

PhiladelphiaStories

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WINTER-SPRING / 2026 / FREE



FERN JEFF RONAN / **WEST PHILLY, CLARENDON, AND THE WORLD BETWEEN AISLES** OCTAVIA MCBRIDE-AHEBEE /
PERFECT MOTHERS BAKE PERFECT CAKES KAT ECHEVARRÍA RICHTER

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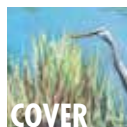
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ART



Silent Witness by Catherine McIlhenny

Catherine has been creating art in many forms throughout her life. Weather, sky, and the natural world inspire her landscapes. She is a Signature Member of the Philadelphia Pastel Society, Pastel Society of America, and other local art organizations. She exhibits regionally and nationally, earning awards for her pastels. Her work is permanently displayed at the Lackawanna County Courthouse, and she teaches pastel classes in her community. CatherineMcIlhennyArt.com



A Light in the Attic by Jay Shifman

Jay Shifman (he, him) believes no one is free until we all are free. An award-winning photographer and writer, when he's not creating beauty on the page he's photographing it in the world. He lives in South Philly with his primary partner/wife, Lauren, and their dogs Nell and Crash. JayShifman.com or @SouthPhillyJays.



Inheritance by Alecia Miller

Creating mixed media artwork allows me to build up layers of meanings and ideas as part of my creative process. I am fascinated with finding commonalities across cultures. This has led me to become a collector of these things—the signs and symbols that merge and flow across cultures; the wonder and peace found in the woods; the memories and mythologies that make up the stories of people's lives. AleciaMiller.com or @the_alecia_bee.



The Garden Party by Jill Pearson

Award-winning artist Jill Pearson grew up in Delco and graduated from The University of the Arts in 2001. She began her career as an illustrator and graphic designer before shifting to abstracts created with acrylics, collage, and drawing media. Her colorful work has sold at art fairs and galleries throughout the Philadelphia region and she maintains a home studio in Chester County. JillPearsonArt.com or @jill.pearson.art.



You Can't See Me by Laura Rutherford Renner

Laura follows the narrative with shade, shadow, and color. She enjoys mixing pure colors, keeping her palette simple to create authentic observation. The quiet engagement of brush to palette and brush to board provides daily calm and purpose. Laura, a retired occupational therapist of 27 years, also works as a job coach with young adults with disabilities. She lives with her husband, their child, and their snarky, beloved cat, Lulu. LauraRutherfordRenner.com or @laurarrenner.



Lily by Sophia Kurtz

Sophia Kurtz grew up in South Jersey, often taking the PATCO into Philadelphia to explore Chinatown with her sister. After attending University of Toronto, she now finds herself jumping between life in the US and Canada. As an artist, she loves to explore natural form through ink and illustration. @skurtzart.



I Saw What You Did For A Klondike Bar by Karen McCool

I'm a figurative oil painter using retro photos as inspiration. I started painting photos after my mom developed dementia. She loved looking through family photos, which led to my fascination with memory and nostalgia. I enjoy capturing moments that encourage us to share our stories. (Preferably, the embarrassing ones, because if you can't laugh at yourself, you should at least have the courtesy to let us do it for you.) KarenMcCool.com or @KarenMcCoolArt.



Handwriting in the Sky by Janice R. Moore

From Moorestown, NJ, Janice R. Moore was awarded a scholarship at the Bildenden Kunst Academy in Munich, Germany in 1982. Returning to NYC, she studied at the Art Students League, audited writing courses at the New School, and was a consultant for CIGNA Corporation's art collection. Her pastels are in the Staten Island Museum and other collections. She is a member of The Plastic Club (Art Studio/Gallery) in Philadelphia.

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Fern

Jeff Ronan

Fern had gotten herself lost.

The bookstore she'd worked at for over a decade had gone out of business, and what she assumed would be a brief blip of unemployment advanced towards month three with no end in sight. To help fill the excruciating amount of free time she now had—and to avoid the sound of her husband Nick's breathing—she would take long walks through their labyrinth of a town. She wore her largest pair of sunglasses and kept her hat pulled low to ward off both the cold and any neighborly attempts to engage her in conversation. Ignoring street signs and the time, she walked aimlessly, allowing herself to slip into a pleasant mental fog. For at least a few hours, she could be a ghost, untethered to the responsibilities of the living.

She'd been listening to a true crime podcast when one of the hosts cut off mid-word, as if they too had fallen prey to the Silver Lake Strangler. She unearthed the phone from her pocket; even through her glove, it felt like an ice cube. The battery had been at fifty-two percent when she left the house, but the temperature had plummeted twenty degrees with the setting sun, and it must have been too much for her ancient phone.

None of the street names looked familiar. Robbed of the maps app she relied on, she picked a direction at random, only to second-guess herself after a few blocks. She doubled back, turning down a different street, but after walking half a mile, she suspected she had been right the first time. An elderly man collecting his mail called out to see if she needed help. Fern picked up the pace, pretending not to hear him.

By the time she returned home, she'd lost feeling in her fingers and toes. Her snot had frozen solid like her nostrils were a pair of popsicle molds. All she could think about was cocooning herself on the couch and zoning out to the new game show she'd discovered in which contestants had to eat the most pickles in a minute. She found the slow-motion instant replays—jaws gnashing, saliva and pickle juice misting the air—particularly revolting and had binged three seasons in the past week. She felt a pang of guilt whenever she looked at her stockpile of unread books, but they reminded her too much of her dearly departed bookstore, a problem she didn't have with *People vs Pickles*.

When she got inside, Nick was pacing, frazzled. He must have been trying to reach her. Fern flushed with guilty pleasure at seeing him look so concerned. "Fucking finally," he said. "Did you forget we're seeing the play?"

She scoffed. "Of course not."

It wasn't that she had forgotten so much as willfully chosen not to remember. They would be driving almost an hour away to see some comedy written in the 70s called *Blanket Statement*. At least, she assumed it was a comedy. She often had trouble deciphering Nick's interpretation of things. This was the same man who had once described *Jurassic Park* as a "heavy watch." They didn't know anyone involved with the production, and neither of them had been to this theatre before, or even the town where it was located. All Nick would say when pressed was that he had seen a production of the play when he was younger, and though he couldn't remember what it was about, he wanted to see it again.

"When did you want to leave?" she asked.

"Like—ten minutes ago."

She gestured to her coat and hat. "Well, I'm ready." She looked down at his bare feet and raised her eyebrows. It was crucial that she didn't give him an inch at the beginning of an argument. It had been one of the best tactics she'd learned from him.

"Do you have the spare charger?" she asked as he yanked his scarf taut, briefly strangling himself. He nodded and made an affirmative grunt before shooing her out the door. After they'd been driving for a few minutes, and his jaw looked less clenched, she asked about the charger.

"It's in my backpack."

She twisted to look in the backseat but only saw a carpet of drive-thru bags and crumpled napkins. "Where?"

"Huh?"

"Where is your backpack?"

"In the living room."

She stared at her husband's dumb face as the wind whistled against the windows. He fiddled with the heat, oblivious. After mentally counting down from five, she said, "My phone is dead. So that doesn't really help me now."

He continued adjusting the heat. "God damn, it's cold." He glanced at her. "Ok. Well, we're late. What do you want me to do, turn around? We're already on the parkway."

"It's fine."

"You want me to stop and buy a charger?"

"No. It is *fine*."

"Ok. So..." He shrugged. "Not like you can use it during the show, anyway. Can't be checking your Insta or whatever in the middle of a play."

Her shoulders climbed up to her ears. "When have I ever done that?"

"You literally had your phone out for half the movie last night."

"That's not the same thing."

"It's disruptive."

"We were watching it at home."

"Disruptive to me, Fern."

Fern bit the inside of her cheek. Most of their recent attempts at communication ended up like this. It seemed to invigorate Nick. He would do squats and push-ups while they argued, then sleep like a baby, while she would be stuck awake, vibrating with adrenaline. Since she'd lost her job though, she had been eating and sleeping and talking and breathing mostly out of routine. If nothing else, fighting with Nick reminded her she was still alive.

Nick turned on the radio, and Fleetwood Mac filled the car. Before Fern could place the song, he changed the station. They listened to the entirety of an ad for a car dealership. He changed it again. After changing stations fourteen more times, he turned off the radio.

Fern stared at her door and considered unbuckling her seatbelt, tugging the handle, and rolling out onto the parkway. Would Nick notice or just keep driving? Maybe he'd slam on the brakes and race back to save her, only for a truck to come along and smear them both across the pavement like butter on toast. She found this image uncomfortably arousing and tried to think of something else.

"Son of a bitch," Nick muttered. She looked over to see him shifting in his seat, digging a free hand into his pockets. She asked what was wrong. "I think I left my phone at home."

"You know you can't check your Insta during the show."

He ignored the comment and changed lanes. "I was gonna use it for directions. Is your phone completely dead?"

"Yes, it's as dead as it was ten minutes ago."

He rolled his eyes. "Christ, I'm just asking."

She pressed on her eyelids with her fingertips. "So...should we stop and buy a charger?"

"It's fine. I know how to get there." He then added, "Sorry," but he said it like a teenager forced to thank someone for a gift they hate.

They drove in silence. Fern's window had frosted up, so she drew a frowny face with her index finger. She then added a crude penis pointing at the face like a finger of accusation. Nick said nothing.

Light flurries divebombed the windshield. Nick turned on the wipers and took the next exit, slowing the car to a crawl. "Keep your eyes peeled for any signs for Ghostlight Players."

She looked out her window. The penis she'd drawn pointed to a thrift store, a hair salon, a coffeeshop—all of them dark. "Is the theatre on this road?" she asked.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"So..." Fern said before stopping herself. She had recently read an article that said the key to a relationship is reframing. It isn't you against your partner, it's the two of you against the problem. Couldn't she try to be the bigger person?

"Hey," she said brightly. "Remember when you said you knew how to get there?" He didn't respond, but his face scrunched in on itself, and she knew she'd hit her target. At the next light, he hooked a left followed by another, immediate left. "Why don't you stop and ask for directions?"

Nick peeled one hand off the steering wheel and made a broad, sweeping gesture. "Do you see anyone to ask?"

"When you see someone, ask them."

Nick nodded a single, slow nod, punctuated by a loud exhale through his nostrils.

A few blocks later, Fern spotted an elderly couple shuffling their way down the sidewalk, their arms interlocked and heads bowed together. Did they cling to each other because it was icy, or did they always walk like this, still crazy for each other after all these years? She studied them from her sideview mirror as they drove past and decided the former would be more romantic. Maybe they were rarely affectionate anymore and holding onto each other would spark some memory from when they were young and first dating. Those early, easy days when you fall for the outline of the person, the ideal version they allow you to see, and by the time you realize there's a discrepancy between the real person and the façade, it's too late. You've convinced yourself the one you fell for must still be in there somewhere, if you could only dig them out again.

"Shit," Fern said, snapping out of it. "There was a couple."

Nick jerked his head back and forth. "Where?"

"Back before the light." She pointed behind them. "We should ask if they know where the theatre is."

"We already passed them." He cut her off as she began to respond. "I'll find it. *I am going to find it.*"

A headache blossomed behind Fern's eyes. She wiped her finger drawing from the window and pressed her damp palm against her forehead. If her calculations were correct, they'd been in the car for seventeen hours. As the streets blurred into one another, she silently counted the seconds, willing herself to say something—anything—once she reached a minute. Then two minutes. Then five. She stayed silent. Since she wasn't following through on the action anyway, she upped the ante. In one minute, she would scream. In two minutes, she would poke Nick in the eye. In three minutes, she would grab the steering wheel and yank—

Nick swerved suddenly into a crowded church parking lot, slamming on the brakes. Fern pitched forward, her seatbelt biting into her shoulder. Nick turned off the car, unbuckled his seatbelt, and hurled himself out, slamming the door behind him. He returned almost instantly, smacking his palm against the windshield.

"Let's go!"

Fern opened her door and looked past him, confused. "Is this a church?"

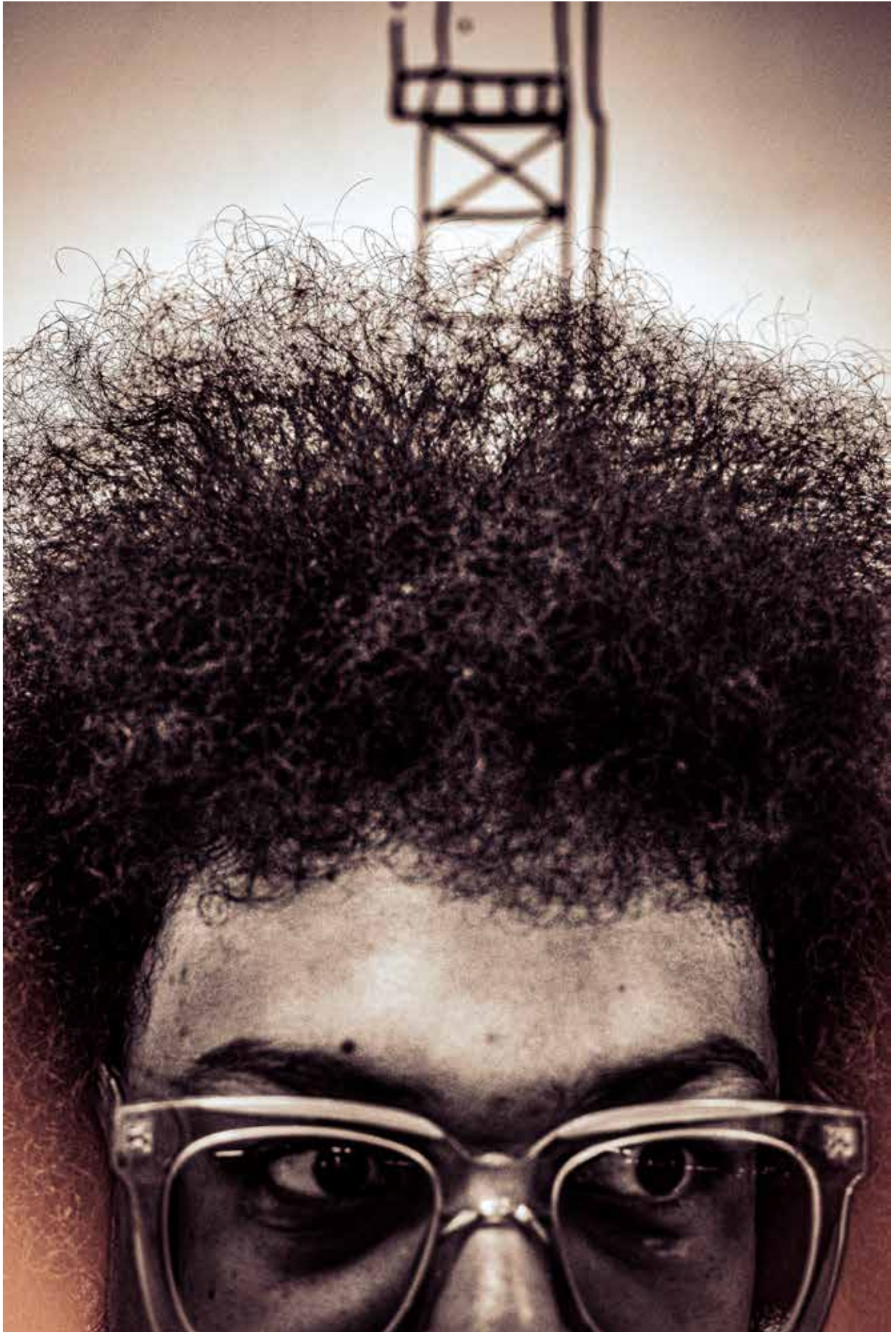
"Yeah, the theatre's in the basement."

This only raised more questions, but Nick was already powerwalking away. She jogged to keep up with him. "Is the play religious?"

"No, just—come on."

They ran, the brisk air slapping Fern awake. A confused burst of adrenaline had flooded her system. After being in the car for so long, she wanted to keep moving, maybe never stop. She felt a brief, manic impulse to open the church doors with a karate kick and immediately wiped out on a patch of ice.

Inside the church, a handwritten sign for Ghostlight Players directed them down a set of stairs, Nick barreling ahead as Fern limped after him. The basement vestibule was empty aside from a teenager wearing a pineapple bowtie. He cheerfully informed them there could be no late seating. "That's fine, kid." Nick



looked past him at the door to the theatre. "We don't mind, we'll be quiet." The teen held up both hands as if to physically restrain Nick and repeated himself, a little less cheerful.

As Nick began to argue with him, Fern wandered off to inspect a poster for *Blanket Statement* taped to the wall. It was a drawing of a group of people, a sheet thrown over them so that you could only see their legs and feet. It made the show look like one of those old bedroom farces, which would make this a far more progressive church than the one Fern had been forced to attend as a child.

A piercing scream startled her. She froze for a moment before remembering the play had already started. It must have been one of the actors. She pressed an ear against the wall but could only make out a furious garble.

A few months into working at the bookstore, an older coworker of Fern's had a nervous breakdown in the travel section. Elaine was a small woman in her fifties who moved through the aisles as if worried she'd damage the books by breathing too loud. On a random Tuesday, with seemingly no provocation, she began tearing books off the shelves, screaming, "ENOUGH!" over and over, so many times the word seemed to lose its meaning. Customers stared, their faces etched with pity and mild fear, but Fern had been pinned to the floor by a curious envy. Elaine left the next day on permanent leave of absence. Fern fixated on the incident for years, wondering what happened to her, until last spring, when she spotted her in the frozen foods aisle at the grocery store. It felt like running into a celebrity. She followed at a distance as Elaine finished her shopping, paid for her groceries, and loaded the bags into her van. Fern watched her drive away, disappointed. The last thing she expected was for her to still look so utterly normal.

Nick stormed over. "The little asshole won't let us in until intermission."

A small pang of hope. She might make it home in time to catch the new *People vs Pickles*. "So...we're leaving?"

He squinted at her. "We're already here."

Fern's headache knocked on the inside of her skull a few times to remind her it hadn't gone anywhere. She sat heavily on a nearby bench. It was twelve minutes past eight, and she hadn't eaten since lunch. "Maybe we could get some food and come back?"

"And miss the start of act two?" Nick shook his head and sat down next to her. "Nope. No way. I'm not moving from this spot."

Fern turned to ask the boy in the pineapple bowtie what happens in act one, but he had disappeared inside the theatre. She looked back at Nick, but he was slumped against the wall, eyes shut and air whistling out of his left nostril, somehow already asleep.

She wanted to check her phone, but since it was dead, she studied Nick's face. She tried to picture him when he was younger. Maybe he'd gone to see the play with his parents, all of them laughing together, some precious memory that he hoped to recapture with her? Or he saw it with a high school girlfriend who had given him a discreet hand job in the darkened theatre, and that was why he couldn't remember a single goddamn thing that happened in the play. She fought the urge to flick his ear.

Time crawled. Fern's stomach growled, her back ached sitting on the bench, her leg throbbled from where she'd fallen in the parking lot, and her headache bonked around the inside

of her skull like a goldfish in its bowl. She tried to remind herself that this would eventually end. The interminable waiting, the play she had no interest in seeing, the long drive home with Nick – these were all finite. As she continued to pull on this thread, she decided almost everything fell into this category. Her complacency, the self-loathing because of her complacency, the thrum of annoyance she felt at Nick's existence, the weight in her chest like a block of ice dragging her down–this would all end at some point.

Of course, the same could be said for the few bits of happiness she scavenged throughout the days. Or her job at the bookstore, for that matter. And then there were those fleeting moments of levity with Nick, like when a shared memory would spark laughter between them, a quick tug as if they were holding the ends of a length of rope, and all they had needed was the slightest resistance to remember they were still connected. This, too, never lasted.

Fern slipped a hand inside Nick's coat and fished out the car keys. Aside from a brief snort, he didn't stir. She rose from the bench and hobbled up the stairs back out into the parking lot. Snow dusted the cars like powdered sugar. A gust of wind blew across the lot, and she shivered with pleasure as it whipped flurries around her. Within a minute, she could be on the road. She could get food, or go home, or just pick a direction and start driving.

She stood there, unmoving. She could go anywhere, do anything. But which choice was right?

Were any of them *wrong*?

A faint shouting rose above the wind. She paused, listening. There it was again. She followed the voices, feet crunching over frost as she circled the church. Rounding the corner, she spotted a line of windows along the ground. She crouched and peered through into the church basement.

Rows of metal folding chairs faced the wall, upon which a sagging, linty curtain had been hung. A single, harsh spotlight illuminated a dining table covered in an old floral tablecloth. Six pre-teens sat around the table in the middle of a furious debate. They wore ill-fitting suits, jacket sleeves sliding up and down as they gesticulated. Fern tried in vain to make out what they were saying. Was this supposed to be a business meeting? Were they half a jury? She still had no idea what the play was about, but one thing was clear. These kids could not act.

They shrieked their lines, pulling exaggerated faces as they jockeyed for attention. If there had been a director, they had seen the writing on the wall early on and abandoned ship. Fern scanned the captive audience as they rustled their programs and shifted in their seats. She suspected most of them were the actors' families.

She couldn't wait to tell Nick. He would have to agree to leave now. Or maybe it would be better to say nothing, wait until the second act to rub it in his face that he accidentally brought them to some kind of youth theatre program. But as she continued to watch, she felt oddly charmed by the kids. What they lacked in talent, they somewhat made up for with an aggressive enthusiasm. Whoever they were, they loved being on this stage with every fiber of their being. If someone tried to stop the show, this pack of ferals would devour them.

One of the girls stood and slammed her hands on the table. With her round cheeks and diminutive size, she closely resembled an incensed chipmunk. She circled the others, jabbing a finger of



accusation at each of them in turn. Fern watched, mesmerized, as the girl stepped on her chair and launched herself up onto the table. As she landed, though, the tablecloth skidded out from under her. She kicked a foot back to steady herself, causing the table's front legs to lift off the floor like a rearing horse.

Fern's hands flew to the window, pressing on the freezing glass so hard she worried it might crack. The girl pinwheeled her arms as she fought to keep her balance, the odds fifty-fifty whether the table would right itself or continue to pitch back and send her flying. She hovered there for longer than seemed possible, suspended between the two outcomes. A strangled cry caught in Fern's throat as the table rocked back, then forward, then back again. Being in proximity to a church must have been

influencing her, because she found herself praying for the first time in years. *Don't let her fall...don't let her fall...don't let her fall...*

But to her surprise, the girl didn't show a trace of fear. Instead, her face beamed with delight, like she knew nothing could hurt her up there. As if this was all just part of the show, and when she was done playing pretend, she'd return to the real world intact.

Jeff Ronan is a writer and actor living in Brooklyn. His fiction has appeared in over a dozen publications including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Neon Door*, *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, *Abys & Apex*, *Twenty-Two Twenty-Eight*, and *Metastellar*. His play *Bunkmates* is published and licensed by Concord Theatricals. Jeffronan.com



West Philly, Clarendon, and the World Between Aisles

Octavia McBride-Ahebee

Yesterday, my younger brother arrived in Philadelphia and immediately asked if I would make my signature oxtail stew. It was a last-minute request, and normally I would have made my way to Reading Terminal Market, the bustling temple of food and humanity. I've been going there since childhood, clutching my mother's and Aunt Lillian's hands, learning from an early age that food is culture and archive.

But I didn't have the energy for the trip downtown, not yesterday. Earlier in the day, I had treated myself to a date with the library. I wandered the cookbook section of the Parkway Central Branch, then sat and listened to Miles Davis in the music department, drifting through the quiet like a rambunctious prayer. That building, designed by Julian Abele, a Black architect whose genius shaped this city, has always been my sanctuary. As kids, my cousin Desi and I would ride our banana- and apple-seat bikes from Overbrook to the main branch, leave them unlocked

outside, and disappear into research and imagination. We had branches closer to home, but that grand building called to us before we could articulate why. We always felt it was ours. More than fifty years later, stepping inside still feels like stepping into possibility.

So yes, the date was lovely and nourishing in its simplicity. And afterward? I was tired. The thought of diving into Reading Terminal's whirl of tourists, produce vendors, fishmongers hollering orders, the smell of spices and hot oil and all that history, I simply couldn't do it. My body said *no*, and I listened.

A friend suggested a nearby meat market that many of our Caribbean and African community members frequent. What I found was a small, unassuming Dominican market with fluorescent lights, narrow aisles of spices and produce, a radio blasting merengue, and a young cashier dancing between customers like joy was his second job.

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And there, behind the meat counter, stood Mr. Shottie, the unexpected sovereign of this tiny, protein-rich kingdom. A youthful Jamaican elder with a Clarendon accent thick enough to stop you mid-sentence, he ruled that butcher station like a gentle chieftain. He was part comedian and part culinary philosopher, a food griot. As he talked me through the oxtails and offered preparation tips, he insisted I take a bottle of his personal sauce: *Shottie's Jamaican Sauce*. He said it was a much-needed ingredient for oxtails. I found myself leaning in not just to hear him, but to hear inside him.

Because in that voice, in the music of it, there was history layered like sediment. The rolling brogue of long-ago Irish and Scottish tongues, carried through colonial overseers and prisoners transported against their will. Beneath that, pulsing, grounding, steady, were the rhythms of the Akan and Igbo, those ancestral beats that refused to disappear. A New World language, born of rupture and survival, dancing on top of a Dominican merengue track in a West Philly butcher shop.

It was enchanting. It was ordinary. It was a miracle disguised as a grocery errand.

There I stood, surrounded by plantains and Scotch bonnet peppers, by chicken feet arranged like delicate relics (yes, I bought them; collagen is my ally and my cane thanks me), realizing this was not just a shopping trip. It was a reminder that history is not behind us. It is right here, humming and swaying

between metal shelves and glass coolers, still unfolding, still calling roll.

In that modest market, I felt the whole Atlantic world in motion, the diaspora speaking back to itself, seasoning memory, stirring pots, laughing, surviving, feeding each other forward.

Sometimes you don't need a Reading Terminal to feel the world. Sometimes the world meets you at the butcher counter, smiling, accent thick with centuries, handing you a bottle of sauce and a lesson in who we are.

And my brother, tasting that stew infused with memory and migration, grinned wide and said, "This is it. Home, found in a bowl."

Octavia McBride-Ahebee is a Philadelphia-based poet, writer, and educator whose work centers migration, Black Atlantic history, memory, and place. A longtime teaching artist and community collaborator, she has contributed to multiple anthologies and cultural projects connecting Philadelphia to West Africa and the broader African diaspora. Her work often bridges literature, visual art, and public history, with a focus on overlooked narratives and intergenerational storytelling. She is currently engaged in several writing and arts initiatives rooted in community and social justice.

Flood Tide

Poem by Ann E. Michael

She remembers watching the Rancocas rise
that year Belle slammed ashore
tearing siding and roof tiles from beach houses.

She recalls how the Mullica churned, a brown
foaming roil, sandy banks too weak to staunch
its uncharacteristic force.

How current unleashed itself from sluggish
shallow creekbeds. How the deadfall dams
re-routed its familiar flow.

The pine barrens sucked down eight
inches of rain in three hours and jetties
moved, the pilings cracked.

Mushrooms materialized on wooden stoops
and stair treads, roads dissolved,
the lights went out.

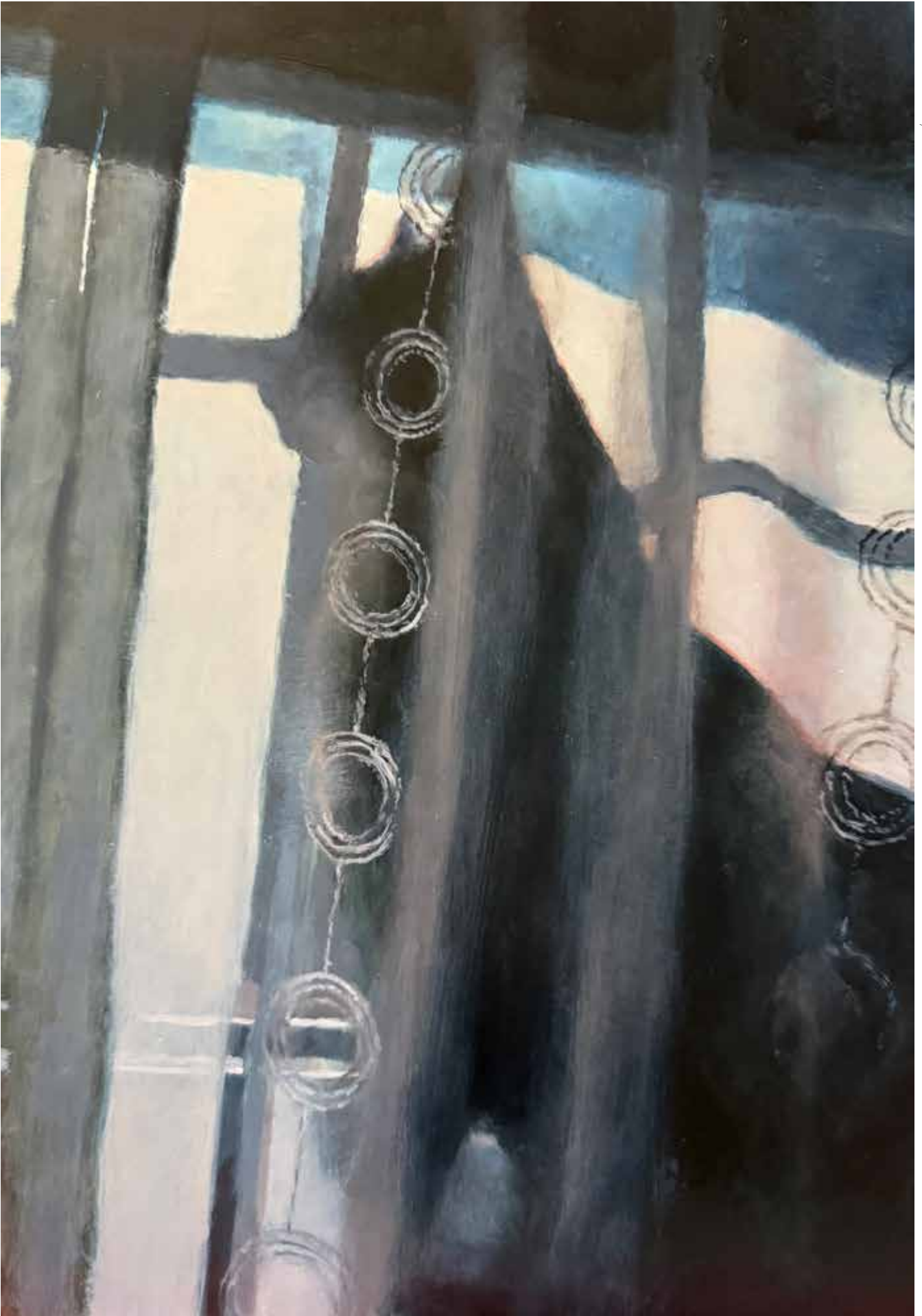
She and her mother sat at the table,
her mom's face flickering in candle flame,
her dad standing at the bay window.

Loud. That's how she remembers that
storm. And her father, young then, she recalls
his anxious observation of the creek—

calculating the crest, reckoning
the cost of abandonment vs. the risks
of stubbornness, attendant to the rain



Ann E. Michael lives in Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley, where for many years she ran the writing center at DeSales University. Her latest poetry collection (2024) is *Abundance/Diminishment*. Her work has been appearing online and in print for many decades in numerous journals, anthologies, chapbooks, and two previous collections. She maintains a long-running blog at www.annemichael.blog



RUBBINGS FROM GRAVESTONES

Poem by Claire Scott

& when

Huge oil portraits of my parents
hung on the dining room walls
as though we lived in a museum and people
paid good money to wander through
only no one ever came

& although

Each night after the maids in white uniforms
passed plates of uninspired food
us four kids sat eyes down
on our silent steaks and potatoes or pushed
the Friday fish around with silver forks

& because

We didn't want to see those eyes
watching us from the walls, eyes
that could see the lies, saying our mother
made big breakfasts no need to bring
turkey sandwiches to school

& while

My mother licked the butter balls
ignoring her dinner, slurping her scotch
my father in a coat and tie carefully carved his meat
into perfect squares before taking a bite
willing her to sanity



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





Perfect Mothers Bake Perfect Cakes

Kat Echevarría Richter

To celebrate our son's first birthday, we settle on a London theme. By this, I mean that I settle on a London theme and my husband knows better than to object. I sketch a three-tiered layer cake, just like they do on *The Great British Baking Show*; it will be light blue fondant with Union Jack pennants and a fleet of double decker busses. The pièce de résistance will be the cake topper: a miniature crown molded from gold fondant and bedecked with edible pearls. This, mind you, makes perfect sense because our son was born within twenty four hours of Kate Middleton's third baby and I had always intended to marry Prince William and my husband and I were very into watching *The Crown* on Netflix during the rare nights that we didn't immediately fall to sleep after putting our newborn to bed.

"You have to try these," I tell a fellow South Philly boy-mom who lives across the street.

"What are they?" she asks.

"Brownies!"

She's skeptical. They don't look like brownies, but that's because they're made entirely of dates, tahini, and cocoa powder. In my twenties, I made brownies with sugar and eggs and pumped them full of espresso powder to fuel the all-nighters that got me through grad school. But that was when I lived in London. That was when I could stay up to write as long as I wanted. That was before I had to wake up the next morning and be responsible for another human being.

"No sugar?" she asks.

"No sugar." This is because now that I'm in my thirties and all-nighters are no longer possible, I've gotten into Vitamixing. First, smoothies. Then, baby food. Now, DIY almond milk and sugar-free approximations of the traditional brownie. "I've actually given up sugar," I say. "And dairy too. And caffeine. And alcohol."

"All at once?"

"Yes," I inform her, basking in the glow of my moral superiority. "It's my New Year's resolution."

"You're going to murder someone," she tells me. She is doing Dry January and suggests, ever so gently, to avoid triggering any homicidal tendencies on my part, that I should

try eliminating one vice at a time. But I stand my ground. I will become vegan. I will lose weight. I will rearrange the furniture. I will reupholster the couch instead of working on my novel. I will renovate the kitchen. And I will bake our son the perfect birthday cake because it is through my cakes that I prove to the world—and to my child—that I am a good mother.

My son's grandmothers both devoted their lives to the education of small children: my mother-in-law as a Kindergarten teacher, and my mother as the sort of stay-at-home mom/Sunday-school teacher/Girl Scout troop leader/4-H chaperone who could whip up a brand new batch of homemade Play-Doh in approximately thirty seconds.

I am good at Play-Doh—the homemade kind is just art with flour—but I do not particularly care for small children. I do not tolerate messes well. I prefer to bestow my educational zeal on young adults. College students present their own problems, but they are, even in their excuses, endlessly fascinating. Babies, on the other hand, are boring.

I make sure to document every not-boring thing my son does during the first year of his life—Held his head up! Rolled over! Sat on his own! Stood up!—but these accomplishments amount to little more than defying gravity. There is nothing stimulating here, nothing approximating fulfillment in my book. And yet, a good mother does not admit such things.

On paper, our son's birthday cake will be the most beautiful cake in the world. On paper, I take pains to "enjoy every moment" of motherhood. On paper, our child is a little "bundle of joy."

In reality, he comes to us blue, with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck. After the NICU, he won't latch properly. After the lactation consultant, he needs physical therapy. After the infant chiropractor, a tongue tie revision. When he finally sleeps, I hook up my breast pump and make my way back to Netflix, back to the *Bake Off* tent—as they call the show in the United Kingdom—where joy is manufactured and perfection is possible.

Physically speaking, Paul Hollywood is not my type. The fifty-nine-year-old co-host of *The Great British Baking Show* is short and stocky, with the puerile spiked hair of someone who refuses

to acknowledge they've gone gray. But those bread-kneading biceps. Those baby-blue eyes. I loved a man with eyes like that when I moved to London for grad school. But again: that was before I got married. Before I had a child. Before I learned that life would occasionally require the outsourcing of my orgasms to bread-baking fantasies involving Paul Hollywood.

When our son is three months old, I think I'm having a heart attack so I drive myself to the ER. The doctor tells me I'm fine; I've simply pulled a muscle while lifting our baby to nurse.

At four months, the pediatrician tells us we can "extinguish" the night feeds but I can't stop crying when we move our son out of the co-sleeper and into his own room. My husband gives me noise canceling headphones, turns on my favorite sitcom, reminds me that our child is *literally* four feet away. But four feet might as well be his freshman year of college, so I burst into tears all over again.

My mother-in-law comes to visit. She bakes casseroles. She does laundry. She slips into the nursery to hold our son when he cries. We're meant to be sleep training. I am not kind about this fumbling of our plans. I have to take myself out to the front porch to calm down. I have to take the dog around the block. When neither of these things works, I order books—more books—that promise to preserve my sanity and get my baby to sleep and solve my diastasis recti by magically knitting my abdominals back together.

At six months, an editor I met on a press trip commissions me to profile a famous choreographer for her magazine. My heart leaps. My mother offers to babysit. I take my laptop straight to the coffee shop, having already conducted the necessary research during nap time. The words come slowly because I am out of practice but I am alive again, if only for a few hours. So alive, in fact, that I stick my foot in my mouth when I tell my stay-at-home-mother how happy I am to finally be going back to "work."

It takes me several years before I can ask my husband, "Do you think I had postpartum depression?"

"Of course," he says. "I thought you knew?"

But I didn't know. I just baked cakes.

Between feeds, I teach myself how to make fondant with melted marshmallows and powdered sugar. I teach myself how to stack a three-tiered cake with wooden dowels and cardboard. At last, I decide to take my newly-acquired skills for a test drive. The result is not the elegant, three-tiered, astronomy-themed cake I had intended to make for my husband but more a deflated alien spaceship.

"It still tastes very good," my husband tells me. "Don't worry."

I try not to cry.

"You're right," I tell him. "I'm being silly." An alien space ship is at least astronomy-adjacent.

Still, I push the stroller to Home Depot. The internet tells me that masonry tools will get the frosted edges of my bakes nice and crisp. And a crisp edge with a 90-degree angle is what separates a good baker—a good mother—from a failure.

Here, in pictures, I am good. Here, over the years, my child is hiking, camping, playing T-ball, building sandcastles with his cousins, sitting atop his father's shoulders to set a star atop the Christmas tree. Here are finger paints and homemade Halloween costumes and culturally enriching activities like painting *en plein air* along the Schuylkill.

But sometimes I am not good. Sometimes I am just too tired for watercolors along the Schuylkill: the bikes, the snacks, the paints, the paintbrushes, the mason jar full of water to clean them, and the paper towels needed to dry them. Sometimes I just wish my son would be quiet so that I can write.

The London cake is off to a much better start than the astronomy cake. But the crown I have sketched in my notebook refuses to materialize. Perhaps this is because I don't want just any old crown. I want the crown from *The Crown*. But the crown from *The Crown* is made of gold. Mine is not. Mine collapses under its own weight.



I KNOW WHAT YOU DID FOR A KLONDIKE BAR by KAREN MCCOOL

It occurs to me that I could just top the cake with a candle in the shape of a number one from the Dollar Tree on Oregon Avenue, which is where I've bought the cake mix and all of the necessary frosting because I'm more concerned with how the cake looks than how it tastes. (Don't tell Paul Hollywood.) But there is no artistry in this solution, no room for creativity.

Finally, inspiration strikes: I will top the cake with a fondant Paddington bear.

I very dutifully resisted the urge to spend £45 on a Paddington onesie at the Cath Kidston boutique the last time I was at Heathrow. Considering that I was seven months pregnant at the time and flying to attend the memorial service of my favorite professor, this took considerable restraint. But now, I shall reap my confectionary rewards.

I spend three days on Paddington, and for three days I am almost alive again: royal blue fondant for his coat; red for the hat; brown for his head and various appendages.

At the Michaels on Columbus Boulevard, I treat myself to an assortment of fondant tools. They look like something a dental hygienist might use: pokey things and pointy things and mirrored choppy things. One has a serrated triangle on the end and makes a perfect stitch-like effect on the edge of Paddington's blue overcoat. Even though he ends up a bit lopsided and must be secured atop the cake with half a dozen toothpicks to keep him from plunging three stories to his death, my mother-in-law is astounded: *You made that???*

Yes. Yes, I did. I set the cake in the center of the dining room table, and the cousins and aunts and uncles and grandparents gather round. I am wearing the same preppy blue-and-white dress that I wore to my brother's wedding and have dressed our son in a coordinating blue-and-white sailor suit. We manage to snap a few photos before he tosses off the matching hat. The stitch-like details on Paddington's coat are so vivid that they even show up in the photos I post to Facebook, which I know because people have commented on them, and this confirms that I'm a good mother.

But everything is not perfect. Only later would I learn that anthropologists have a term for the process of becoming a mother: *matrescence*. Nobody ever uses this term, not even that favorite professor, who was, in fact, both an anthropologist and a mother. When she learned of my pregnancy, her only advice was to keep working so that I could afford childcare, lest I lose my "potential." Even as I type "matrescence," Microsoft Word runs a furry red caterpillar—a very hungry caterpillar?—beneath the word, urging me to consider a correctly-spelled alternative. Is this because motherhood is meant to come naturally? Automatically? Does the process of becoming a mother—of determining the sort of mother you're meant to be—not even deserve a name?

At the end of the party, Paddington sits alone atop a small plate because no one actually likes to eat fondant, not even my two preteen nephews who usually eat anything.

"Where would you like me to put him?" my mother-in-law asks, cupping the bear like a sanctified communion wafer.

"You can just throw him out," I tell her, switching the baby from one hip to the other.

"But you worked so hard!"

"It's okay," I tell her. "What am I going to do with a fondant bear?"

She offers to take it home and put in her freezer.

"I can shellac it," she says.

And for a moment, this actually seems like a good idea: Paddington from our son's first birthday, then the trash truck from his second. We'll have to switch to individual cake pops for his third, because of the pandemic, and then we'll overcompensate with mason jar cakes and a fleet of rented quadricycles on Boathouse Row for his fourth, but for his fifth birthday, I'll bake a mermaid-themed sandcastle cake, complete with a beach of brown sugar, ice cream cone turrets, and handmade chocolate seashells. My mother will be so impressed that she'll call the neighbors to come see.

But is this the sort of woman I want to be? Channeling my creative impulses into birthday cakes when, beyond the highly choreographed fantasies of the *Bake Off* tent, beneath the socially acceptable performance of motherhood, I actually care so little for baking that I use a boxed mix from the dollar store?

Poor Paddington with his perfect stitching deserves a more dignified fate than that. So, too, does my son. So, too, does his mother, this woman that I have become. And so, on the afternoon of his first birthday, I put him down for his nap. I sneak into the kitchen. I take Paddington from his solitary throne in the freezer and I throw the fondant bear into the trash.

Then, I write. I write in fits and starts. I write in the margins. I write in between the cakes over the years. And by the time my son turns six, I don't care about anything being Pinterest-perfect anymore because I've gotten myself into a fully funded MFA program for creative writing. An ice cream sundae bar, I decide, will do the trick and my therapist is very proud of me.

For his seventh birthday, halfway through my degree, my son decides he wants a pirate ship. We scroll Pinterest together.

"That one's perfect!" he declares, zooming in on a veritable flotilla created entirely from fondant. But then my son—who is brilliant and kind and endlessly creative—remembers what I've taught him.

"Actually, nothing is perfect. But could we make a kraken out of fondant? Like, a really big one?"

"Absolutely," I tell him. And together, we make a complete mess of the kitchen: clouds of confectioners' sugar coating all of our appliances, melted marshmallows congealing in the microwave, food coloring—blue, green, inky purple—staining both the countertop and our fingertips. The color scheme is "ocean" so anything goes. And when my son wants to add another layer of white chocolate pirate skulls to the base, I tell him to go for it. "But save one for the crown," I suggest, because even the deadliest of beasts deserves to feel fancy.

And this crown materializes: yellow fondant with seven spikes and a pirate skull in the middle. We mold seaweed from green fondant, ocean waves from Dollar Tree frosting, sea shells from sea salt caramel flavored candy melts. And when we top the cake with a perfectly imperfect eight-tentacled kraken, I don't even bother to post a picture on Facebook. I'd rather share that I've just published my first short story, and it's been nominated for a Pushcart.

Kat Echevarría Richter is a fellow in the Creative Writing MFA program at Rutgers-Camden. Her work has appeared in *Glamour*, *Glassworks*, and *Skirt* and her essay "Becoming Boriqua" won first prize from LMNL Arts. Kat lives in South Philly with her partner, their child, and a neurotic but loveable rescue dog.

God Save the Human Cannonball

Poem by Marko Capoferri

the best disinfectant	gravity is
I'm still struggling	a statement
on its own	to let fly
that it hovers	wings and hope
than a man	for longer
any story is only half-	normally can
mimicking flight	perfect: there's an arc
to sea level	that falters
where it started	not far from
the old story	consider
drowning	of a man
shivering	and the surface
like applause	with rain
and the moth	for his vanishing act
of ash	a floating speck
the night	who loves
and ends that way	like a fire
to vanish	with any luck
of memory	without a trace
being saved	what we might call



Marko Capoferri is a poet, musician, occasional journalist, and former conservation worker based in Missoula, Montana. He was born in Camden, NJ, raised in the Pine Barrens, and has since lived and worked in eight US states. His work can be found in *The Shore*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Ekphrastic Review*, and elsewhere.

Making Humes Valley

Poem by Robert Fillman

After Harry Humes (1935-2025)

Write its history in teeth.
Make it part fox and songbird
settled on a sumac branch,

egg-stealing snout and a flash
of tail collaring the scree.
Shovel out the anthracite

and run hands on calloused cliffs,
spires of millet. Listen for
rock clicks. And don't be afraid

to eat a little hill dirt.
Make it hard as tortoise shell
with the sure foot of a snake,

sacs of venom that vanish
into summer grass. Let it
open like an exit wound,

but give it the pleasing shape
of a peace sign. Fill its mouth
with a water break. Call it

Kashmir or Danube or Death
but don't split the map in two.
Carve out its bottom for kings.

Make its memory hollow
like a broken milkweed pod
or the fleshy pink space that

hides within lungs. Then, dare it
to breathe, stand firm against wind,
all of the planet's motion.



Robert Fillman is the author of *The Melting Point* (Broadstone, 2025), *House Bird* (Terrapin, 2022), and the chapbook *November Weather Spell* (Main Street Rag, 2019). Individual poems have appeared in *Poetry East*, *Salamander*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Verse Daily*, and elsewhere. He is an assistant professor at Kutztown University in eastern Pennsylvania and the poetry editor at *Pennsylvania English*.



THE DOX THRASH MURAL*

Poem by Yvonne

*They say Hoods sprayed it! Kids tagged it! A blackout box!
They say Kids? In freezing butt cold? Who pitch-black caulks
A point-blank square bull's-eye? They say Square arty quacks!
Same old war on murals! They say Simmering packs!
They say Snarkies from the 'burbs! Messing good old Blacks
At home! Naw! They say Nobody there for years, folks!
Not since Brother passed? Not since '64 riots?
Naw! They say Brother tied good heritage in knots!
They say Pop left bad kiddy tags! Old smart-mouth jokes!
The last word? They say A snot-nose tribute to Dox!*

Hearsay. All wrong. Government—oops—did it.
“Slum clearance.” The streets he loved. Bad credit.
He never owned that wall, the mural gone.
Down the block in brief reprieve his sweet old home.

*In 2001 a tribute mural to the master printmaker Dox Thrash was installed at 2442 Cecil B. Moore Avenue in Sharswood, a North Philadelphia neighborhood famed for its jazz venues, where he lived and worked for decades. When painted over by government workers, it was replaced in 2015 by a new mural at 1631 Girard Avenue, where it has since been almost totally blocked by new development.



Yvonne: Philadelphia born, raised, retired. First poetry editor at *Ms.* Some awards: NEA (poetry/1974/1984), Pushcart Prize (vol. 6), BRIO (1991), Leeway (fiction/2003). Recent print: *A Black Philadelphia Reader* (Penn State, 2024), *The Hopkins Review* (Summer 2023), *POETRY* (July/August 2022), *Stronger Than Fear* (CaveMoon, 2022). www.iwilla.com

BOOK REVIEWS

Minato Sketches

by Sharon White

Review by Mary Evangelisto Miller

When Gigi lands in Tokyo to begin teaching a summer-long art history seminar, she embarks on more than a professional appointment. Summer often serves as a bridge, especially for students and teachers, spanning the chasm between the end of one school year and the beginning of another. For Gigi, the summer represents even more: a rebirth. After a debilitating stroke, and years of rehabilitation, during which she was tasked with relearning how to perform basic functions—smiling, speaking, using utensils, word-finding—she is ready to reenter the world, outside the protective care of her family.

It is no accident that Tokyo is her destination. As a young student, Gigi's period of study in Japan proved transformative, and an irresistible longing to return to that time while beginning the next phase of her life propels Gigi forward, despite her reservations. Trying life on her own, independent of her husband and sons, is the next step in her healing, as well as an attempt to reclaim something she lost inside her soul before the stroke caused her to lose her language. Postgirlhood, prestroke, Gigi lost sight of who she is beyond a wife and mother, and misses her fire, needing "this time to be a chance to reclaim some kind of wildness of spirit."

As Gigi settles into what will be her life for the summer, she begins to reclaim herself through teaching, connecting with her students, and, in particular, through new friendships with colleagues—particularly Richard, a physics professor-turned-dance and yoga instructor. In her time off campus, Gigi explores various gardens and tends her own plants she has installed in her apartment. As the summer unfolds, her friendship with Richard becomes central to her life, as they spend many hours bonding while exploring Japanese gardens and parks together.

Recurring themes mirror the loss and renewal of Gigi's health and vitality. Gigi frequently refers to her stroke as "lightning in her brain," equating her medical emergency with a natural disaster. Likewise, the Japan of her youth has been transformed through the catastrophic earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011—a triple disaster involving a massive earthquake, devastating tsunamis, and the subsequent Fukushima Daiichi nuclear meltdown, leading to loss of life, displacement, and long-term environmental and social effects in the Tōhoku region. Tōhoku, too, is emerging from disaster; like Gigi herself, the Japan of her younger days is gone, but in the process of rising from the ashes.

Still alive, but irrevocably changed.

In another metaphor for creating order from chaos, the work of Robert Smithson is mentioned throughout the novel. Smithson



is best known for large-scale sculpture and land art; his focus was on transforming ruined or exhausted sites in nature into something new—much like post-lightning Gigi, or post-3/11 Japan. The wild boars that are thriving in the desiccated landscape in high-radiation zones in Sendai serve as another example of adaptation after a cataclysmic event. Gigi's ongoing fascination, and eventual encounter, with these wild boars show her affinity for these creatures, which mirror her own strength and resilience.

Minato Sketches is a beautifully written novel. The fleshed-out descriptions of the gardens and flowers Gigi loves, as well as the still-recovering landscapes she visits, lend vitality to the text. The chapters are concise;

like the still-recovering processes of Gigi's brain, each chapter comprises sketches of time, rather than completed artworks. The voice and language are clear and simple. The multilayered structure of the novel creates interest throughout the novel as different elements of the story unfold. Through Gigi's experiences, as well as the narrative, the reader learns details about Japanese culture and society that add heightened texture and meaning to Gigi's experience.

In Japanese, Minato (港) means "harbor" or "port," symbolizing safety, cultural exchange, and connection. The character 港 visually depicts water enclosed by structures, signifying a safe haven for ships. In *Minato Sketches*, for Gigi, the Tokyo summer is precisely that: a place of safety during her progressive healing; a place of exchange of what she was before the stroke for what she is becoming now; a place of new connections, not only with new people, but with Japan, as a metaphor for her own rebirth after disaster. As we follow Gigi on her journey, we are reminded of the fragility and power of change. What does not kill us may not necessarily make us stronger, but it will change us, and we must find a way to forge ahead.

Reviewer bio:

Mary Evangelisto Miller is a freelance writer and editor based in Bucks County. She has been self-employed as a medical editor for 23 years. Mary holds a bachelor's degree in Mass Communications and English from Temple University and a master's degree in English and Publishing from Rosemont College.

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Play, Rewind

by John Vurro

Review by Jennifer Rivera

In *Play, Rewind*, John Vurro's striking debut novel, readers are invited into the fragmented world of Wes, a twenty-six-year-old young man whose life has been reoriented around the slow unraveling of his mother's mind. Vurro delicately balances narrative intimacy and structural sophistication, producing a work that is both emotionally affecting and formally ambitious. Set against the crumbling backdrop of a dying video rental store in Queens, New York, the novel is a meditation on memory, regret, identity, and the salvaging power of art.

Wes is introduced to us as a once-aspiring filmmaker now trapped in the liminal space between hope and responsibility. When his mother was diagnosed with dementia, he gave up his plans for film school to care for her full-time. The emotional cost of this decision, however loving, becomes the axis on which the entire novel turns. Wes is not simply a dutiful son; he is a young man increasingly defined by loss of future, of past, and of self.

His mother, once his anchor, is now volatile and unrecognizable, her moods swinging sharply as her memory deteriorates. Yet, Wes continues to maintain their home in its pre-diagnosis state, as if he can freeze time and prevent the erosion of her identity.

Vurro's portrayal of dementia is remarkably grounded. Rather than romanticize the disease or turn it into a convenient metaphor, he presents it in all its harrowing mundanity: the constant repetition, the flashes of lucidity that only make the decline more painful, the emotional labor that never stops. Wes's caretaking is both physically draining and spiritually exhausting. His only real support comes from Gloria, a compassionate and competent part-time nurse whose presence offers structure and a semblance of relief, even as the weight of the situation grows heavier. She gently urges Wes to consider placing his mother in a home—an option he sees as both a betrayal and an impossibility, given their financial constraints.

A thread of mystery enters the novel when Wes discovers an unmarked videotape outside the store labeled "COPY DON'T WATCH. BE BACK SOON." The tape appears to be a simple home video of a couple's Caribbean vacation, yet it becomes a powerful emotional and narrative anchor. What first seems incidental evolves into a deeply symbolic presence in the story: a glimpse into a life untouched by obligation, a visual embodiment of joy and freedom that stands in stark contrast to Wes's own constrained existence. Vurro uses the footage not just as a clue, but as a catalyst. This artifact awakens something long dormant in Wes's imagination and ultimately sets the story's emotional and creative transformation into motion.



Wes's emotional landscape becomes further complicated by the reappearance of Lola, a high school crush who disappeared without explanation just before graduation. She resurfaces as mysteriously as she vanished, offering neither clarity nor closure. Instead, she inserts herself into Wes's life, posing as Joan, his mother's long-deceased sister. Her role in the household becomes an unsettling performance, one that momentarily comforts his mother but ultimately disrupts the careful equilibrium Gloria has helped Wes maintain. Lola's refusal to share her past and her tendency to sidestep caregiving boundaries create additional strain. Yet her presence also injects a kind of chaos that nudges Wes toward emotional risk—toward change.

Vurro uses Lola's character as a reflection of Wes's indecision and yearning. Her mysterious past, her charm, and his intense emotions towards her all complicate the care ecosystem around Wes, forcing him to confront not only his mother's deterioration but his loneliness. Lola's return and her impulsive efforts to help challenge Wes's sense of control and his reluctance to look beyond the walls of his current life. Lola's presence also reintroduces the theme of escape. For Wes, the tape and Lola represent alternative lives: one imagined, one remembered, both infused with what-ifs.

The novel pivots when Wes decides to enter a film contest at the Manhattan Film School. With Lola's help, he begins recording his mother's daily life, interweaving this footage with the mysterious vacation video. The act of filmmaking becomes a vehicle for processing grief, confusion, and memory. In this way, *Play, Rewind* becomes not just a novel about film, but a novel structured like a film—editing together disparate pieces to create a coherent emotional narrative.

The documentary effort elicits a crucial confession from his mother: the truth about Wes's father. Contrary to what Wes believed, his father never moved to Florida. Instead, after putting the family in danger due to gambling debts, his mother paid him to disappear. This revelation doesn't just upend Wes's understanding of his childhood; it exposes the fragility of the stories we tell ourselves to survive. Vurro handles this moment with quiet force, avoiding melodrama in favor of emotional authenticity.

Check out the full review at Philadelphiastories.org

Wisp

Poem by Charles McCurdy

bird

such a tight fist of letters
needing just a wisp of breath
to be heard

and when you see one,
at first
a brief wash of color,
music and motion
and then
in full focus
a wren
doing a fitful dance
on a porch railing
and singing
throat tilted up,
beak wide,
you welcome
the thrust of energy
and the flow of liquid tones
yet also ponder
how ill-prepared
eyes, ears, mind and heart are
for the task
of taking it all in

but the bird
draws you back
and asks
that you unclench your mind
and relish,
while you can,
this puff of air,
this sketch
so deftly etched
and then,
just as swiftly,
swept away



Charles McCurdy plays and works with words. After graduating from Oberlin College with a double degree in English and Music, he taught high school English for about 10 years, practiced journalism for about 15 years as a music critic, reporter and editor for newspapers and magazines including the Philadelphia Inquirer and Chamber Music magazine, and worked in corporate communications for Merck & Co., Inc., Bristol Myers Squibb, Daiichi Sankyo, Inc., and Labcorp. He has lived in and near Philadelphia for 37 years with his wife, two daughters, one granddaughter and two dogs.

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