Chernobyl had. With the overzealousness of a new immigrant, perhaps she even hoped for him to indict their old country by revealing the part he'd played in hunting down the exposed animals. Still, she had not told him that his grandson was to be present, and Max knew nothing of this part of his grandfather's life. Perhaps this was why he had dreamed of Duga last night. Was Maksym the sign he was supposed to look for?

To his annoyance, this worry pursued him throughout the day, even in the moments when it was his duty to empty himself of personal thoughts and become instead a receiver of the same

kind as the towering radar array he frequently dreamed of. Yet even as he sat with his dying patient that morning, the chaplain found himself unable to concentrate and kept returning to his dream of Duga. He had to shake himself repeatedly from thoughts of the enormous structure with its barbed cylindrical elements like overturned metal birdcages. To him, the array had looked like some spiked gate meant to keep out the giant *Balachko* his grandmother told stories about when he'd been a child.

Each time he drifted, Olyinyk would remind himself that he must be completely present for his clients. Nonetheless, called upon to listen rather than speak, he would find his mind wandering again a few minutes later, thinking about the fog in his dream which had not existed in real life, or how this change lent the dream an eeriness that, in real life, had been closer to awe as he'd stood in front of the super-structure that stretched more than half a kilometer through the forest that hid it. The discomfort he had felt in his neck as he tipped his head back trying to see the top of the array was replicated in the dream, but the uncanny, high-pitched hum of the wind moving through the spiny electronic elements was a more noticeable presence in his dream than it had been in fact. It had only been upon coming out of the trees and facing the large chain-link fence surrounding the military installation that he had realized that he had been hearing this wraithlike sound all along, a tensile supernatural whistle like the drawing of a fingernail down a thin guitar string.

Realizing that the dying man had stopped talking, the chaplain raised his eyes to see the man gazing thoughtfully out the window at the lagoon in the center of the hospice garden. Olyinyk did not move to fill the silence immediately, knowing that he could at any time ask the sick man whether he wanted to pray and that this would cover his momentary inattentiveness.

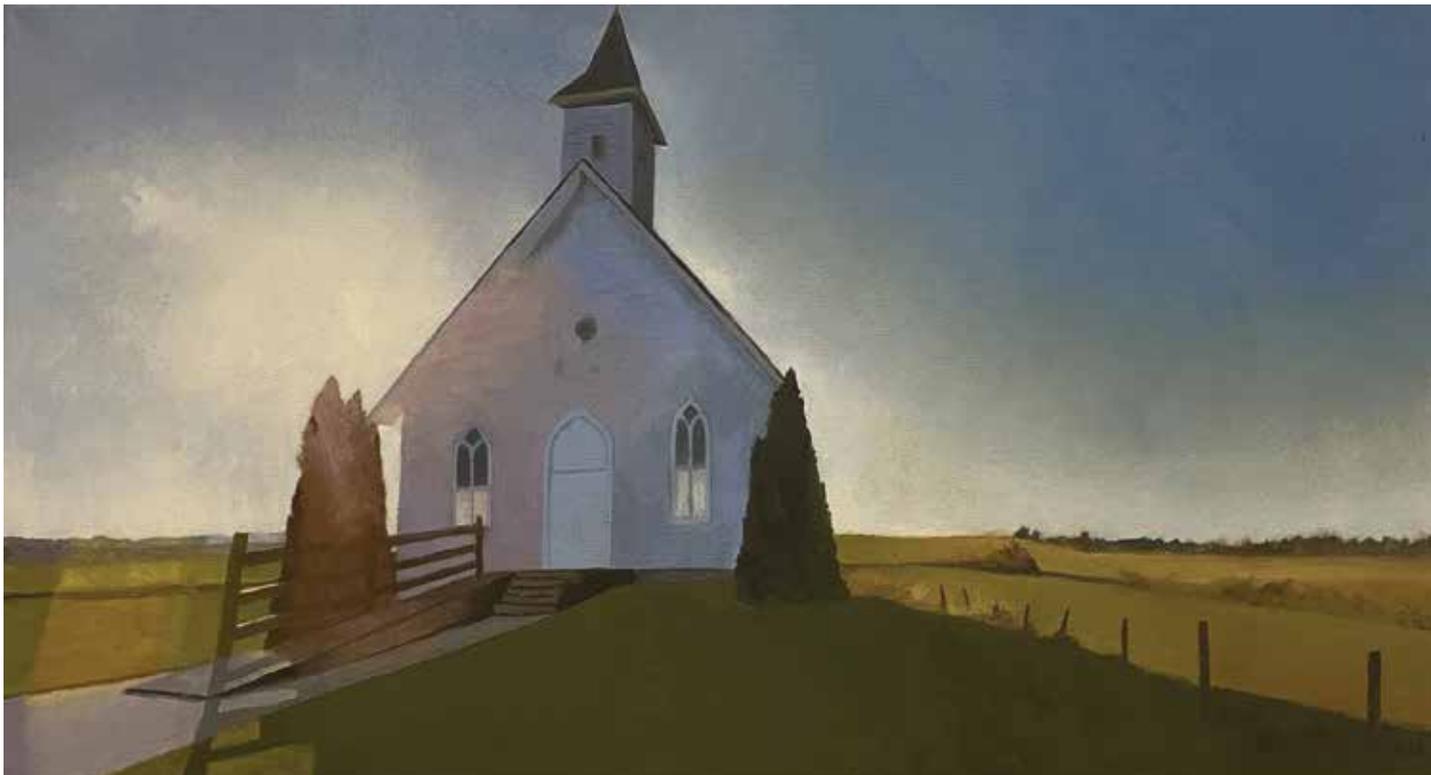
People often took Olyinyk's silence as piousness. As thoughtfulness. His reluctance to speak served him well in his position as a counselor and hearer of last thoughts. But it was borne of the difficulty of acquiring a new language so late in life and nothing else. His English, when he spoke, was deeply accented. He still had to think of how to express shades of meaning in his new language, and so he went carefully and slowly, and thus appeared thoughtful and slow to judge.

Even now, he kept a tiny disguised dictionary in his pocket. Ashamed of having to admit he didn't know a word when he had first learned English, he had removed the plastic cover that identified the book as a dictionary and inserted the block of pages into the cover of a miniature psalter instead. In this way, he sometimes appeared to be studying a passage of scripture when he was really learning a new word.

He remembered learning the word *secret*, how he had been struck by both its lesser-known definition as an inaudible prayer traditionally said before mass, and that its root, *secretus*, was comprised of other words meaning "apart" and "to sift." Thus, the word *secret* had roots meaning to separate and distinguish. He thought often of this as he listened to the, until-now, unspoken regrets of the people he ministered to at the end of their lives, considering how their secrets kept them separate from their loved ones, and did, in fact, distinguish one person from another.

In fact, he had been thinking of this the previous day in the midst of an awkward family moment between his client, Mr. Joseph, and his sister as she pleaded with him to allow their





brother to come visit. The formidable sister had brought her Bible with her to give the request the force of religiosity. Mr. Joseph had borne her pleading placidly until she began talking about forgiveness. At this, the dying man had snapped at her like a flag in a desert wind, declaring he was done talking about it.

"She thinks I am just stubborn." Mr. Joseph turned his face to Olyinyk now, his nasal cannula pulling loose with the motion. Olyinyk reached out to readjust the tubing, acutely aware of the man's intent eyes on him as he did. Mr. Joseph waited for him to sit back again. "Maybe I am," he continued. "Maybe I should have told her why I won't."

The chaplain, hearing this as a query, thought it best to say something noncommittal. In such moments, he had found that many of his grandmother's folk sayings doubled as wisdom. He searched his memory for one as he rounded one hand into the palm of the other.

"In Russia, we say....," he paused, silently asking his Ukrainian grandmother to forgive him this geographical sleight-of-hand. It was easier to say "Russia" to Americans whose knowledge of the European continent was defined by the Cold War. "'To him that you tell your secret, you resign your liberty.' God doesn't require us to share our reasons with other humans."

Olyinyk deliberately left out what he had been taught, that God's requirement was only to share one's reasons with Him. The chaplain's charge was to be a counselor and Godly representative should the dying want it, but it was not to push religion on people. His job at the nursing home was only to accompany the patients on their journeys out of this world.

He had found that there were as many ways to make this exit as there were kinds of people in the world. Some went gracefully, and some went angrily. Some went regretfully, and others went gratefully. Some were surrounded by people who loved them, and others were alone. And there were those who went still holding onto their earthly secrets, while others wished to leave

all that behind them when they went. It had always surprised him who made their peace with death, and who held a grudge and fought all the way out. He waited now to see which kind of person the dying man was.

Mr. Joseph searched Olyinyk's face. He licked his lips as he thought and then began to cough. The sound was painfully dry, a rasp of emery across wood.

"Some water?" Olyinyk offered, taking the cup from the table next to the bed and placing the straw in Mr. Joseph's mouth. He held it steady as the man took a sip. This act of generosity seemed to make up Mr. Joseph's mind. He began haltingly to speak.

Olyinyk nodded as he listened, careful to maintain his look of serene anticipation. The chaplain had practiced this expression in the mirror a great deal when he had first started working in hospice care. It was different from blankness. It was not indifference, either. It was an expression of expectation, of waiting. It was, if he could describe it, an expression of absence: absence of judgment, absence of narrowness, absence of surprise. At first, he had tried to create an expression that spoke of compassion, but he found that there were things he heard in his capacity that made this hard, and so he practiced showing gentle expectation instead.

Mr. Joseph's eyes went dark as he told the chaplain about his troubled relationship with his brother, and, as if the memory was a physical thing exiting his body, his breath caught in his chest at one point and the coughing began again. He brushed away Olyinyk's alarmed hand and continued until the story was completed. The two men sat in silence for several minutes. The effort to speak had been replaced by exhaustion. Olyinyk observed how the man had seemingly deflated under the sheet, like the vanishing of a magician's dove from under its master's handkerchief. There would be no more talking today.

"Would you like me to pray?" Olyinyk asked. The man in the

bed blinked, and the chaplain took this as assent. He rose to stand by the bedside. "I would like to say this first," Olyinyk told him. "I am reminded of a saying, *Pravda u vodi ne tone i v ohni ne horyt*. It is hard to translate. It means the truth does not drown in water or burn in fire."

Perplexed, Mr. Joseph's eyebrows knit.

"It is a way of saying that truth cannot be destroyed," Olyinyk explained. The chaplain let this sink in, and then he reached to take Mr. Joseph's hand in his own and began to pray for the dying man.

Later, in Max's car, Olyinyk sat wondering about the indestructibility of truth as he stared at his grandson's hands on the steering wheel. There was a faint scar on the back of one that he had never noticed before. There were freckles on Max's arms, a blond dusting that repeated itself across the boy's broad cheeks, his mother's Slavic bone structure made wide with American stock. He was a friendly-looking boy with hair the color of the winter wheat of Olyinyk's homeland.

Olyinyk tried to ignore the lack of seriousness that seemed to afflict all American teenagers, the air of insouciance and well-being they carried with them in their ignorance of hardship. In Ukraine, Max might already have been in the army by this age. A remembrance of the mildewed smell of socks that never dried completely came to Olyinyk as he thought about the tent he had shared with the other hunters in his team. He could still feel the heft of the rifle he had carried. In his memory – or perhaps from his dreams – he heard the echo of the rifle report ringing through abandoned villages. Sighing, Olyinyk rubbed his stomach as they pulled into the high-school where Nadya taught.

"Alright, *Dedulya*?" Max asked as he pulled into a parking space. A rush of good feeling went through the chaplain hearing his native language in his grandson's mouth. At least Nadya had taught him that.

"Yes, *moj mal'chik*, thank you. I was thinking about my talk."

Max laughed. "Don't tell me you're nervous." He put the car into park and turned off the engine, turning to his grandfather with a teasing smile. "You, the big hunter, who has faced down wild boar and bear. They're only tenth-graders."

Olyinyk reached over and cuffed the boy playfully on the side of the head. Max laughed again, and Olyinyk found himself taking the boy's nearest hand and holding it between his own just as he had Mr. Joseph's earlier. The skin on the old man's palm had been rough and dry like a cat's tongue but thin as tissue paper on the back of his hand. Olyinyk thought that truth was sometimes the same.

Big hunter. Olyinyk heard these words like a taunt in his head. He and the others had been chosen for the mission because they were hunters, but they had only been hunters of household pets who had lost their fear of man and came willingly to the sound of human voices even as, with rifles, they had put them down one by one. The creatures that retained a semblance of wildness, the rabbits and otters, they let free despite their orders to destroy the animals. The cats stared, or else darted past and hid under furniture, but dogs understand and you could see how their understanding went from hopefulness to fear and betrayal.

Olyinyk turned his grandson's hand over in his own to look at the unblemished palm, aware that there would be a price to pay for telling the story he wanted. That was a story of a mutt with the torn ear and how it had struggled to get free from the crush of dead animals in the truck, and how, so successful a

day had they had, that not one of the hunters had a bullet left to kill the wounded creature, and how the wounded dog had managed to free itself and run away into the woods, and that Olyinyk, seeing the others were exhausted and demoralized with the work, sent them back to the impromptu army camp nearer Pripyat and volunteered to track the animal and kill it, and that he had followed the cries of the injured dog until he came out of the trees with the eerie radar array Duga there before him stretching to each horizon like some industrial nightmare and the dog lying panting at the fence with blood-matted fur the color of his grandson's hair, and how he noticed then that it had one torn ear and that it would never rise from the place it had sunken down and saw nothing further was necessary on his part, and how the dog had looked at him with such awareness in its eyes that he had dreamed of it, and Duga, forever after, and how he went to sit by its side while it died, stroking its torn ear back against its head and waiting for the whole thing to be over.

"How did you get this scar?" Olyinyk asked the child of his child, swallowing the memory and taking out his absence mask and putting it over his face.

Max twisted his hand to look at the scar with interest. "Hmm," he said. "To be honest, I don't remember, *Deda*. I think I was very young when it happened. Mom would probably know."

Olyinyk rubbed a thumb across the scar and then patted the boy's hand and released it. He understood that these American children, with their brand names and full plates, would draw away from him in horror and disgust if he told his story, that the look in his grandson's eyes would change like the dogs had when they realized that the humans they thought had come to save them were coming instead to kill them. He knew that he could tell them about the vodka with a spoonful of goose shit in it they drank to protect themselves from the radiation and the child-sized gas masks and the forty-five seconds of terror of the first Liquidators and then the ongoing terror of waiting in the years after for the tap of sickness, when every hair in the sink and unexplained bloody nose was a sign that had to be understood in the larger context of the Exclusion Zone, how all of them had become finely attuned to listen for and read these signals, but that in the end, these human sufferings would not matter the way the suffering of a dog with a torn ear did to them.

His grandson's scar was a story, too, of some past injury and misfortune, like his own, but also not, since it could be ignored or forgotten and did not ultimately speak to the morality of the bearer in the way Olyinyk's former job and being a citizen of a country who had let such a thing happen did. He thought that it was perhaps his punishment to see how the look in his grandson's face would change knowing his grandfather's story, and also that, perhaps, given his participation in those events at Chernobyl, it was right he be punished. He patted Max's hand again in a gesture of comfort the boy could not yet understand. Then he pushed open his door and rose from the car, prepared to do his penance.

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Elizabeth Rosen is a former children's television writer, waitress, academic, receptionist, world-traveler, and dog-lover. In the company of her loyal hounds, she writes both mainstream and speculative fiction. Her favorite drink is diet coke, with coffee coming in a tight second. Her favorite music is anything from the early 80's that depended heavily on synthesizer. Her favorite place is anywhere books congregate. Follow her at Instagram at @thewritelifeliz. thewritelifeliz.com



# Finding Parking, a Purple Couch, and a Home in Philadelphia

Stephanie Abraham

Antonio and I arrived in Philadelphia on August 5, 2014. I'd driven the entire two-day trip from Georgia because he didn't have a US driver's license yet, and I was worried if he got pulled over the consequences might be death or deportation. Me, on the other hand, they'd probably just wave on. We made the trip in a new Toyota Prius, which I bought from a salesman who had been reluctant to sell me a car over the phone. "But don't you want to come by and see it?" he'd asked.

"I live in Oaxaca," I said, trying to explain my situation.

"Oaxaca. Where's that?" he interrupted.

"In Mexico...it's, I just don't have time to go back to Georgia just to buy a car," I finished.

"Well, do you know which car you want?" he asked.

No negotiating. I'd already viewed every Prius for sale on Toyota's website, and I knew which one was the cheapest. "The Prius Hybrid, the silver one because it's \$5,000 less than the others."

"All righty, how'd you like to make the down payment?"

I read the salesman my credit card number over the phone. For the next few months, I gave no more thought to it until I needed to drive it off the lot. Instead, I focused on Antonio's US residency paperwork and finding a place to live.

In our new apartment, also rented sight unseen, we plopped down our four duffel bags, our only worldly possessions, and looked around. It wasn't the first time in my 34 years I'd start over from nothing, but I hoped it'd be the last. We'd ended up there because the owner was the only landlord who'd rent to us without having me sign the lease in person. Of the twenty or so others I called, only he understood the logistical constraints of our situation. The others thought I'd crafted an ingenious scam by transferring an entire month's deposit and the first and last month's rent into their bank account.

In anticipation of our arrival, I'd ordered a mattress online, but we'd missed its delivery. As we scurried across town in our Prius, Antonio asked how we could possibly pick it up in such a small car—living in Mexico had caused us to miss the foam mattress revolution. Back in the apartment, after releasing this squishy item from its packaging, in hopes it would become a mattress,

we headed to Walmart. Filling two carts with sheets, pillows, toilet paper, a frying pan, and a spatula—life's essential items—the total rang into the hundreds of dollars. I gulped, counting the days until my first paycheck arrived. Unfortunately, the cashier made an error and could not check us out. Oddly frustrated with us for buying too much stuff, she made us move everything to a different register and wait as she hastily rescanned every item. Exhausted, I rolled my eyes at Antonio and gave a grimaced grin to the cashier to avoid another "error."

Until I moved to Philadelphia, I never understood how a TV show could be made about parking, only parking. That evening, standing on the sidewalk in front of our apartment, staring at the numerous street signs, I tried to make sense of the parking rules. Now, I can identify non-Philadelphians by how long they stand on the sidewalk staring up at a parking sign. Between Googling and staring, I concluded that we'd need a residential parking pass to leave our car indefinitely on the street in front of the house, which could only be attained in person at the Philadelphia Parking Authority or what all Philadelphians call the PPA.

"You can't get a residential parking pass for a car plated in Georgia. You'll need new Pennsylvania plates," the woman behind plexiglass window #4 explained.

While my heart sank into a dark place, I held close to my carefully copied lease and insurance card, which had taken me over an hour to print that morning. "Okay, how can I do that?" I answered with a high voice, raised eyebrows, and no sudden movements.

"At PennDOT or one of their licensed agents," she said just before yelling, "Next!" to the person behind me.

I nodded and left, wounded but not defeated, wondering if PennDOT was the equivalent of the DMV. Using the bad Comcast free internet at our apartment, I realized I'd also need a Pennsylvania driver's license before transferring the title to Pennsylvania.

My wherewithal for dealing with government agencies waned. I was still traumatized by my interactions with the USCIS for Antonio's temporary residency, which had included an across-the-country trip to Ciudad Juárez, thousands of dollars in application fees, and hours of translating our private Facebook



messages from Spanish to English *by hand* to prove the authenticity of our relationship. Everyone told me it'd take years to get his residency. Hire a lawyer, someone had said, it's probably only \$5,000. Nearly all the money we had. I did the paperwork myself. I pored over every entry about Mexicans applying for US residency on [visajourney.com](http://visajourney.com). I repeatedly read the form instructions on the USCIS website to ensure I didn't miss something and cause us to be separated by national borders. Less than a year later, Antonio's immigrant entrance package arrived at Oaxaca's DHL office with DO NOT OPEN printed outside. We were to carry it to the airport to show he had permission to board the plane. After landing in Atlanta, we'd hand it to the immigration officer, allowing Antonio legal entry into the United States of America.

For the next week, trying to jump through the tag, license, and parking pass hoops in the Philadelphia Blackhole of Parking, Antonio and I took turns moving the car every two hours, perpendicular to the prior parking space, all around the neighborhood. At first, we stayed up until midnight, when the metered parking ended, and woke at 7:00 AM, when the metered parking began, to do our last and first park of the day. Then, we figured out that if you parked at 10:00 PM, your two hours ran out at midnight, and the unmetered parking began, and if you were parked in a metered spot at 7:00 AM, then your two hours also began, giving you until 9:00 AM. All of this was confounded by our inability to parallel park. I grew up in the country and Antonio grew up without a car, so we'd never needed or desired to learn this life skill.

Several years before moving to Philadelphia, when Antonio and I were dating and I was living in Georgia, I visited him in Villahermosa, Tabasco, where he was an architect on an airport redesign contract. When I arrived, he drove me to his domicile—the word I'll use for it—a concrete room with glassless windows,

a curtain for a bathroom door, and an inflatable mattress, which no longer inflated, for a bed. "I'm not sleeping here," I said, and we headed for the cheapest hotel in the city.

One afternoon during that first week in Philly, Antonio said he was giving up and would just move back to Mexico because it was easier to survive there than find parking in Philadelphia. I somewhat agreed. But I couldn't leave. I had nowhere else to go. Nearly all my money had been put into the apartment. And my job at Rowan University started in three weeks, our only source of income. Besides, I never give up easily and wasn't about to let the PPA take me down. We had to try and make it. And if he left the US now, he'd be abandoning his temporary US residency. In a way, the day we got our residential parking pass saved our marriage.

Over the next two weeks, we'd get a kitchen table from Ikea, a TV from Best Buy, and a yellow dresser from a guy with a broken leg selling antiques on Craigslist. All items that somehow we—which really means Antonio—got into the trunk of the Prius. But I just couldn't bring myself to buy a couch. Somehow, somewhere between Oaxaca and Philadelphia, my heart had set itself on a purple couch. It's ridiculous. Who buys a car without having driven it? And rents an apartment without having seen it? But won't accept anything but the perfect purple couch?

Me.

The only time I'd ever bought a new couch in my adult life was when I moved to Oaxaca, and it had been big, fluffy, and a lovely burnt orange color. I hated selling it when we moved to the States. All the other couches in my adulthood had been hand-me-downs from recently deceased relatives, smelling of mothballs, or cheap finds on Craigslist, smelling of the unidentifiable. The heart wants what the heart wants, and mine wanted a new purple couch. On my laptop, trying a variety of synonyms for

purple - lavender, violet, and plum, weeks passed as I searched the internet for the perfect couch. The results were either out of my price range or looked like they belonged in an ornate palace, so I resorted to foraging the nearby furniture stores.

Meanwhile, Antonio, the Mexican MacGyver, constructed a couch-like object from the box the foam mattress had come in. He saves everything, always telling me that what I perceive as garbage is still useful. But even Antonio, the man who can sleep anywhere, tired of sitting on our make-shift furniture and insisted I choose a couch or he would pick one out himself. After another unsuccessful trip to Ikea, we decided to check out the furniture store next door, Raymour & Flanigan. Greeted immediately in Spanish by the salesman, who I later found out was Puerto Rican, he painstakingly showed us nearly every couch in the warehouse and offered a financing option of 0% interest for 12 months. We tried to translate "ottoman" to Spanish, thinking the online translator's suggestion of "otomano" just couldn't be right. After looking for more than an hour at couches that were not any shade of purple, I thought all hope was lost as we headed to the exit. Our new salesman hung his head, and I, feeling guilty for not buying anything, confessed my heart's desire, "It's just...es solo que...quiero un sofá morado."

"A purple one?" he replied, "Come with me."

Slinking between all the living room setups, we arrived at a little room on the side of the warehouse. "Like this one?" he asked, "It's the last one we have."

A velvety, dark purple, there was my couch, as if it had been waiting for me. A dozen signatures later, my purple couch would be delivered in just a few days. Thinking back, my irrational desire to only accept the perfect purple couch seemed to be a small refusal to accept whatever life would give me. It was my way of exerting a little agency upon a world that wouldn't let me park my car.

Parking would never be easy in Philly. Over the next couple of years, the PPA towed my car numerous times, once from right outside my door. Gazing up and down our sidewalk, the street was empty of cars as far as I could see. An oddity in Philadelphia, I thought the rapture had happened, and everyone had taken their cars with them. Knowing there was no way God would have left me behind, I called the PPA, again. They'd towed it, they said, and it should be within a five-block radius of where it was initially parked. Antonio took one key, I took the other, and we started in different directions. Holding the keys over our heads and as far into the street as possible, we walked our neighborhood, repeatedly clicking the lock/unlock button and listening for our car's beeped response.

Two years later, when I was nearly eight months pregnant, we'd bought a rowhome in East Passyunk. In the smallest U-Haul available, we moved our purple couch and the few other things we had accumulated, less than three miles across the city, to our new home, just a little bit bigger than our apartment. Antonio removed the front door to get the purple couch into the house. Then he couldn't get the door back onto the frame without more tools, so that night, we pushed our purple couch up against the front door to hold it in place to protect us from the outside world. As my belly expanded beyond what I thought humanly possible, I could no longer sleep on our mattress, so the purple couch became my bed. Propped up with nearly every pillow in

the house, I'd tuck a heating pad under my back each night, hoping for relief from painful sciatica burning down my legs.

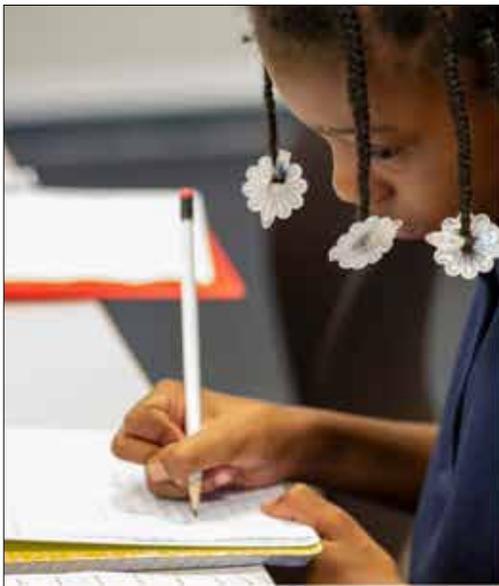
As I write, people walk north toward the United States. They, too, carry all they have with them. A few might find a new home in a place they've never seen before. Their experience isn't a new one, and neither is ours. Humans have been moving for as long as there have been humans, even before we were humans. Sometimes we move because we want to. Sometimes because we have to. And it's always been hard. I count ourselves lucky, blessed, and privileged to have found some parking, a purple couch, and a home in Philadelphia. I wish the same for everyone, everywhere.

Our baby turns seven soon. He loves to sit in Dickinson Square Park, eating chocolate ice cream with sprinkles in a cone that he got from the laundromat, which, I swear, is the best chocolate ice cream in the city. Turns out that August 5, 2014, would be the last time we'd arrive at a home without having seen it with almost no material possessions to our name. When we bought our home in East Passyunk, I told the real estate agent we didn't have enough stuff to fill a basement. Now it's full of toys my son won't let me give away, mismatched tools Antonio refuses to organize, and the mattress we picked up in a Prius. We upgraded the car to a RAV4, another funny story, and my son cried as the new owner drove our Prius away. Despite the residential parking pass, we still join the war of Philadelphia parking after 5:00 PM.

Nearly ten years have passed since that August day we arrived in Philadelphia, and the arms of my purple couch are worn and turning a light lavender. I wonder how long I'll wait to replace it. Will it have to be purple again? My heart doesn't yet know. But I did just Google purple couch — and I don't like any of them.

---

Stephanie Abraham is a professor of education at Rowan University who dreams of growing up to be a creative nonfiction writer. She writes about her childhood in Georgia, working as an elementary school teacher, learning Spanish as an adult, falling in love in Mexico, and finally finding a home and starting a family in Philadelphia. She's published in various academic outlets. Still, most proudly, her writing has found a home in *The AutoEthnographer: A Literacy & Arts Magazine*, *Five Minutes*, and *The Font: A Literary Journal for Language Teachers*.



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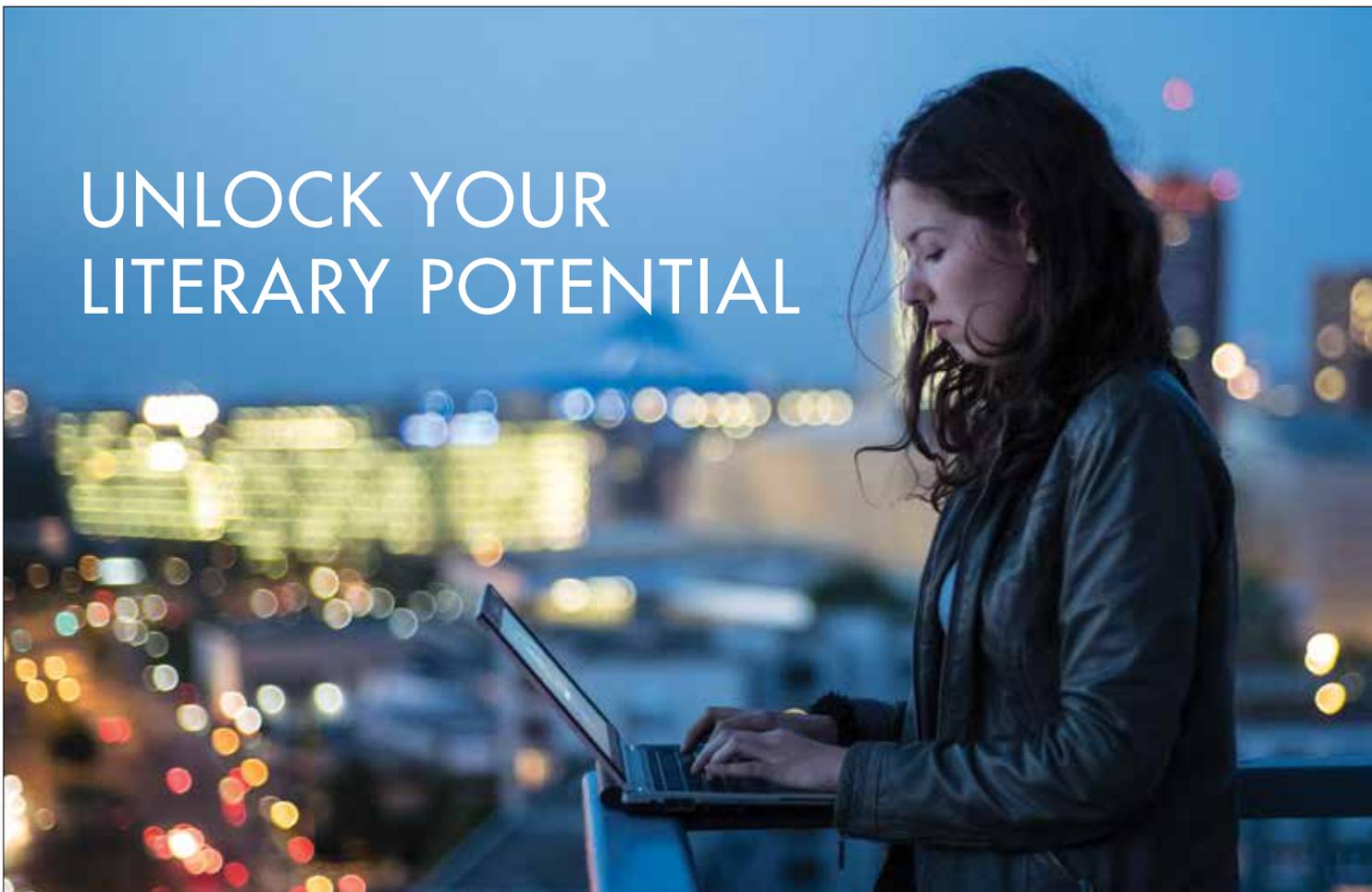


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# Letter from the [Poetry] Editor

Philadelphia Stories is excited to share the winning poem in this year’s National Prize in Poetry! The poem, “A Song for Anna Mae: an erasure for Tina and those of us who chose to leave” by LaVonna Wright of Lithonia, Georgia was selected by the 2024 judge, Kirwyn Sutherland. Wright will receive a prize of \$1000 and an invitation to read in a reception for our contest winners. About his selection, Sutherland writes:

In “A Song for Anna Mae: an erasure for Tina and those of us who chose to leave,” I was taken by not just the narrative that was achieved from this erasure but also the sub or shadow narratives that the author crafted from just a couple of short/quick lines:

A long dress  
carried me

I grew out of that  
I fell  
in love

and

Dreams told me a  
Temper was  
A story  
broken, mean.

These sets of lines are delicately simple but effective in how much heft they carry especially against the backdrop of Tina Turner’s story, as well as the stories of other black women domestic violence survivors. This poem allows the reader to linger on these lines/phrases, a further immersion into multiple texts: Tina’s words, the constructed poem, and the silences of her/their story/ies.

We are awarding each of three runners up a \$250 prize: “Make Her Dance” by Vincente Perez of Albany, CA; “Control” by Tara A. Elliott of Salisbury, MD; and “Tía rebuilds her house as she snores” by Purvi Shah of Brooklyn, NY. Sutherland also selected the following poems as honorable mentions: “Flight,” by Khalil Elayan of Tunnel Hill, GA and “If the Elevator Tries to Bring You Down, Go Crazy” by Von Wise of Philadelphia.

The editor and readers of Philadelphia Stories selected the following poems as editor’s choices: “Oshouo” by Shin Watanabe of Binghamton, NY; “Painting the Heart” by Alison Hicks of Havertown, PA; “Underground Parking in Tehran, 1984” by Shakiba Hashemi of Aliso Viejo, CA; “Yellow Throat” by Alison Lubar of Cherry Hill, NJ; and “the body remembers everything it has ever been” by Elliott batTzedek of Philadelphia.

Along with LaVonna Wright, the other winners will also be celebrated with a hybrid reading and awards ceremony. This reading will be free, and open to the public on Saturday, April 20 at Thomas Jefferson University’s East Falls campus and via Zoom. Visit <https://philadelphiastories.org> for more information.

Judge Kirwyn Sutherland writes that, “The poets who submitted to this year’s contest weren’t afraid to test the limits of language to create some really unique and at times experimental work.” This year’s poets confront the large and small threats to our bodies, our communities, and our imaginations. Such work helps us grieve and grow. I am forever grateful to the writers who trust us to share their work.

Finally, I must explicitly thank our contest coordinator Eli Aharon for consistent, helpful, and organized communication with our poetry screeners and these poets.

— Courtney Bambrick, Poetry Editor, *Philadelphia Stories*



# A Song For Anna Mae

Poem by LaVonna Wright

---

*an erasure for Tina and those of us who chose to leave*

a little pony  
I put praise on shapely and beautiful  
when I  
broke out.  
Innocent Star  
Full of a dream  
endless.  
A long dress  
carried me  
I grew out of that  
I fell  
in love  
Everything in the right place.  
I ran into music, bigger than life  
A Pink Cadillac,  
a star.  
Dreams told me a  
Temper was  
A story  
broken, mean.  
I wanted Little Ann  
to be seen.  
I did not walk. Later hell

And worship.

    Tried to hide before people  
Knew.

I never felt I deserved it.

I left.

    Landed,  
    Blessed and enough.

A black woman.

    A holiday  
A chant.  
A door.

    Something good.  
    Something bigger.

I've never seen myself as a star  
For the people.

Possibility, despair.

    The shape of Love,  
    This world.

When I look in the mirror.<sup>1</sup>

1 This poem was written with Tina's responses in her interview with Oprah, appearing in the May 2005 issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*.



LaVonna Wright is a poet, educator, and artist from Augusta, Georgia. Receiving her MA in English from Georgia Southern University, LaVonna is devoted to a poetic and academic ethos that centers on innovation, equity, & truth-telling. She writes to venerate Black women's narratives, personal and historical, often bearing witness to the ways in which they have navigated grief, unraveling, and silencing; through her work, LaVonna aims to reaffirm the tenderness that has not been offered to them. You can find her sharing writings in her newsletter, spending time in community, or cooking something slow.



# Make Her Dance

*After Juicy J*

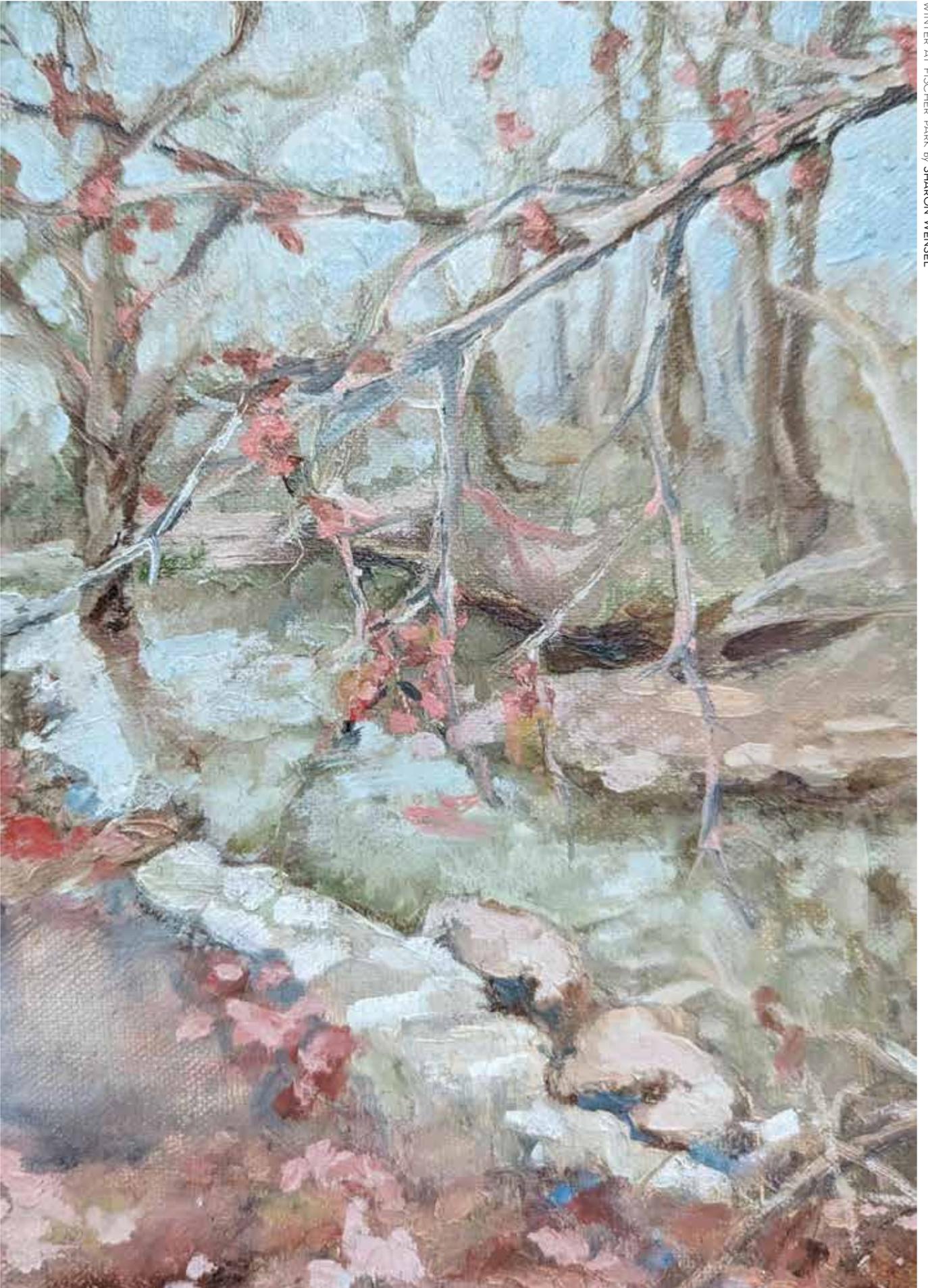
Poem by Vincente Perez

---

When the ones fall from the sky  
we confuse the source of the Rain.  
The ass shaking caused a deluge.  
As it should be yet the hand is considered  
the source. The clouds aren't even the  
source. White science pales in any comparison  
forced by Black alchemy. The gold, the  
shine, the minerals in deep conversation  
but we only see paper. Shiny teeth snag on  
the lights, a Diamond in the rough was carbon  
first. life Fossilized then consolidated. Some LLC  
is paid homage and the rain dancers are  
forced to tip out. House money isn't real. Plantation money  
is. The club separates the haves and have nots. Miss recognition  
got a smart mouth. All hail the fat ass, the rain bringer,  
clapping and winning the battle of the bandz.



Vincente Perez is a poet and scholar working at the intersection of Poetry, Hip-Hop, and digital culture. He is a PhD Candidate in the Performance Studies program and a Poetry and the Senses Fellow at UC Berkeley (2021). His debut poetry chapbook, *"Other Stories to Tell Ourselves"* is available now (Newfound 2023). Their poems have appeared in Obsidian, Poet Lore, (De)Cypher, Honey Literary, Poetry.onl, and more. [www.vincenteperez.com](http://www.vincenteperez.com)





# Control

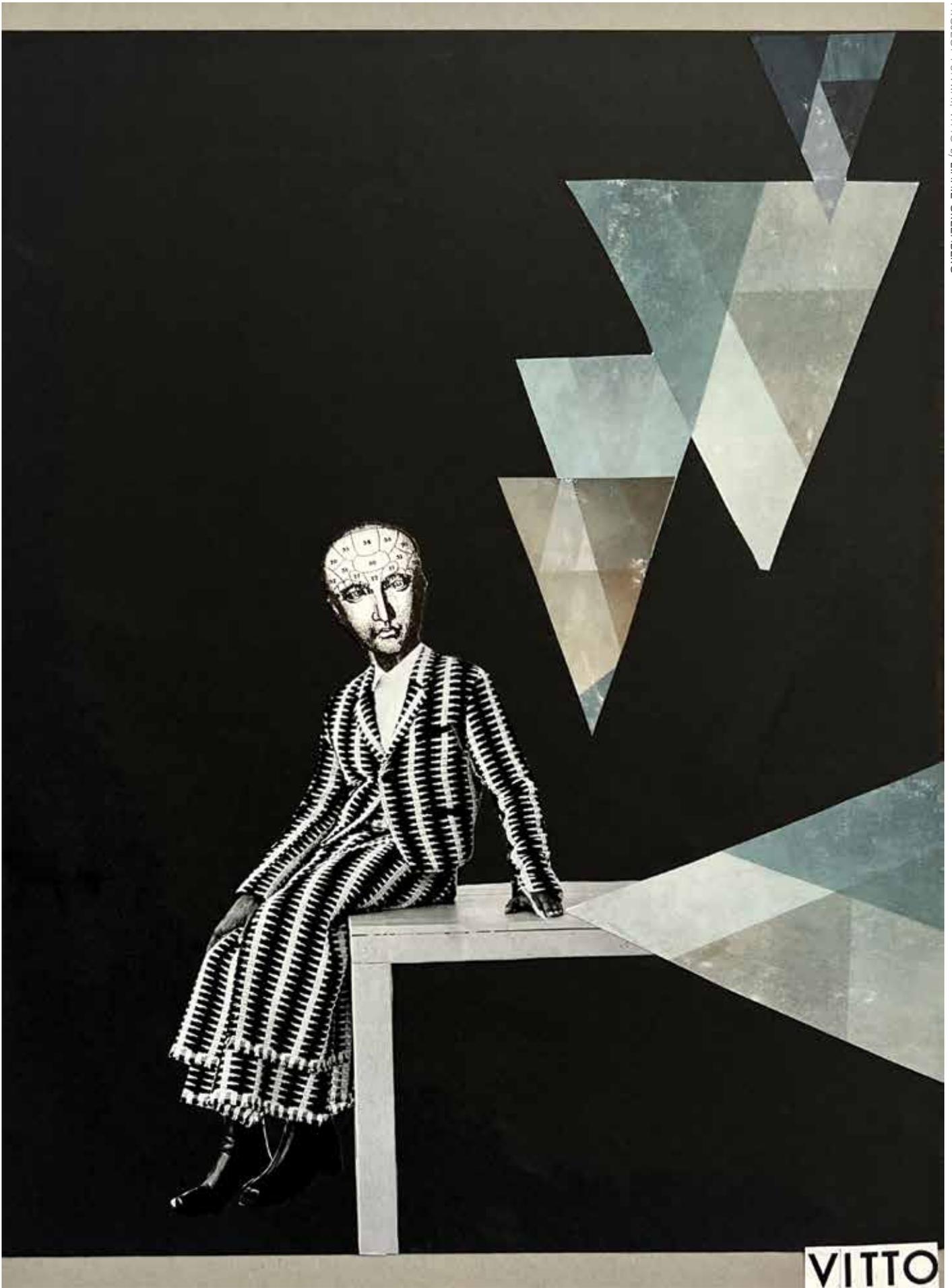
Poem by Tara A. Elliott

In the boat of the Buick, lake of ice  
glinting in front of us like a tarnished mirror—  
there in the empty Acme parking lot, my father  
tells me: *Step on the gas*. And there it is  
that moment of this-can't-be-right, but  
he nods, winds the window down until a small crack  
forms along the edge and slips  
the remains of his lit cigarette to skate  
orange down the pane. He exhales smoke  
from both nostrils and says, *Step. On. The. Gas*.  
As my boot levels pedal to floormat, the tires  
begin an almost useless spin—as frictionless  
as teenage excuses. A brief catch  
as tire grips asphalt and the car guns  
forward until he says, *Now, stop*. He has prepared  
me for this, and yet every instinct  
tells me no. I freeze then force myself to flick  
foot to brake oh how we spin—our DNA stretching out into endlessness,  
the double helix pulling so tightly  
against itself that it ribbons. *Turn against the slide  
against it*, and I do—back treads gripping nothing, connecting  
with nothing, and we sail in glorious squirreling circles  
until gravity slows us  
and we stop.  
*And again*, his commandment  
as he sparks lighter to fresh Carlton,  
*But this time turn into it—you'll see*, so again I punch foot to gas  
then pound the brake, the back of the car flying out  
from behind us—the tail turning the fish.  
And twisting into that slide, four thousand pounds of Detroit steel  
comes under my control, the steering restored, the tires aligned,  
and as I pump the breaks softly, as he tells me to do,  
as though there is *an egg underfoot*,  
we glide to a stop.

There, in the rare silence that is the snow, cigarette now pinned  
between his teeth, my father grins. He flicks ashes  
sideways into the waiting mouth of the ashtray—  
the yellowed tips of his fingers  
stained with nicotine.



Tara A. Elliott's poems appear or are forthcoming in *Cimarron Review*, *32 Poems*, *Ninth Letter*, and *The Normal School* among others. An award-winning educator, she also serves as Executive Director of the Eastern Shore Writers Association (ESWA), and chair of the Bay to Ocean Writers Conference. A former student of Lucille Clifton, she's been awarded numerous grants and honors for her writing and outreach, including the Christine D. Sarbanes Award from MD Humanities, The Light of Literacy Award from Wicomico County Public Libraries, and a Maryland Arts Council's Independent Artist Award.





# Tía rebuilds her house as she snores

Poem by Purvi Shah

---

You stand from the crumbling rooftop as she scours  
adobe, surveying the conquistadors' stamp

on the land – a disheveling mountain

here, sliced aqueduct there, a cathedral

of grass cloaking bricks now host  
to ladybugs & mantis. Somewhere

she sees ghosts of those broken

by land – San Juan, San Antonio, Espada, San

Soledad. As new mission, Tía strokes her rib, hair,

ankle – extinguishing memory in the cellular

with a reclamation of contact,

with a reclamation of relation,

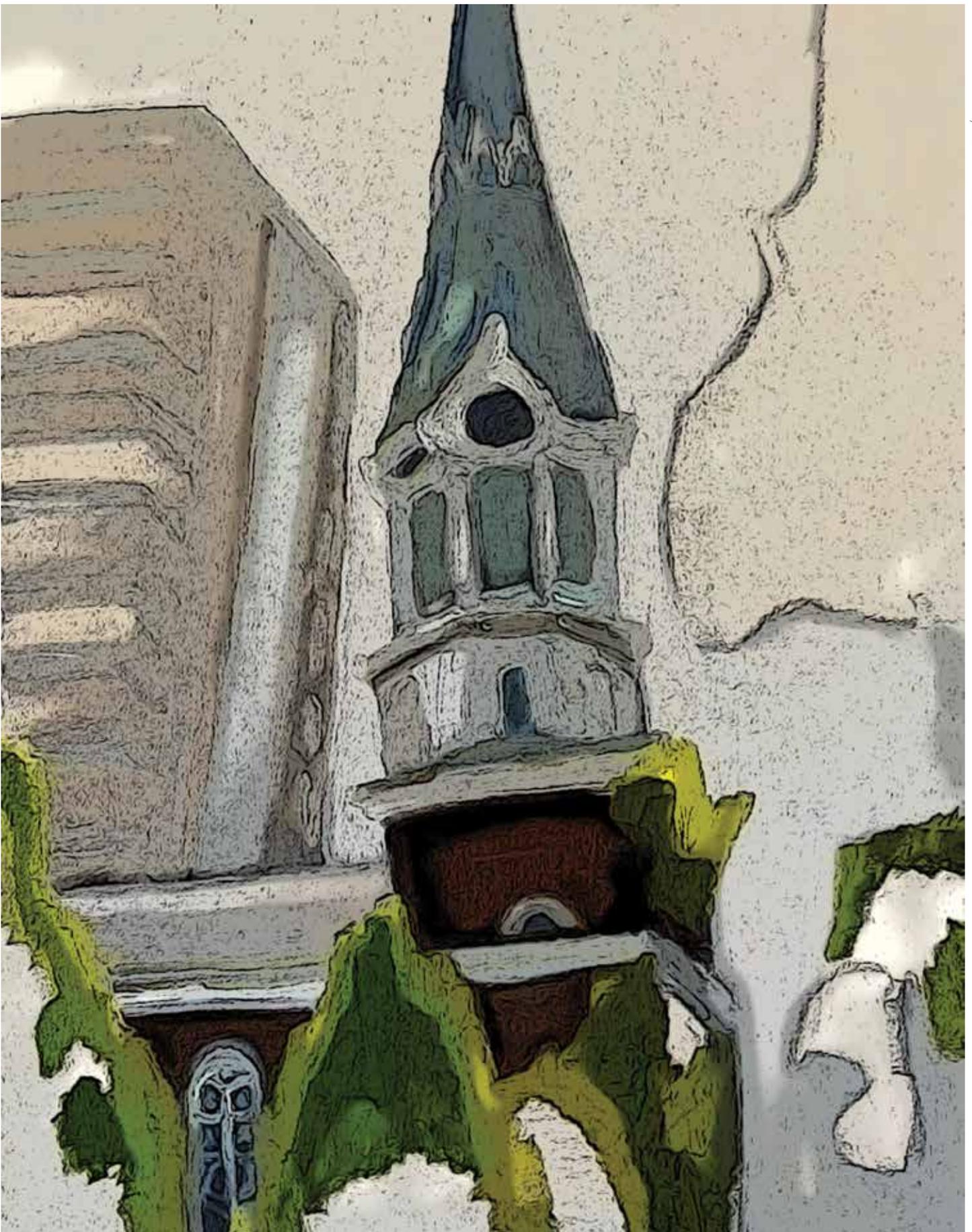
with a resistance to restless resistance,

with embrace of easeful & tender revolution –

with beloved body slumbering to repair.



Purvi Shah seeds healing through anti-violence advocacy and creating art. Her most recent book, *Miracle Marks* (Northwestern UP, 2019), investigates gender violence & her prize-winning debut, *Terrain Tracks* (New Rivers Press, 2006), plumbs migration and loss. Purvi relishes sparkly eyeshadow, raucous laughter, and seeking justice.



# Flight

(Dedicated to Carlos From Guatemala who died at the border)

Poem by Khalil Elayan

---

An invisible hand, vice-like,  
grips his shoulder...

Head, turning from the light,  
he knows the cage has fallen.

He flees from persecution to persecution.

The arduous and angry road north,  
long through jungle and desert and mesa  
and up to the border of reason before  
the breakaway turn

back into the night of sand and moon.

Huddled in the sagebrush of memory and fear,  
the boy bites his wrist to stave the ghost of hunger,  
too hungry to remember how to eat

or how his mother sang when cooking breakfast.

"Oh little vampire with blood in your teeth,  
what energy can you derive from draining your life?"

Looking at the grains beneath his shoes,  
he remembers a man named Tyson on the television,  
saying as many stars exist...

To visit such a one!

He licks a finger with more blood than spit,  
delicately sticking a single grain of sand  
near the nail.

Here it is, a glorious star, big enough

to shine a way for him,  
a child searching for magi.

There, in the desert night,  
a one like the *hijo Jesus*,  
hiding from Herod's men.

With no strong-armed carpenter to build him a home,  
no *Madre' Maria* to suckle him in his shivering death.  
The cage is everywhere,  
infinite in its capacity to stretch and follow,  
grabbing the bird-bones of his shoulder,

bidding him to step into the darkness.

Six, seven, eight steps south, now,  
are like the breadth of a continent.

How does a cage like this get built?  
Who orders its erection?  
What is its material?

Everywhere unseen,  
it falls like a weighted  
drop of rain,

making a sound, but not in any instance to be found  
in the desert night.

Moments... and

as great a star as the little bit of silica had become,  
it has fallen from the finger,  
itself in flight from the cage, to return  
to its constellation on the desert floor.

As the keepers of the cage know no shame,  
an echo cries, "Uncage the primitive!" but the voice is  
a hollow in the scorpion's den, where the predator remains  
sophisticated in his charms.

The boy rubs the empty space at the tip of his finger  
and hears the distant notes of his mother's voice on the night breeze.

He can see her ebony braid swishing rhythmically as she cooks eggs  
while he makes a bed in the lightless constellation of ages.



Khalil Elayan is a Senior Lecturer of English at Kennesaw State University, teaching mostly World and African American Literature, and he loves gardening and spending time in nature on his farm in north Georgia. Khalil's poems have been published in *The Black Fork Review*, *About Place Journal*, and *The Esthetic Apostle*. Khalil has also published creative nonfiction, with his most recent essay appearing in *Talking Writing*, and his latest short story has shortlisted in *The Vincent Brothers Review Annual Short Story Contest*.

# *If the Elevator Tries to Bring You Down, Go Crazy*

Poem by Von Wise

---

When Prince sings *I Would Die 4 U*  
I know he's singing the number 4,  
the capital letter U, and I believe  
there are things worth dying for.  
I can hear their chopped off heads trailing  
behind Prince's motorcycle  
waiting for the moment they bounce  
together and kiss inside a cloud of exhaust.

His motorcycle is a storm,  
a purple nebula flashing  
magnetized lighting in the distant reaches  
of space, where his light is travelling  
still, untouched by death. I would die  
for just about anything large enough  
to love so easily: Your hair.  
The taste of dehydration. The idea of you  
towering above the actual me.  
Your head mouths a letter  
and then an alphabet.  
Your head spells a word, *rain*.  
Or was it *pain*?

Prince is touching down,  
one wheel, then the other  
kisses the ground. I want to warn him  
that it's too late, ask you  
to help me lift him back into the sky  
before history catches up,

but I don't see you anymore.  
And it's not too late. You say

there's more beyond each beheaded  
word, outside the constellations  
of hurt. As the elevator doors close  
Prince says something about going crazy.  
He's still alive, his motorcycle still dragging  
the future behind it like a parade.



Von Wise received his MFA for Creative Writing from Florida International University. He teaches English composition and creative writing in Philadelphia, where he lives.



# Fevered

Poem by Ann E. Michael

---

She told me her brain was a barn on fire,  
horses hammering at the stalls, beams ablaze  
and buckling, sparks taking their hot bodies  
outward and upward on air drafts, or worse,  
her brain a cathedral burning, it was Notre Dame  
while Paris gasped, medieval joinery unjoined  
in a furnace that melted iron, out of control,  
smoke in her lungs, an *auto da fe* of mind.  
What I could tell her was: nothing. That  
everything dies? That the fire is beautiful?  
Or, here is a river, immerse yourself? No—I held  
her feverish body next to mine and let her burn.



Ann E. Michael lives in Emmaus, where for many years she ran the writing center at DeSales University. Her most recent book is *The Red Queen Hypothesis*; she's the author of *Water-Rites* (2012) and six chapbooks. Her next collection, *Abundance/Diminishment*, is forthcoming from Kelsay Books in the spring of 2024. She maintains a long-running blog at [www.annemichael.blog](http://www.annemichael.blog).

# In the City

Poem by Magda Andrews-Hoke

---

We saw a goose in the courthouse yard.  
Then more flew in and settled  
on the grass. The day was sinking hard

to dusk, but the geese paid it no mind,  
just croaked and rustled by the pond.  
The path encircling them was lined

with pithy weeds that spit fronds high.  
End-of-workday walkers passed us by,  
mothers with strollers, shy

tourists, acting awkwardly at home. The water  
glistened, increasingly, as the sun slaked  
itself on winter-fingered tree limbs. The ache

of colors intensified the sky for one moment,  
then slid to indigo. And off we went,  
wandering towards home, and fell in bed,  
as if this were some grand event.



Magda Andrews-Hoke lives in Philadelphia, PA. She studied Linguistics and English at Yale University and was a recipient of the 2019 Frederick Mortimer Clapp Fellowship for poetry. Her poems can be found in *Commonweal Magazine*, *The Friends Journal*, *North of Oxford*, and elsewhere.

# Letter to an Old Friend

Poem by Sonia Arora

---

When I scan your letter, left to right,  
seeking light between spaces,

I wonder if it is the way my grandmother  
sifted wheat or the lentils in a chalni.

I loved that rattling sound of her work  
back and forth, she'd swing the thali,  
picking out small kankars, only leaving  
what her family could imbibe.

But how do I tell you all this when I have  
not seen you in over 25 years.

It feels like another dimension in my short  
stay here in geological time.

Instead, my palms upturned cup the sky  
as if in a drought, searching for rain.

Bodies in the night slipsliding into ease.  
How do we travel back? What if we never  
have the chance to go back home  
before dying? Like my mother in her 70s  
who is too frail to make the voyage back  
as if to a dying star whose time is of another.

In the city I once lived where you reside  
on the pavement where people gather  
to sip coffeetea, words etched in concrete:

*In the space between the lines, not dedicated*

You too can gather the distance  
in your hands, for I am too feeble  
to travel back to you.



Sonia Arora is trying to find the right balm to cure her diasporic funk. She channels her angst by writing poems and insists on walking every day. Sonia has been published in *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Elysium Review*, *RockPaperPoem*, *Sonic Boom* and more. In her free time, she fights fascism and makes pumpkin roti. Sonia raised her son Kabeera with her husband Raju in Philadelphia and the city echoes in her heart till today.

# An Interview with Jenny Lowman

Jonathan Kemmerer-Scovner



*Jenny Lowman is a true advocate for literacy. She has worked in the nonprofit arena of Philadelphia for over 15 years, having served as the executive director for the West Philadelphia Alliance for Children (WePAC), promoting childhood literacy in Philadelphia public elementary schools through reopening and staffing libraries, and prior to that, as an attorney at Philadelphia's Education Law Center.*

*Currently, she serves as a school board member in the Cheltenham School District and, along with several others, has founded the Philadelphia Alliance to Restore School Librarians (PARSL), a grassroots organization dedicated to returning certified school librarians back to all schools in the School District of Philadelphia.*

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

It was this little Richard Scarry book from my public library growing up, *On the Farm*. It was a little square, maybe 3 x 3 inches. I loved that book so much that my parents bought it from the library; I still have it to this day!

My mom was an English teacher, so I was surrounded by books

my entire life, classic literature all over the house. *1984*, *Great Expectations*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*... At some point or another, she'd taught them all. I always had access to books, and I could read whatever I wanted.

That's how this all started for me, just having access to a wide range of books, and not being told what I could or could not read.

## **You attended public school growing up?**

Yup, all the way. There weren't a lot of other options in the Lehigh Valley, where I'm from.

I remember our elementary school was a relatively new building, and they'd somehow forgotten to plan for a library, so they had to create one out of the janitor's storage closet, this small, windowless room that had maybe six shelves and a few tables – but we had a librarian.

My middle school, though, had a big library that we used a lot, and my high school did as well. We learned the card catalog, micro-fiche, the Dewey Decimal system... all that wonderful stuff. It wasn't until I was a senior that we had a computer lab for the first time.

## **The role of the public school librarian has evolved a lot since those days.**

Definitely. Librarians are still there to make the world open to children, that part hasn't changed, but today their role is even more important, because they're teaching digital media literacy as well. They're teaching children how to be good and informed consumers of information, to not just find a source, but to *discern* between sources. If there isn't a certified librarian who's learned those skills themselves, students are really missing out.

## **That seems like an enormously useful skill to have in this day-and-age. There are lots of adults I know who could've used that.**

The librarians I've been fortunate enough to work with through PARSL describe their libraries as safe spaces, which is also something that's evolved. There are just so many more issues kids today struggle with, and there are amazing books available to address them. Books that explain disabilities such as autism and dyslexia, books about grief and loss, books about gender identity, all kinds of books to help children understand the world



**Blankenburg School, the first library WePAC reopened in 2009.**

around them. All of these are things that librarians today bring to bear.

In my own school district, the librarian at the middle school has turned the library (called the Learning Commons) into an incredible space with an amazing collection that she's curated with an impressively diverse selection. She also started a Project Lit book group that had over 90 students participating, the last time I checked.

It's a real holistic approach. It's the concept of providing "Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors," first identified and described by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop in 1990. You want children to be able to read things that reflect who they are, that show them something else, and then provide a door that they can walk through into a different world.

### **Oh, I like that a lot.**

I work with one retired librarian who says that what people don't realize is, especially for elementary school librarians, they're the only person in that building who sees a kid from Kindergarten to 5th grade, and in the case of a lot of Philadelphia schools which are K-8, they know these children for nine full, consecutive years.

All of these reasons are why it's so heartbreaking that over 50 school districts in Pennsylvania currently don't have any librarians at all.

### **How did this become an advocacy issue for you?**

From working at the Education Law Center. I'd seen how disparate and inequitable the funding for public schools in Pennsylvania was, how some school districts would have all these amazing resources for their students and others had practically nothing. Money really does make a difference. It's a tremendous injustice for schools not to be able to afford basic instructional services like school librarians to educate their students.

### **What exactly is the current status of the libraries in the School District of Philadelphia?**

Currently, there's one full-time equivalent school librarian working in the district, which means there are 3 to 4 school librarians who

work part-time in a few buildings. One librarian for 113,000+ students in 217 buildings. This is down from 176 school librarians for about 230 buildings in 1991.

### **So from 176 librarians down to 1. Got it.**

Dr. Constance Clayton, who died recently, was the district's superintendent from 1982 to 1993. She'd made it a priority to have school librarians in as many district buildings as possible. She'd understood that the only place many of the district's students were going to have access to books to take and read at home was at school.

### **What happened to erode that?**

Unfortunately, Dr. William Hite, who was the district's superintendent for a decade up until 2022, appeared to have no use for school libraries or librarians. He seemed to have convinced himself that the school district didn't really need them or else they were a luxury the district couldn't afford. He would say things like, *Teachers have classroom libraries, kids have access to plenty of books.* But he didn't seem to have any understanding of what school librarians actually do, or what students were missing by not receiving instruction from them.

But the loss of school librarian positions really started back in the late 1990's, when Dr. David Hornbeck was superintendent of the district from 1994 to 2000. Dr. Hornbeck had recognized that the district needed more money from the state to provide its students with an adequate education, but then-Governor Ridge refused. While Dr. Hornbeck was fighting for more state funding, he switched the district over to site-based budgeting. Meaning, the district gave each school a certain pot of money, then central administration would say to the principals, essentially, *Here's all your money, budget accordingly.*

Of course, the money was never enough, and with so many other positions and programs, librarians just slowly got phased out. That's how we found ourselves in this situation.

And the district still uses site-based budgeting! That's why PARSL is asking that any funding for new librarian positions come out of the district's central budget, so that principals don't need to choose between funding a school librarian or an assistant principal's position, for instance.

### **But are the libraries themselves at least still accessible to the children?**

Usually not. If a school had a library at one point, then that room has either been repurposed or is locked and is simply off-limits.

### **That's heartbreaking!**

It is, and we need people to know about it. PARSL met a few months ago with someone from the Free Library of Philadelphia, and I expressed my frustration to them that more organizations which are concerned about improving childhood literacy in the city aren't standing up and saying, *'And part of this is having an actual, functioning library with a certified school librarian in every public school!'*

There are some schools – mostly K-8 buildings – that have other organizations which come in and run their libraries for them, like Historic Fair Hill. They now operate four school libraries in

North Philly. The Friends of H.A. Brown School is reopening the library in that school. The John B. Kelly School has a very active volunteer-led library program. All told, there are about 30-35 elementary schools in the district which have functioning library programs, although they don't have certified librarians leading those programs.

When I worked for the West Philadelphia Alliance for Children (WePAC), that was (and is) WePAC's primary objective, to reopen libraries in K-8 schools in the district using volunteers. WePAC currently operates volunteer-run libraries in 13 district schools, which is a huge accomplishment for the current staff and volunteer crew. I actually started out with WePAC as a volunteer in the library at the Blankenburg School. I loved reading to the kids and helping them pick out books to take home. I also wished the library could be open more than twice a week so that all kids in the building could take advantage of it – not just kids in the lower grades.



**Overbrook Elementary. Weeding and organizing and stocking new books. The library is now reopened and run by WePAC volunteers.**

### **What kind of things would you do for WePAC?**

When we were reopening a library, before we could do anything else, we had to weed through the library collection, because some of the books were ancient.

There were some that were moldy and waterlogged, and others that were sexist, racist and just flat-out wrong on a variety of topics. It was a real snapshot of a period. For example, I found a book from the 1950's about friction. You might wonder how a topic as benign as friction could possibly be problematic, and then you open the first page: *"Mother creates friction when she washes a pan! Father creates friction when he walks home from work and wipes his feet on the door mat!"*

Then there were the books from the 1970's that you could tell were really trying so hard to be progressive and inclusive, like, *"Look, Lucy learned how to fish, just like her brothers!"*

Then there were all the great relics we'd come across. One had a card catalog which was so beautiful and in such great shape, we left it there because the kids would have otherwise never seen one. I remember going through the drawers of this

beautiful, wooden desk and found what must have been some of the last, stamped cards from books that had been taken out. It was so cool, but also so sad, like, *Oh, this was once a functioning library.*

Then there were other obstacles that had occurred during the pandemic, not the least of which was that the district had taken some of their federal money and used it to paint a lot of their library spaces, which is great... Except when they did this, they took all the books off the shelves and then threw them back on. In no order. Whatsoever.

### **Oh my god, that sounds like a librarian's nightmare.**

Oh, it was a *total* nightmare for anyone who values organization in the slightest. There were four or five schools with WePAC-operated libraries in that situation, so you're talking a massive, massive undertaking for a small, volunteer-driven organization.

But the larger issue was that this was just too important an aspect of what should be key part of a child's educational experience for the School District of Philadelphia to continue to, essentially, rely on the kindness of strangers, as it were.

Also, even in the best-case scenario pre-COVID, most WePAC-run libraries were only open two or three days a week, maybe for four or five hours per day. Some of them were just one day a week for a couple of hours. So, when I say we were working to *'reopen the libraries,'* that's the most we could have hoped for. It was far from ideal, even if everything had been going our way.

### **What do the schools in the districts have to say about it?**

Oh, there's schools that want it, they desperately want it. They tell us that the only reason they don't have librarians is because they can't afford them, that they're not getting the money they would need from the state. Which is most definitely true, but every school administration sets its priorities, and the School District of Philadelphia could have made it a priority to return librarians to its schools, but they chose not to.

But what really motivated me to start thinking strategically about this issue was when the Philadelphia Inquirer published an article in October 2021 about a dedicated English teacher at Building 21, a high school in Philly, and how he had started a library on his own in the school with the help of his students, and how much the students loved the library space. In response, I wrote a Letter to the Editor which said that, as moving as that story is, the real issue is the lack of school librarians in the district. Yes, it's wonderful what this amazing teacher has done, but it shouldn't be necessary. Just like the volunteer-run libraries, it's not sustainable and it's not providing students with an educator trained in helping students learn to think critically, analyze information, and evaluate online sources – just a few of the skills taught by today's school librarians.

The Inquirer printed it, and then several women reached out to me separately to let me know they were with me one hundred percent on this, and wanted to know what they could do to help fix this situation.

### **That was the beginning of the Philadelphia Alliance to Restore School Librarians (PARSL)**

One of them, Deb Kachel, happened to be someone that I had already known a little from working at the Education Law Center. She's a retired school librarian and is currently an online Affiliate Faculty member for Antioch University Seattle. She is also highly respected researcher in the field and has been a long-time member of Pennsylvania School Librarians Association's (PSLA) Advocacy Committee. Right before COVID, PSLA had organized a rally on the steps of the School District of Philadelphia's Administration Building at 440 North Broad with the teacher's union for just that reason, to get attention to the fact that there weren't any librarians in Philadelphia schools, and that this absolutely needed to change.

The second woman who reached out to me was Corinne Brady, the leader of a volunteer library program at the John B. Kelly School in Germantown. She told me she had two retired school librarians for volunteers, and they were running it more or less like a school library should be run. Which is great, except that Corinne understands that to ensure a functioning library for future Kelly students, the school needs a librarian in place.

The third woman was Dr. Barb Stripling. She is the retired director of school library programs in New York City, a past president of the American Librarians Association, and professor emerita with Syracuse University's School of Information Studies. So, impressive credentials.

She'd already been working to rebuild the pool of school librarians in New York, but when she moved to Philadelphia, she could not believe the librarian situation here.

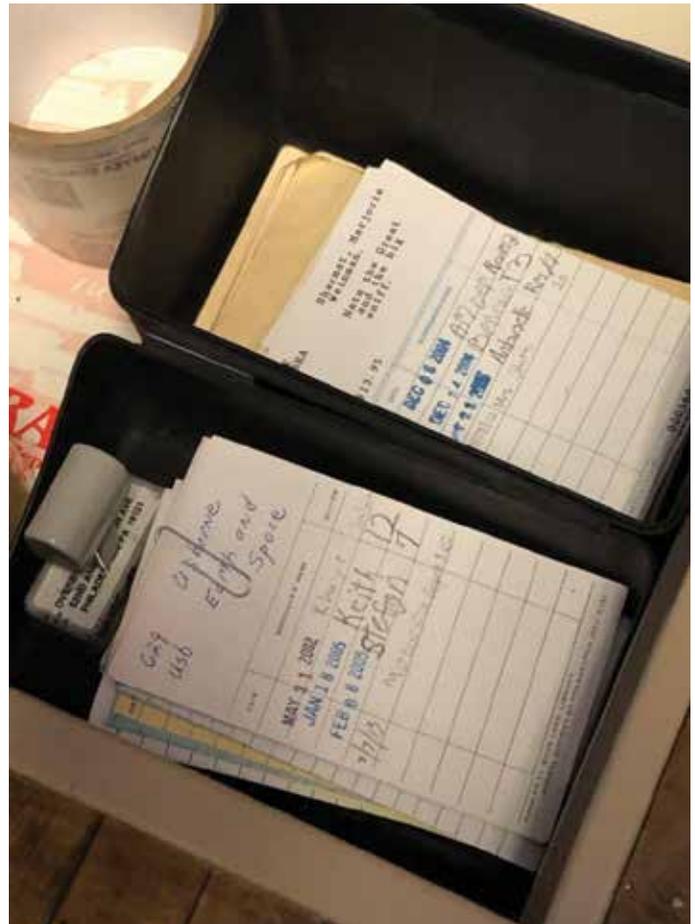
And then Deb Grill reached out. Deb is a retired Philly school librarian who experienced the phase-out of librarian positions in the district first-hand. For 34 years, she held positions in the Philadelphia School District as a reading teacher, certified school librarian, literacy coach and new teacher liaison. Deb has been a long-time advocate for better public schools for all children in Philadelphia as a member of the Alliance for Philadelphia Public Schools (APPS).

Our core committee consists of the five of us. We had our first Zoom meeting in March of 2022 and didn't know if anyone else would even show up, but we ended up having 85 people join.

#### **What steps have you been taking?**

Well, we wrote to the superintendent and to the district's governing body, the Board of Education, but never heard back. We wrote again. Nothing. Again. Nothing. We weren't certain where to go.

Then a friend of mine, Maura McInerney, who is the legal director at the Education Law Center and who was on one of the committees that the new superintendent had formed to help create his strategic plan for the district, found herself at a meeting with him, and she went up to him afterward and told him he needed to start getting librarians back in the schools.



**Overbrook Elementary, library cards from 2004 -2005, artifacts from when they'd last had a librarian.**

He walked her down the hall and gave her to his chief of staff, Sarah Galbally, who then met with PARSL in June 2023.

We laid out for her what we thought needed to happen, a graduated plan of returning librarians to schools.

Around the same time that we met with Sarah, we published a white paper - and we shared it with Philadelphia state legislators, city council members, candidates for office, District staff and other stakeholders. Over the summer and this fall, we've met with dozens of people about this issue. One state legislator, Representative Tarik Khan, who represents the Roxborough and East Falls areas of Philadelphia, has taken a particular interest in this effort, and we are working with him on two proposals, one at the state level and one at the local level, to restore school librarians to some schools in Philadelphia and around the state.

There's also this federal grant that comes around every year, the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program, which exists to fund projects that will grow more school librarians. So, we said, "Hey, School District of Philadelphia, you really should apply to this!" and, the district agreed! In September, PARSL's Core Committee worked with the district's Office of Grant Development to submit a request for funding to support the planning work needed to return school librarians to the district. As part of the process of preparing that proposal, the district has now identified a point person for this librarian restoration work, which is something we had been asking for since we started reaching out to the district.

### And how exactly does that happen?

Well, the first thing that needs to happen is to develop a pipeline to get a pool of certified school librarians. Basically, there's two ways to become a certified librarian in Pennsylvania, either you're already a certified teacher and you take a PRAXIS test in library science, or you could get your Master of Library Science. But, either way, you first need your teaching certificate to become a certified school librarian, because librarians are first and foremost educators.

We've got to create a way for people interested in becoming school librarians to get that certification. Right now, we don't have that, because Drexel had been the university that used to have that, but then they shut that certification program down when Philly stopped hiring school librarians. There's still a master's in library science program at Drexel for academic librarians, college level librarians... but not for school librarians.



**Samuel Gompers School. Weeding and organizing. The library is now reopened and run by WePAC volunteers.**

Next, we must assess the status of library spaces in all district schools, because we know for a fact that some of them do have library spaces that are functional, particularly those supported by Historic Fair Hill, WePAC and certain "Friends of" groups and Home and School Associations.

Then there's the budget situation.

### How much money are we talking?

If certified school librarians were to fall from the sky tomorrow, we estimate it would take about \$22 million to put one in every building in the district.

That may sound like a lot, but in the grand scheme of things, in a budget that's already several billion dollars, it's not that much. For a district where the primary goal is to improve the reading levels of its students, it makes both academic and economic sense.

We're trying to get them to see that this is a really good investment, because there's a ton of research from multiple library impact studies that show the direct correlation between having school librarians and an improvement in students' academic achievement, particularly on reading tests, surprise,

surprise. That's what, in part, sparked the interest of the state rep we're working with is.

The other thing that I think finally got us through to the district is that the superintendent, Dr. Watlington, has said he wants to make Philly the fastest improving school district in the country. So, we said, okay, well if you want to do that, you'd better get up to speed with this issue because DC is adding back librarians in every one of their schools. Boston is doing the same thing. So is LA. So is Clark County, Nevada. So is Minneapolis and New York City.

### Are you saying Philly is in last place?

Yes, in terms of large urban school districts with any school librarians at all, I think it is fair to say that Philly is in last place. I think that was the other thing that got through to the district and the powers-that-be.

### Have you thought about getting in touch with the writers for *Abbot Elementary*?

People have tried that!

There was one episode that really got some retired school librarians going on Twitter. The main characters were having a professional development day in their school's library, and there were all these nice books on the shelves and these librarians tweeted at the show and at the actress Quinta Brunson and Shery Lee Ralph, who's married to Philadelphia's State Senator Hughes, 'This is not realistic. You need to do an episode on how this really is.'

We keep trying to draw attention to the situation as best we can. We are persistent yet encouraging. We've said to the district, "You can make this a huge win. You can make this happen. It's going to take years because it took years for all the librarians to disappear, but you can do it."

### It strikes me as you're telling these stories, that for the most part, everyone you talk to is nothing but enthusiastic and positive. Where's the resistance coming from? Is there a villain?

I'm not sure I would say there is a villain per se. What I'd say is that there have been decades of state underfunding and the resultant lack services in the district, that it's hard for people to believe that things can change for the better. It will take time and effort to manage those changes, but they can happen through creative thinking, collaboration, and perseverance. Because like I said, many principals really want this. Administrators want this. Parents want this. The people in the district's grants office, they were like, *You don't have to convince us, we want this to happen!*

The powers that be in the district, in the city, and in the state have to understand that school librarians are not a luxury, they are a necessary component of an adequate K-12 education, and they need to be funded as a matter of equity.

To learn more about PARSL's work, please visit our website or our Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/librarians4phillyschools>. If you are interested in volunteering with PARSL - and we can always use PARSL - please sign up at <https://www.restorephillylibrarians.org/volunteer> or email [parslibrarians@gmail.org](mailto:parslibrarians@gmail.org).

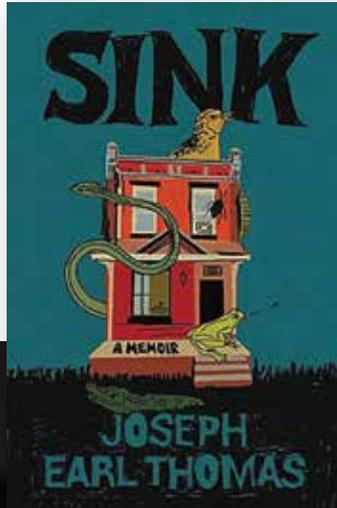
# BOOK REVIEWS

## Sink

by Joseph Earl Thomas

Review by Ashley Swallow

Navigating life in Philadelphia never came easy for Joey, the protagonist of *Sink* by Joseph Earl Thomas. Being a person of color, living in poverty, and being Keisha's son came with endless expectations and rules rooted in violence, threats, and a never-ending tough persona. Since Keisha's addictions came first to Joey, he became all too used to fending for himself and growing up without his mom around. As a result, the young child was often under the care of his Popop and Ganny.



do you add and subtract? And for what? What is deodorant? And toothpaste? Why the stupid teachers think I have time to read the stupid books? Why does everybody wanna know about my winkey or doin it or not and with who and how and when and at what time of the day? And why do they care about God and don't care about no people? And where is God?" Despite this all, Joey was constantly told he was spoiled.

Thomas' choice to narrate the majority of the memoir from the eyes, ears, and mouth of Joey is a testimony to the author's ability to deliver the stories of his childhood both unscathed and untouched. The third person narration adds to the book's authenticity and relevance. It is as if Joey has returned from the past to tell his truth. In the best way possible, the authentic prose and perspective comes across free of consideration, reflection, logic, and time. *Sink* is a narrative of, in Thomas' words, when, "Possibility exceeds reality."

Becoming the cornerstones of the imaginative, fantastical mindset that would carry and protect Joey, Pets, Pets, Pets located on Frankford Ave, Spike his garden snake, Joey's complex relationship with Tia, and gaming were some of the small escapes that the young boy found reprieve in. Throughout Thomas' memoir, he touches on a desire to be cared for and led, and as the book and narrator move forward, readers learn and watch Thomas' difficult journey to become the thing he needed.

At odds with the culture he was born into, much of Thomas' memoir reads as stories of survival. Hope, heartbreak, and home are some of the core themes that bounded Joey's story of retaliating redemption. His Popop waited for him to defend his little sister with violence and slurs, keeping watch in class for roaches running out of his backpack, cutting even more grass to buy back his Sega that Joey's Ganny sold to the pawn shop: Optimism was a trait that Joey seemingly despised. Rising above to meet himself, *Sink* shared Joey's persevering perspective through it all.

One excerpt of the book illustrated both Joey's perspective and the issues that persistently plagued him. Thomas wrote, "How

### Author bio:

Joseph Earl Thomas is a writer from Frankford whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in VQR, N+1, Gulf Coast, The Offing, and The Kenyon Review. He has an MFA in prose from The University of Notre Dame and is a doctoral candidate in English at the University of Pennsylvania. An excerpt of his memoir, *Sink*, won the 2020 Chautauqua Janus Prize and he has received fellowships from Fulbright, VONA, Tin House, Kimbilio, & Breadloaf, though he is now the Anisfield-Wolf Fellow at the CSU Poetry Center. He's writing the novel *God Bless You*, *Otis Spunkmeyer*, and a collection of stories: *Leviathan Beach*, among other oddities. He is also an associate faculty member at The Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, as well as Director of Programs at Blue Stoop, a literary hub for Philly writers. <https://www.josephearthomas.net/bio>

### Reviewer bio:

Ashley Swallow is a freelance writer from Philadelphia. In addition to being a contributing writer for Showbiz Cheat Sheet, Accept This Rose, and Sportscasting, she is a local standup comedian. Ashley earned her bachelor's degree in secondary education English and communications from Pennsylvania State University.

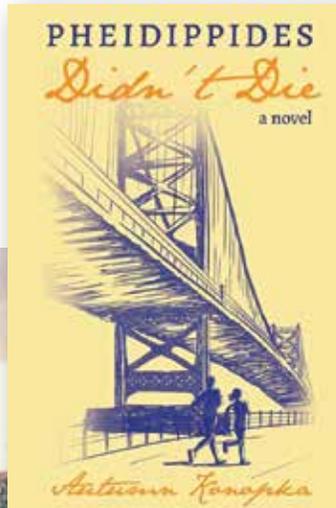
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## Phedippides Didn't Die

by Autumn Konopka

Review by Nicole Conti

*Phedippides Didn't Die* is a captivating romance novel that Autumn Konopka sagaciously weaves topics of grief, mental illness, and trauma into a heartwarming love story. With the makings of a romantic comedy, the reader will inevitably blush, laugh, and shed a tear (or many) at the gripping poetic portrayal on deep themes Konopka bravely and unapologetically delves into.



evident through every word, even when struggling or descending, that she is stronger than most. This character is framed in wondrously lyrical and keenly self-aware diction, making her likable and real to the reader in every mental breakdown or stride.

Mac also grieves for his brother, who has been dead for years. He deals with anxiety and the daunting responsibility of being strong for his family in his secret emotional suffering. To make his family and his brother proud, he asks Libby to help train him for the marathon his brother participated in every year. This interlocks their fates in a symbolic process of running and training

whereas they are mending together in their shared grievances. Despite her valiant emotional guard and his several mistakes, you will root for them the entire way, flipping through all the chapters to see their end result.

Libby and Mac are a paragon of how two people do not enter a relationship perfectly unscathed. Their flaws prove that healing and the art of loving is not linear, deeming it a realistic portrayal that merely informs, not romanticizes. Both Mac and Libby realize together that even though they are dealing with differing forms of grief, that it is all the same in the end, and all grief is to be alleviated the same way: unconditional love, understanding, and reassurance. This story is a hopeful allegory for the people who have the same struggles Mac and Libby do. A much-needed modern take on love that does not shy away from the brutalities of mental illness, grief, and sexual trauma. It proves that characters can be traumatized, but also be funny, sexy, and charming. Konopka sheds candid glaring light on the obscure bravery of navigating romance with mental/emotional hardships, and that there is more nuance to trauma than being healed or not healed, being okay or not okay. So yes, you will undoubtedly race through this novel, but it will sit with you long after the finish line.

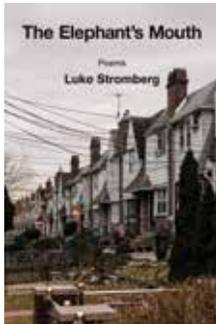
### Reviewer bio:

Nicole Conti is currently a student at Monmouth University in New Jersey studying English with a Concentration in Creative Writing. She is an aspiring author pursuing a career in publishing. Her writing is often inspired by women's rights and her feminist poem, "July Twenty-First" won the Monmouth University's 2024 Toni Morrison Day Creative Writing Prize.

The novel opens from the perspective of Libby is running en route to the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, and she has a very blunt candor about her intentions. With ten-pound ankle weights strapped to her ankles, the reader is led to believe that she is on a casual run to the bridge, until Libby eventually reveals her secret mission is to commit suicide. She is interrupted by the novel's second protagonist, Mac, who pulls her into conversation with his blubbering, awkward charm. He is handsome, goofy, boyish, and utterly at her disposal. The reader is instantly drawn to the contrasting characters, along with the jarringly atypical way they meet. He indirectly talks her off the bridge, and they go to a coffee shop. The narration then shifts from her perspective to his, as it does this throughout the novel, resulting in reliable and trustworthy narrators as the reader gets to enjoy both of their inner monologues.

Libby has a history riddled with sexual trauma, grief, and heartbreak. She has only been truly loved by her best friend, Helen, who influences her to reconnect with her brother. Her brother wants nothing to do with Libby, so she must learn to grieve someone who is still living. Despite all of this, she never once victimizes herself through her poignantly tragic history. It is sheerly

# CAPSULE REVIEWS

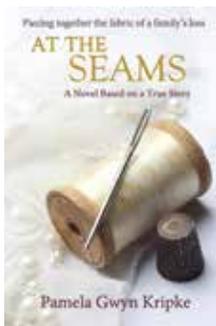


## **The Elephant's Mouth**

by Luke Stromberg  
Review by Donna Di Giacomo

"The Elephant's Mouth" allows readers an opportunity to glance into Luke Stromberg's life and memories. Luke Stromberg's much anticipated debut poetry collection draws in readers who are not poetry fans with ease, making them think they're not reading poetry at all.

*Read more of this review at [www.philadelphiastories.org](http://www.philadelphiastories.org)*

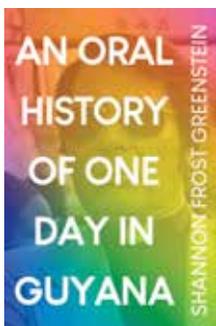


## **At The Seams**

by Pamela Gwyn Kripke  
Review by Constance Garcia-Barrio

In the novel "At The Seams," author Pamela Gwyn Kripke shows how designing and sewing clothes unites the family despite traumatic events that carry over generations.

*Read more of this review at [www.philadelphiastories.org](http://www.philadelphiastories.org)*

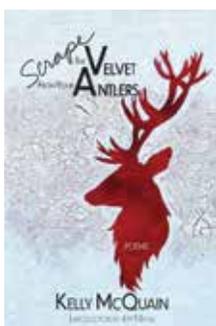


## **An Oral History of One Day in Guyana**

by Shannon Frost Greenstein  
Review by Amy Wilson

Shannon Frost Greenstein unravels and explains the events that are commonly referred to as Jonestown in her book "An Oral History of One Day in Guyana". While Jonestown bears the name of the cult leader, Jim Jones, Greenstein's story redirects our attention to two fictionalized twin sisters, Aisha and Imani, whose relationships are upended by their connection to the People's Temple.

*Read more of this review at [www.philadelphiastories.org](http://www.philadelphiastories.org)*



## **Scrape the Velvet from Your Antlers**

by Kelly McQuain  
Review by Courtney Bambrick

Kelly McQuain's "Scrape the Velvet from Your Antlers" asks readers to identify with the hunter or the prey in different poems throughout the collection. Sharing an evolution of the body's power and desire to grow, McQuain forces readers to question who they are and where they're going next.

*Read more of this review at [www.philadelphiastories.org](http://www.philadelphiastories.org)*

# RESOURCES

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William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

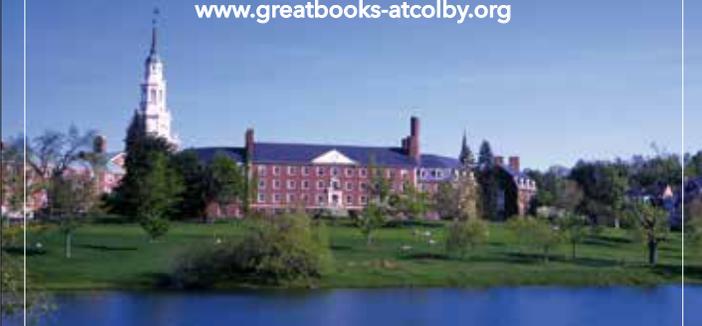
Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*

Charles Baxter, *The Feast of Love*

Françoise Sagan, *Bonjour Tristesse*

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Rodriguez, MFA and  
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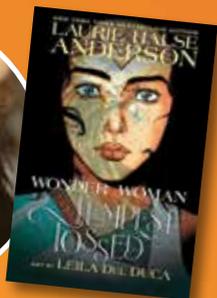
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