

PhiladelphiaStories

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

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ART



Buschini Drillers 1910 by Maryanne Buschini

Originally from Valhalla, NY, Maryanne Buschini maintains an art studio in the Philadelphia area. Buschini earned art degrees from Kansas State University and the University of the Arts and studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Barnes Foundation. Her artwork has won awards and exhibited in juried shows. Buschini's paintings focus on subjects that are not apparent at first view: exploring relationships, stories, memories and possibilities, immigration and working people, communities, and the natural world. www.maryannebuschini.com.



First Aerators by Maryanne Buschini

Kelly McQuain, a writer and artist, 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*. From July 12-August 30th McQuain's paintings will be on display at the William Way LGBT Community Center in Center City, Philadelphia. Stop by!



Meditation Poppies by Kelly McQuain

"Looking Up XXXIV" is from John A. Benigno's Philadelphia Scene Project. John's Adobe Church Project was awarded a grant from the Luminous Endowment for Photographers, and his work is held in many collections including the Woodmere Museum and the Berman Museum at Ursinus College. His award winning work has appeared in exhibits throughout the United States, and John teaches at the Main Line Art Center in Haverford, PA. Visit: www.photographicimages.us



Looking Up XXXIV by John A. Benigno

Nancy Shell, a self-taught, senior, female, minority disabled artist uses her own life's difficult experiences to understand under-served populations. Themes of women's freedom, myth and science pervade her work. She's received The Leeway Foundation's Art and Change and Transformation awards and won first place in Fleisher Art Memorial's 2018 Adult Student Art Show. The piece appearing in this issue was a finalist in the "Let's Connect" Mural Arts Contest at the Barnes Foundation.



Bridge at Treweryn Farm Trail by Brian Coates

Brian Coates was introduced to oil paints at a summer course at the University of the Arts shortly after turning 17. This course influenced Brian to become a painter and study at UArts. At graduation in 2000 he received the Rohm and Haas Fine Arts Achievement award. Painting for nearly twenty years, Coates has shown his work at the Freeman Galleries in Chester, the Swarthmore Players Club, and the Chester County Arts Association's galleries.



Venice Connections by Mary Kane

Mary Kane received her BFA from Ohio State University and studied at American University. Kane is President of Philadelphia Tri-State Artists Equity and has served as curator for Main Line Unitarian Church for over 25 years. During a 2017 visit to Venice, she was struck by all that connected things and people; bridges, stairs, tunnels, gondolas, canals and corners of buildings impressed her and inspired the work in this issue. Visit www.marykane.com.



Jubilee 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.artist and instagram.com/suzannecomerart.



Le Jardin de L'amour de Ma Granmere by Nancy Shell

Nancy Shell, a self-taught, senior, female, minority disabled artist uses her own life's difficult experiences to understand under-served populations. Themes of women's freedom, myth and science pervade her work. She's received The Leeway Foundation's Art and Change and Transformation awards and won first place in Fleisher Art Memorial's 2018 Adult Student Art Show. The piece appearing in this issue was a finalist in the "Let's Connect" Mural Arts Contest at the Barnes Foundation.

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Where the Rubies Live

Tyler Barton

The night before I became a failed salesman, I was wired and awake in Derek's room, gazing out his window, reading his Anatomy textbook, and eating peanut butter with a knife. I had questions—big questions—but it was 2 a.m., and all my older brother cared about was getting sleep. If every hour we lose hair and grow cells and our bones thicken overnight, are we different people the next morning? Derek grunted in the negative. Never had he felt his arms grow longer, no matter how new he looked to me every time he emerged from the pool, fists up in victory.

What I loved most about going to meets was his starting-block routine, a series of stretches I knew by heart. I'd repeat after Derek as he moved pieces of himself—slow head roll, delt shrug, arms to heaven, finger wiggles, bow at the waist, hammy stretch, ankle arch, toe curl, ending with a ten step run-in-place. Up on those metal bleachers at ten years old, it wasn't swimming I cared about. It was the idea that my arms might grow long enough to reach all the way down there and tap him, just before the whistle blew, on the shoulder.

That night I stood at his window, stretching. "Want some Jif?" I said, offering the knife.

"Jesus, Bret," he said. "Go to bed." This was when Jesus was no longer a swear, after dad joined TEAM and traded Sunday service for sales trips. It was after we'd moved uphill.

"Relax," I whispered. "We don't have anywhere to be tomorrow, right?"

As Saturday night wobbled into morning, I stared down the hill at the lights along the dog food factory—gold, red, some even emerald, like the jewels I somehow believed my dad sold door to door. I tried to remember what life was like when we lived down there but my brain dug up nothing. Besides, it made much more sense to focus on the future, who I was becoming.

Of course, now that I'm grown, all I ever think about is the past.

On the floor of Derek's room, I awoke in a diamond of sunlight. He stood at the long mirror, yanking at the cuffs of his suit jacket, trying to make them reach his wrists.

"Why are we dressing up?" I asked, hoping for church. I knew it was a thing of the past, but I missed the little cups of grape juice, the colorful windows, the way time stood still.

"Your brother's showing his first plan today," Dad said, coming in to organize Derek's hair with the harsh black comb. "He's joining TEAM." My brother's face said pain, each stroke ripping

out something little but essential.

"His suit's too small," I said. No one listened to me. With his wingspan wide, Derek's arms rolled in tiny circles. My brother was a swimmer, not a salesman. I, however, felt I knew how exactly how to woo. My school counselor wrote that I was "quite charming one-on-one."

I showered quick so that Dad wouldn't yell about wasted water, pulled on my polo, and even brought him the little evil comb to make my hair successful. I stood in the kitchen, waiting to be preened. Dad swallowed coffee and said, "You'll show the plan once you're older."

"That's what you said about playing drums in praise and worship band," I said. "And now we don't even go! Who knows what this family will be doing when I'm old enough?"

"Okay Bret," Dad said, his eyes shut tight like my voice hurt. "There's no room—"

"—in this house for gloom," I said. "I know. But this isn't gloom. This is the truth. Promises suck, because no one knows if the future me will want the things the me today wants."

"See what I mean?" Derek said to Dad. "He's nine going on Nietzsche."

"I'm ten!" I said, as Dad shrugged and flipped open his cellphone to make a call.

"Dude, go make some friends today," Derek said. "Have fun while you still can." He was talking to me, but looking somewhere else, somewhere inside the folds of his growing brain.

"Or go get some exercise," Dad added, closing the phone.

My family thought I was the only one who didn't notice my own fat. They'd accuse me of eating saltine sleeves, spaghetti leftovers—but that was Derek, bulking up for meets. I watched him trying to drink coffee, how he just held it in his mouth. And here I could drink coffee fine. Actually, I loved coffee and could even tell you what the chemical caffeine does to our bodies—the molecule looks like a dead frog. It's pictured in Derek's Bio book. Dad ran his pinky along the inner lip of a Jif jar, a habit Mom hated. He leaned toward me —*Shhhh*—and popped the finger into his mouth.

"Okay, but who could turn down a cute kid?" I said. "You'll sell like a hundred rubies with me there, smiling and making jokes." The men of my family laughed at me.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," Dad said. "Besides, I've got the cute kid strategy already working." He clapped my brother's back, and Derek spit coffee onto the floor.

"Jesus," Dad said, inspecting his shirt for stains. We stood still in the kitchen, all of us hungry, listening to the faint sound of Mom in the sideyard, singing to her vegetables.

Across the garden, Mom knelt by her pepper plant, gloveless and already sweaty. I wanted to know why I couldn't go. She looked into the sky as if Dad was a planet you could sometimes spot in daylight. The station wagon left the driveway without even a honk goodbye.

"It's too early to get worked up," she said. The strip of yard between our house and the neighbor's fence was a tunnel of flora. Snap peas sprouted along the fence, baskets of herbs hung from the gutters. Every part of a salad grew in disorderly islands, a logic only Mom knew. I picked my way through the plants, moving toward her voice. She was out here for hours every morning. The grocery store she'd managed had been bought out back in June. I didn't understand how that had affected our family budget, had no concept of debt. Waiting for the bus each morning, I'd see Mom sitting beside the tomato wire, eyes squinted, watching for growth.

"Seriously," I said to her. "I can sell as much jewels as them."

"Many," she said. "And what do you mean, jewels? You don't even know the plan, Bret."

"I can learn. I learned about cells just last week. They're all over us, always multiplying and dying and coming off on our bed sheets. And remember, you taught me a cucumber was a pickle. All I need is someone to tell me. Give me a date then. When can I be on TEAM?"

"A cucumber isn't exactly a pickle. And it's not my job to tell you everything. Some stuff you have to figure out for yourself." She tried to hand me a trowel. "Listen," she said, whispering like she was telling a secret. "You won't like the TEAM. I mean, I can hardly stand them myself. The product they sell is always changing, and the people are so...flimsy."

Once a week she played N64 with me upstairs while the local TEAM members gathered in our living room to read aloud from a glossy book called SELLEBRATE. The cover showed a has-been pro wrestler leaning on the hood of a Lamborghini while a briefcase by his feet spewed golden light. I could never hear exactly what they were saying down there during the meetings, but talk always circled back to who's got silver, who's gone gold, where the rubies live, how hard a diamond is. "I bet you I'd love it," I said to Mom.

"Bret, honey," she said, sounding tired. "I'm sorry, but I have work to do here."

"Me too," I said, charging back across her garden, stomping through our family's food.

I searched the house for my mother's TEAMate, the requisite grey briefcase. She'd never even gone on a sale, so it would still be full of the product and the plan. After ten minutes of rummaging, I found it below the sink, a silver case branded with the gold TEAM logo. I imagined the shining things inside but, to my mind, had no time to look. I had to out-earn my father, sell better than my brother, and I had to start now. I threw open the front door and ran, my toes pressing up against the tips of my shoes.

I chose a random house with a wraparound porch. The heavy knocker hung just in reach, made a solid rap. I cleared my throat and hummed a song Dad often belted in the shower while I failed to sleep—*Eye of the tiger; it's the thrill of the fight*. No one

came to the door, so I pressed the bell. Its bright ring echoed through the house forever.

I wondered if each echo of the doorbell was the same or a different sound. How changed were they from the original ring? I thought of the Bret I'd been last night, then the Bret I was in the shower, the Bret falling through Mom's garden. Was I becoming Bret faster or slower than Derek had become Derek? I wiped the sweat growing inside my elbow-pits and imagined whole teams of cells flooding away. Is this porch the same now that I'm all over it? I stepped to the left, then to the right, trying to see if each move was the birth of a new Bret. Who was the true Bret?

"That's a neat little dance," said an old lady at the end of the porch, and I froze. She smiled wide—her teeth didn't quite fit her mouth—and pulled open the door.

Inside, she sat on a chair, but I stood. My voice, my pitch, the plan—it echoed through her quiet house. I made everything up. Something about jewelry, how you can buy silver and with enough work, you can grow it into gold. Rubies and emeralds were next, I was pretty sure, and the ingredients to grow these were Time and Faith. Love. Patience. Grit. I mixed what I'd heard from our living-room TEAM meetings with what I recalled from church, sprinkling in lines from my counselor's cat posters—*Yesterday you said tomorrow, today just say MEOW!*

"Then, the creator comes down, wearing a crown of diamonds," I said, ready to open the briefcase. She smiled, staring past me with shaky eyes.

"Bret-hunny," she said. "I get it."

"And that's when, I'm pretty sure..." I was trying hard to close, hungry for the time to come when she handed me money, when I slammed the dollars down on our dinner table, when Salesman-Bret got all the praise he deserved. "...We're allowed into heaven."

"Turn around," she said, her voice now cutting with an edge. "Look at my bookshelf." Behind her were twelve identical spines—SELLEBRATE—all in a row. "I'm already in your father's downline," she said. "He and that Derek are such nice men. But, shhh, I'm in a lot of folks' downlines," she said. I'd heard the word 'downline' before but never understood it. None of this made any sense. I sat down. My hands shook, the briefcase rattling. She knew who I was? Dad and Derek had been here? And how many times? "I heard the Joneses are going sapphire," she hissed.

When she asked if my dad knew I was here, I stood up to go. She moved toward the phone, blocking my way to the front door. "Shouldn't we call him?" she said, and her top row of false teeth slipped out of her mouth. They smacked the floor, sounding like knuckles cracking.

I screamed and bolted—briefcase held tight to my chest—down the hall, through a kitchen, out a door, and into the backyard. And beyond that, the woods.

I cut through the trees, my briefcase heavier with every step. These woods should've been the same that ran behind our house, but everything looked weird—the trees were shorter, more packed together, and the leaves seemed greasy, sticky. It was all down hill. I didn't know my way. I used rocks to cross a stream but landed in some black muck that sucked the shoe from my foot. My hair caught burrs and bugs as I waded through bushes. A branch tore a hole in my polo, right above my nipple. My eyelid bled from a briar scratch. I walked so long the shadows shrunk.



I must've looked deranged, because screams rang out the second my feet touched cut grass. Three young girls sat inside the empty body of a hot tub, pointing at me, shaking their heads *no*. I wanted to turn back but how would I find home through those trees?

"My daddy will kill you," yelled the girl with beaded braids. She was the smallest, brown-skinned and squinting. Her left front tooth was gone, the new growth just a crooked stub.

"You're bloody," said the second, her freckles alive with sunburn. "Where's your shoe?"

"Is the road up that way?" I asked, licking my lips. At the top of the embankment, dumpsters overflowed with furniture, garbage. The sluggish Cleaver creek trickled behind us.

"We'll tell you if you help us," said the third, oldest girl. Her dark skin seemed to glow in the sun, and her blue bikini top made me queasy. "What do you know about hot tubs?"

I wiped my briefcase in the grass and said, "What I know about is jewel—"

But the middle one cut me off: "We need a plan for getting this thing into the creek." She jumped out and stood in front of me, squaring her shoulders. The other two followed suit.

"Why would you want to do that?" I said.

"So we can all float around in a freaking hot tub," said the oldest. "Duh."

"It's called living your best life," said the middle girl.

"What's in your case?" said the youngest, her braid-beads clicking together in the wind.

I decided to skip the speech and go right to the product. The bikini girl looked old enough for a weekly allowance. Maybe the youngest still got tooth fairy money. "Okay," I said, laying the briefcase flat in the grass. The girls came close. We formed a circle around the case, looking down as if into a hole that reached the other side of earth. I could not wait to finally show someone what I had inside. "Now, what I'm about to present to you," I said, unlatching the case. "You should picture it around your neck. In your ears. On your wrists."

The girls touched each other's arms. I held my breath and lifted the lid like a veil.

Inside, eight silver knives gleamed in the sunlight. The glare shot into our eyes, and my heart became a garden on fire, beds burning, tomatoes melting. The older girls cursed, sprinted up the hill—but the littlest smiled, looked right at me, and asked, "Can I do the next part?"

She chose the biggest blade and held it between us like night had fallen, the knife a torch. I thought about how I'd learned in Derek's textbook that two touching objects never actually made contact, how a tiny space always hovered between the electrons of each item. I couldn't say where we were, but inside I knew—this was the edge of our old neighborhood.

"Give me your shoe," she said, and I kicked it off. With that knife in her hand, I would've done anything she said. I had no confidence. I was a failure. I didn't even know the product.

She knelt down and commenced sawing my shoe clean in half. In a deep voice, she said: "As you see, it moves clean through the toughest stuff: meat, leather, even bone. This blade is reinforced steel, with a full tang, and three brass rivets that store-bought knives lack. This handle will never separate from its blade. It never wears out! And it comes with our Forever Guarantee, which means regardless of time, use, and your ever-chang-

ing life, you'll never be without."

"You're good at this," I said, suddenly wanting a knife of my own. Or maybe I just wanted her to put that one down.

She continued in her husky, affected voice: "Now if you have a penny, I'd like to show you what the scissors can accomplish."

I picked up a knife and started into the inch-thick plastic hot tub liner. The blade cut with ease. The girl's name was Kiana. Her dad sold these too.

With knives long as our forearms, we sliced into the hot tub. "This is how you get the hot tub into the creek," she said. "One tiny piece at a time." Her laugh was catching, hoarse like Derek's, but not mocking.

"At that point, will it even be a hot tub anymore?" I asked, looking up the hill. The sun hung high in the sky. There was plenty of time left in the day, enough time for Kiana and I to make ourselves rich.

Forget the plan, whatever it'd been. These knives were divine, and the new plan was to sell them. I examined one as we walked, how it glinted, glowed, the handle so sturdy. I wondered if this was where the jewels were—melted down, re-made into this. If so, were they still jewels? Was this a diamond or a knife? Was I still working for TEAM, or had I quit altogether?

At the corner of two streets I'd never seen, the stop sign was missing. The pole just stood there, crooked in the dirt, with nothing to show. Maybe it was because Kiana chose to hold my briefcase, but I suddenly felt nervous, like I was being tricked. I remembered the old woman with all her book copies, how she smiled after the teeth fell, the black hole of her mouth. I thought of Dad and Derek's mocking laughter. Everyone took me for an idiot.

Was I being robbed here? "Excuse me," I said. "Can I carry my briefcase?"

"Chill, I told you my dad used to sell Cutlass," she said. "What? You don't trust me?"

She sighed and sat in the dirt beside the curb. When she opened the briefcase and took out the hefty kitchen shears, I could feel my heart thumping through my stomach. "Blood brothers or soul sisters?" she said. I stared at her until she decided on soul sisters. She handed me the scissors, and demanded that I snip off a piece of hair. "Wake up!" she yelled, clapping her hands at my face. The shears, heavy in my hand, shook like a light about to go out. I imagined standing here with Kiana, taking turns poking at my severed ear on the curb. But when the blades touched a tuft of my bangs, the hair came off without a sound.

I cupped the black shreds in my hands.

"Give me," Kiana said, so I dumped the thin pile into her hand, and she pushed my hairs into her shorts pocket. She took the scissors, and in a blink she lopped off a whole braid, complete with the little green heart bead. She put it in my hand. "Okay, now we're bonded."

"Forever?" I said.

Passing stoops, birds, barbeques, and men gazing into the open hoods of bright cars, we sold to no one. Kiana led us in her big, silver flip-flops. The center thong kept popping out of the left one, and we'd pause while she fixed it. I carried the suitcase, chin up, no smile, just like she instructed. A scent I knew blew

through the air, a smell like Cheerios left too long in the bowl. We passed the smokestacks of the dog food factory, but still I didn't see this place as home.

At the park, teenagers sat on bleachers. Teenagers smoked by bathrooms. Teenagers did wheelies. Teenagers with shoulder muscles and moustaches ran across two netless basketball courts. Kiana navigated the landscape, confident and quick, graceful even with her flip-flops slapping. I jogged to keep up, looking around for seven year-old me, as if past selves just stayed where you left them. The first group we met—four boys leaning on BMX bikes—glared at us.

I was silent. Kiana tried. "You guys need any—"

"Fuck outta here with that shit," the tallest one said.

The second group kept turning Kiana's questions back on us.

"Why you hanging with tubby here? Where the fuck his shoes at?"

"I'm trying to talk business," she said. I held tight to her braid in my pocket.

"I'm trying to talk about why you're out here with Ralph Lauren." He leaned close and flipped my collar up. His crew roared. We left, and Kiana welcomed me to Lacuna Park.

At the drink fountain, I let the water fill my mouth and spill over. I wet my whole face while Kiana shared with me her father's mantra which was: *Selling is cellular. It's in our blood.* She said her dad was so dedicated to his business that he left to live with other sellers in a neighborhood up the hill. He'd been a FedEx driver, but was fired for selling the plan while making deliveries. Her dad had worked nights, a rotation between 2nd and 3rd shift, just like my dad had before we moved up the hill. She and I bonded over being woken up by our fathers leaving late at night, the car engine firing, the front door falling closed. Dinners were lonelier too. Now, even with my dad working first shift, he still missed dinner often. He always left to sell the plan. Because of this, Mom had a rule that everyone had to be home for Sunday dinner. I looked up at the sun, wondering if I'd be back up the hill and seated at our table in time.

Kiana stood up and started walking in circles, waving her hands as she lectured. "Dad says there's two kinds of people: ones who think the world is all buyers or sellers, and ones who know that if you're selling the right product, the buyers can become sellers too." I laughed, and she clapped her hands three times. "Listen, first we sell the knife—easy. But *then* we sell them tools for how to sell their own knives. And *then*, every time they sell a knife, we get cash, 'cus we brought them in." She took a deep breath and grabbed the suitcase. "That's the plan."

"So what you're saying is we make fishers of men," I said, but she was already walking.

Our first sale came near the bike racks, when a kid ran past us, nearly in tears, asking if we'd seen a guy with a beard riding a blue Huffy. Out of breath, he sat on the bench. Kiana skipped the pitch and struck. She popped the briefcase, and placed it on his lap.

"First time customer," she said. "Special deal. Any of these for ten dollars."

As the kid slowly reached for one, I wondered: what if he turns it on us? But Kiana had it covered. She picked one up under the guise of showing him the rivets.

"Who are you?" he asked, running a finger along the handle. "Why do you have these?"

"We're your *team*," I said, grinning. Kiana's moxie had restored my will to sell. "We'll teach you sell these, put you in our downline. You'll make back all your money."

"A hundred times," Kiana added. The kid pulled a Velcro wallet out of his pocket and handed me a ten-dollar bill. He took the smallest knife—the parer, Kiana called it—and slipped it into his pocket. Kiana put her hand out to shake, but the kid just walked away. She quickly sold another in the girl's bathroom while I struck up a too-slow conversation at the vending machines. The group there squinted at me, and when I mumbled something about knives, they smacked the briefcase out of my hands and demanded I go home.

"People want to feel big," Kiana said. "Safe and strong. Simple as that."

The shears went to a pair smoking behind the tennis court. The steak knife brought in five, plus half a PBJ sandwich, but the buyer—he wore a big black raincoat and kept arguing with himself—was like everyone else we'd sold to: He wouldn't sign up, didn't want in on our team. But he did shake my hand, and for a second we traded cells.

All day long I had been saying goodbye to tiny parts of me. I thought I was shedding an old Bret to make way for the new one—the salesman, the charmer, the pride of my clan.

Kiana tore the sandwich in half and we ate in the shade of a boarded up concession stand.

After finishing the sandwich, my stomach hurt with hunger. And when group of kids in green bandanas arrived, I wished I was at the house, bugging Mom while she prepped dinner. These kids had hard arms and wide shoulders like Derek. I elect-

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ed not to offer a handshake.

"Heard you got blades," the biggest one said. What we had left were the two largest ones—serrated, silver, the length of a thigh, the kind of knives you might use to strip the skin from a fish, or saw through bone. I tried to smile, but the group gave back only hard stares.

"Well?" said one, his bandana like a scarf. I prayed silently and clutched Kiana's braid.

"Well?" Kiana said. Her tough tone slipped, her voice retreating to a younger version.

"Show us the goods."

"You got no money and you know it," she said. And with that, someone shoved me to the ground. In a blink they had the briefcase. *Peace!* they yelled, marching away. Kiana ran after them, and suddenly I was alone. I found a place beneath the bleachers and sat down in the dirt. I thought of Derek, always sure of his body and where it was headed. To the end of the lane, back. Repeat until varsity. Same person in a different place. I wanted to be home. But hadn't I lived here, once, in this neighborhood? I looked around again for our old house. I'd swung from those monkey bars, I swear, but Derek was always with me. I was never allowed at the park alone. Or was it a different park? What good was memory if it was always coming off in chunks?

"It's okay," I said when Kiana returned, red-faced and cursing. "We still got the money."

"But what about the plan? What about tomorrow?"

Kiana believed we'd be the same people tomorrow. But I thought I'd change when I showed the cash to my family. *Look at what I did for you, without you.* I couldn't wait.

"I'll get more," I told her. "We'll go out again next weekend. Try a new neighborhood?"

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She wouldn't look away from where the thieves had disappeared into the park's long shadows. "Where do you live?" I asked. "So I can come find you next time."

"Listen," she said, finally facing me again. "You can't tell my Mama we done this. She hates this stuff. She kicked Dad out the house. She says the TEAM is a cult."

"What's a cult?"

"It's when you get so excited about something that someone ends up *killed*." The word hovered between us, and I think we understood something about what we'd just done. In fact, a boy Derek's age would soon be stabbed. Not to death, but enough to stain the asphalt on the ball court so dark red that a nearby church would pay to paint the whole court blue. Enough to warrant an investigation, a lawsuit, a settlement, an unalterable change in me I still can't name.

Kiana looked up, sucked in her tears, and straightened her spine. "Matter of fact," she said, shoving my arm. "You can't tell *anyone* about this."

I nodded despite the fact that I was going to have to lie to someone—either to Kiana by breaking her promise, or to my parents by not telling the truth about the work I'd done, the money I'd made, the success I'd gained. It was not triumph I felt when Kiana handed me my half of the cash, but betrayal. Maybe this was my first inkling of the truth about adulthood: it's not an act of physical change, but a process of learning how to hide who you are, who you've been.

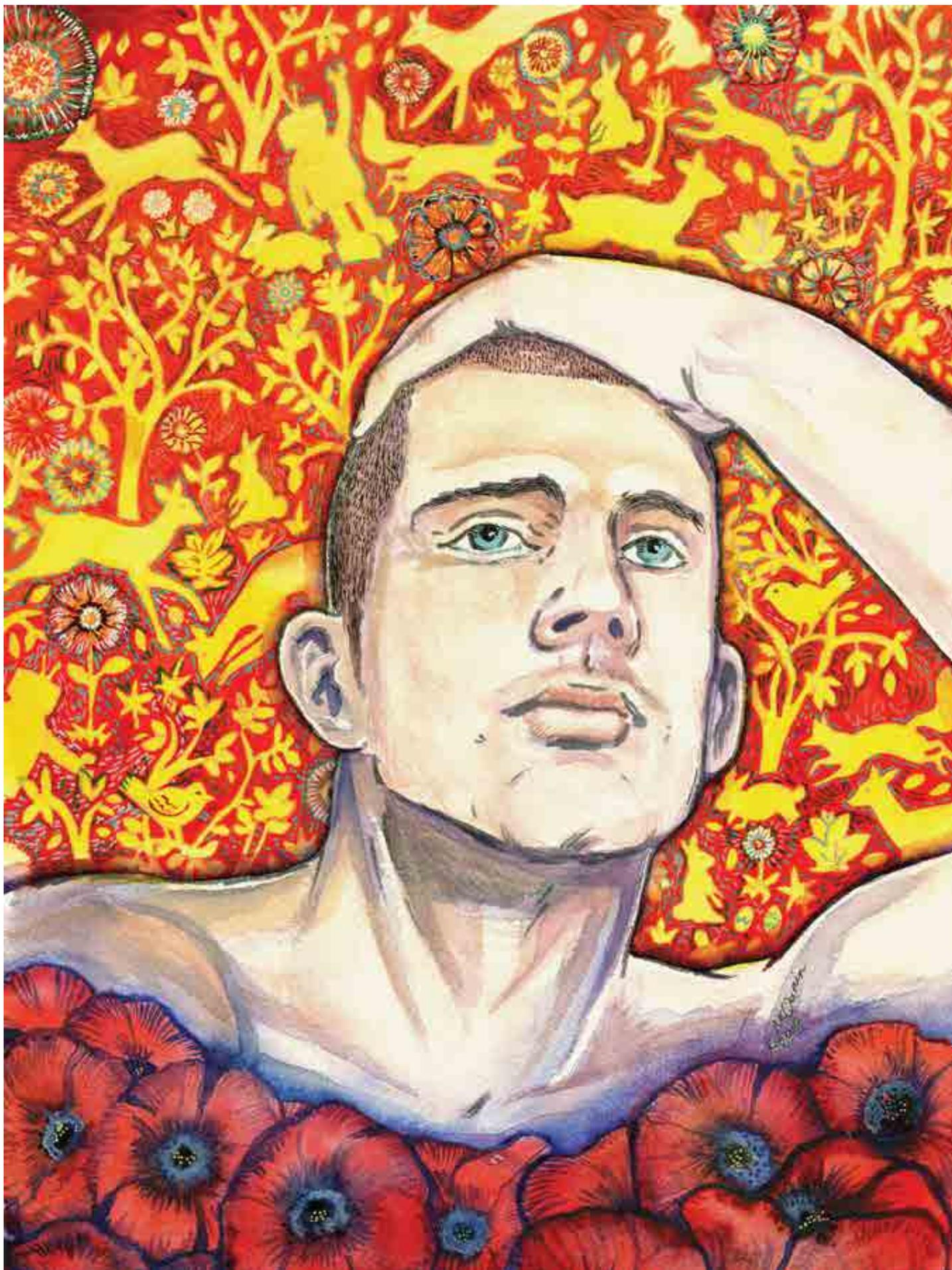
As we walked the streets in silence, I tried to memorize every sign and corner. I thought I'd be making my way back there soon. When she veered toward the stoop of a row house without a goodbye, I wanted to cut all the rest of my hair off and give it to her. I grabbed at the bounty in my pocket—twenty bucks and a girl's braid. The sun set fast, the sky a smoky pink. In the threshold, she turned to back to me, waved her arm through the twilight and yelled, "Go!"

At the foot of the hill, the hot tub sat there, unmoved. I closed my eyes and began to climb. Through the dim forest I soon saw my shoe stuck in the mud, but I left it. My feet had hardened. Alone now, I could think only of my family. What would they say when I got home? As I walked, my imagination built a table piled with the bounty of my mother's garden, me opening the door, my back straight, no blood on my face, the hole in my shirt stitched, my shoes clean and gleaming, my hands not trembling, and I drop it all into the center of the table, the money and the braid, right there on the Mt. Rushmore placemat. I say, *We're getting ice cream tonight.* They gasp. *I told you I could sell the plan.* They stare like they've never seen me before. And they haven't. Not this version. I am missing a chunk of my hair. I am new. Their son is—for a sweet, brief second—a serious businessman. I want to feel pride, but something in their faces makes me sick. *Sold it all. Even the briefcase, I lie.* Everyone says *Bret* as if my name is a rare stone found only in the ocean. But it isn't praise they're giving me. No one notices the money, only the braid, the rope of hair, still knotted with the little green heart.

Mom screams. Dad cackles. Derek disappears. The house collapses.

I awoke from my fantasy in the yard, having made it all the way to our house on the hill.

Walking inside suddenly seemed terrifying, so I stood on



tip-toes at the living-room window. Mom paced the kitchen, the cordless phone in her butt-pocket. Dad and Derek sat at the table, still dressed in their stupid suits. I wanted Dad to stand up and stop Mom's pacing with a hug, wanted to reach through the window and tap Derek on the shoulder. *Hey, dude, I've got a surprise.* No one spoke. The TV was the only noise—local news, crime.

We'll alert you as soon as we know more, said a reporter. But we're hearing reports that the victim is a teenaged boy, sixteen, found early this evening in Lacuna Park.

Mom rushed into the dining room. "He's got to be out there, you two! Take the car." When Dad and Derek stood up from the table and started putting on their shoes, I tried to knock on the window, but my knuckles just bounced against the screen. I wanted to speak, but all that came out was a cough. The three of them turned toward my sound, staring at the front door in silence, as if it might burst open. I waved behind the window, but they still didn't see me.

It turns out that we do have a true self, something that never changes even when every other part of you has. The true self is what's there when no one you love will look at you.

The TV talked of stab wounds, sirens, victims, suspects, words I didn't decipher. A sick taste climbed my throat. I felt flimsy. This oddness rushed through my body like blood, a sensation I could not have named. Responsibility, guilt—I still feel it now—shame.

I ran to the sideyard. Blood sloshed in my head, washing away old cells. New ones grew, snapping like Pop Rocks. I hoped they were good cells—sturdy, dependable. I prayed that they would stay and thrive and be the foundation of the final me. But I could already feel them dying, slipping, snowing through my body like static. I puked so many of them into our garden.

As the men of the family climbed into the station wagon to find me, backing out of the driveway into the night, I hid behind the pepper plants, keeping low to the ground. When the motor's

hum died away, the world was totally silent—Mom had turned the TV off—and I heard my heart beating against the dirt. Hand in my pocket, I gripped Kiana's braid.

She would be the one to confess to her mom about what we'd done. There were so many witnesses to describe me. The lawsuit would come for us, for my parents, for reckless endangerment, and eventually, when all was settled and done, for the house.

I laid in the garden and stared at it, our big house. How had it changed us? How would we be different if we'd kept living down the hill? In the little slice of a house, tucked in the middle of that long row, our tiny sliver of that street-length brick building, with the thin walls and the yelling next door, the cats on the porch, the bed I shared with Derek, the dinners without Dad, and the quiet breakfasts while he slept, and the church full of singing neighbors. I was falling asleep, beginning to dream my past life into existence, but then the back door swung open and banged closed.

At the far end of the garden, my mother appeared. She stood still, staring through all of her plants. She didn't see me out there, blending in, growing every second into something none of us understood. But then she moved closer, slowly, stepping through the garden, swimming carefully toward me, until she found my arm and screamed and gripped it so hard she left marks. When she asked me where I'd been, I said I didn't know, and we both knew it was a total lie. I had been here, in my body, this whole time.

Tyler Barton is the co-founder of Fear No Lit, the organization responsible for the Submerging Writer Fellowship. He is the author of the flash fiction chapbook, *The Quiet Part Loud* (2019), which won the Turnbuckle Chapbook Contest from Split Lip Press. His appears or is forthcoming in *Kenyon Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Subtropics*, *Gulf Coast*, *Cream City Review*, and *Paper Darts*. Find him at tsbarton.com or [@gottyler](https://twitter.com/gottyler).

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The Idea of Ruby Seeds

Poem by Lorraine Henrie Lins

We left the pomegranates
to leather in the back of the fridge,
unrounded withering
thumping hollow
against the carton of milk each morning
when breakfast was through—
a whim during Christmas week
when I thought the idea of ruby seeds
knocked into champagne flutes
or over dense, white yogurt
would indulge
but each morning
the coffee was enough
hot and strong.



Lorraine Henrie Lins is a Pennsylvania county Poet Laureate and author of four books of poetry, most recently *100 Tipton*. She serves as the Director of New and Emerging Poets with Tekpoet and am a founding member of the "No River Twice" improvisational poetry troupe. Her work appears in publications and collections, and a small graffiti poster in Australia. Born and raised in the suburbs of Central New Jersey, this self-professed Jersey Girl now resides just outside of Philadelphia where she has learned to pump her own gas and order a cheesesteak.....wit.

Betsy Ross' Girl

Poem by Deborah Turner

Tried to put in some
orchid purple yellow, and some
coffee colored brown
like my fingers I pricked
helping with all her stichin.

"Nah," she say,
"keep it like the Brits,
our forefathers."

None of that tobacco green
she threaten to put me in
should I open my mouth
bout how Master
have his way with me.

None of that
sunrise orange
come over the water
like my Mammy's boat
done.

Just the blood red
with the deep blue
and the white stars
like the night
that swallowed up my daddy
took him north to freedom,
I hope.



In addition to writing poetry, Deborah Turner is working on a memoir about her life in West Philadelphia. Her early works appear in the *Lavender Reader* as well as in anthologies including the *Body Eclectic* and *Testimony*. She regularly blog publishes at www.deborahturner.online.



ACORNS

Ramona Defelice Long

Dennis can't believe Terry and I will give up a vacation day to visit the family cemetery, but once I convince him that I'm not kidding, there is silence on the phone. I hear him breathing—a concerning wheeze that carries across the ether of our connection—until he says, "Well, if you're going to be there, check to see if he's in it."

He, meaning our father.

I promise I will.

There's a speed trap at the edge of town. I don't remember it until I see the worn WELCOME sign with seagulls and a shrimp boat painted in dulling colors. The sun glints off the bayou, slightly choppy under a breezy December sky. On a piling ten feet from the edge of the road, a pelican perches. At first I'm not sure it's real, but it moves, turning slightly to face the sun.

"Look at that," Terry says, like the tourist he is. "Is that usual for this time of year? I mean, don't they migrate someplace warmer?"

Warmer than Louisiana? I shrug. I don't know. I haven't lived here in forty years.

"Slow down," I say. "There might be a cop car hiding behind that sign."

Terry slows, his foot hitting the brake too hard, and my hand whips out to the dashboard. While we're being welcomed to town, the speed limit abruptly drops 20 mph.

We both turn to check behind the sign. No cop car.

"False alarm," I say. "There's usually one hiding back there. Everybody knows about it."

"Everybody, huh?" Terry teases. "How old were you when you left this place?" The way he says "place" instead of "town" makes clear his first impression.

"Seven. Dennis was five," I say, but I'm staring out the window, looking for familiar sights. Memories. Is that red brick building the hardware store where I got my first bike? That pinkish one with Library painted on the door where I got a library card? A shuttered white building on the bayou side might be a snowball stand, a tumbling down one with a rusting pole reaching to the sky—the old Frostop.

There's no traffic. It's a Tuesday, mid-morning, and a bypass was built behind town so the oil industry workers could zip along in their white pickups without getting caught in the speed trap. An abundance of white pickups means the economy is healthy, someone at the conference told Terry. We've been counting

white pickups all morning on the drive from New Orleans toward the Gulf.

There are no white pickups going through town. The locals must be sleeping in.

I continue my memory tour. The Sheriff's Annex looks new, but it's in the same spot as the old one. Why do I remember where the jail would be? I am not sure, but as if a hand touches the top of my head and swivels it, I turn and peer through the windshield, across the bayou, across the road, to a street on the other side. My hand lifts, my index finger points.

"Across the bayou, on that street. First house on the right side," I say. "Where we lived." Directly across the bayou from the sheriff's office. Maybe that's why I remember the jail?

Terry slows—if you can go slower than 20—but there is not much to see. A street lined with wooden houses, some of them shotguns, some of them cottages, one square red brick which sticks out like it fell from the sky. Yards full of azaleas and china ball trees. Chain link fences, one or two strung with Christmas lights.

A few houses are painted pastels, but when we lived here, your house was white. If it was painted at all. I glance down at my feet and picture myself sitting on an unpainted porch, dangling my bare toes over tangles of sweet peas, while through the screen door behind me voices argued. Where was Dennis? Not beside me, and I dropped into the too-long grass and went hunting for him. He had a few regular hiding places—under the cistern, beside the shed, beneath the front porch when the weather was dry, behind the small concrete statue of Our Blessed Mother in the front yard. The statue was painted blue and white, and seasonal flowers grew around it: lilies in spring, petunias in summer, some hardy bloom in fall. I don't recall finding Dennis, but I must have. I always did, always sat beside him and waited out the fight, while across the bayou, black and white police cars sat in front of the Sheriff's Annex.

I turn my face and stare at the road. Now I remember why I remember. Daddy used to tell us if we were bad, the Sheriff would put us in jail. We believed him because one of the deputies was his brother, my Uncle Dale.

"The church is coming up," I say. "After the school."

Terry points to a small, pale purple building painted with green vines and bright pink flowers. It sticks out more than the red brick house. A sign in front says MOIRA'S DINER.



"Should we stop first?" Terry asks. "I could use coffee, and some more of those beignet things if they got 'em."

"You're such a Yankee," I say, but I'm glad we're stopping. For the coffee, and the beignet things, and to gather myself.

I can't recall anyone in my father's family named Moira.

I take his hand as we walk the few steps to the diner. Terry is always amiable, but since Dennis's diagnosis, he's been extra solicitous. Dennis and I are all that's left of my mother's family—no cousins, no family reunions, no Thanksgiving meals reminiscing about how your mother was always stoned and your father disappeared one day. After Mama overdosed, Grandmama told Dennis and me we'd always have each other; before she was gone, we had to promise to stay close. We didn't keep the promise physically, but we talk or text almost every day. Grandmama's heart would be warmed, but she was wrong. Dennis and I won't always have each other.

With no treatment, weeks to months. With treatment, two years.

"You're not taking this trip because of me?" Dennis asked. "You don't think you'll go in the family cemetery and find a headstone that says 'Died of liver cancer at 45, so avoid liquor and fatty foods'?"

"Yes, Dennis, that's why we're going, because everything has

to be about you," I say. The old joke between us. Which, we'd both admit, is a little bit true. "But if I see a headstone like that, I'll Instagram it to you."

"Please do," he says.

Moira is a white-haired lady in a dark purple dress that matches the bistro tables and chairs. Suns and moons and stars are painted on the dark blue walls. The ceiling is yellow.

Terry pulls out a chair for me and whispers, "Did we take a wrong turn?"

There are no beignets on the menu, only tea cakes, muffins, and scones. Lots of teas, but also coffee. Moira might be an anomaly on the bayou, but she has business sense. We order coffee. Terry, sad resignation in his voice, orders a blueberry muffin.

Moira is back in no time with our order. She's frankly curious about us, so frankly that she asks. "Where'rey'all from? I can tell you're not from around here."

Terry says, "Philadelphia. We've been in New Orleans for a conference. I wanted to see the Gulf of Mexico, so we drove down the scenic route."

The response sounds practiced, like a cover story. Which it is. But I am intrigued by Moira's use of "where'rey'all" as one word,

so I add, "I was born in the area." I name the town of Grandma's birth, not really in the area but where we escaped to after Daddy disappeared. Before she can ask for details, I say, "What about you? Moira's not exactly a down the bayou name."

She laughs. "Oh, my darling, I gave myself this name. My given name's Mary Madonna. There were four Marys and three Madonnas in school with me, so I changed it. I thought it would make me special."

"It fits you," Terry says, jutting his chin toward the stars and moon and the sun ceiling overhead.

"Or maybe I fit it," she says, but she's eyeing me, and I start thinking of Marys and Madonnas in my father's family. Surely there were some, whether I remember or not.

I ask to use the restroom and stay in there as long as possible. When I return to the table, Terry's had my coffee put into a go cup and his muffin is down to crumbs. I want to bless him for the hundredth time.

"Moira was getting a wee bit nosy," he says as we go back to the car.

"I know." I am shaken, as if encountering a white-haired lady in a purple dress was dodging a close call.

I don't have to point out the church to Terry. The sign is planted almost aggressively close to the road, and the white stucco exterior is striking against the towering live oaks overhead. We turn into the parking lot, and I tell him to drive around the back of the church. I have no reason to go inside, though Dennis and I were baptized here, and I wore a white dress and a hat with an itchy elastic chin band on the day I made my First Communion. We were gone before Dennis made his.

There is a tall black fence surrounding the cemetery. That is new, and my stomach drops. What if it's locked? Would we have to find the pastor and ask permission? I am not sure I want to do that.

We get closer. The gate is open. I sighed, relieved. Terry frowns as he side-eyes me.

"You all right?"

"Yes," I say. "See if you can find us a good parking spot."

The line of spots alongside the church is empty. Terry pulls into the first one. We both jump as something hits the roof of the car.

"What the hell?" Terry says.

"It's just an acorn," I say, knowing before I see it. "The church grounds are surrounded by oak trees." I explain briefly how the deep roots are supposed to keep the in-ground graves from floating away during hurricanes.

The wind has pushed piles of acorns against the edges of the parking lot. They crunch under our feet as we get out of the car.

"Cripes, you sure can't sneak up on anybody here, can you?"

That is probably a good thing, but after a few feet of cringing after each step, we start laughing. It's so loud, it's absurd. I expect flocks of blackbirds to fly out of the oaks, but though I hear them cawing between our steps, they stay put.

At the gate, I stop. "Oh, shoot, I forgot the papers in the car," I say.

Terry says, "I'll get them. You look around."

He crunches away. I hear another "Cripes."

At home, I did research on the grave sites of our relatives, but I am certain from memory that our grandparents' tomb is on the fifth row on the right side. Daddy would bring us here on Father's

and Mother's Day and lament the loss of his parents. His father died at sea when a rogue storm blew in and nearly capsized his shrimp trawler. He pitched over the side and drowned before his crew could pull him in. Daddy was a teenager. His mother died later, in a car accident caused by a drunk driver.

The tombs are above ground, in the sun, and the cemetery blazes as if buckets of whitewash have been poured over the whole plot. It's December, only a month after All Souls' Day, and even after forty years away, I know the social ramifications of not white-washing the family tombs by the day after Halloween. We did it in the morning, half-sick from too much candy, Mama dragging us here with Grandmama helping. Daddy was the oldest son and it was his responsibility to tend his parents' resting place. Which meant it was Mama's job, which meant Grandmama did the actual work. Grandmama who moved in when I was a baby because Mama was incapable, and stayed after Dennis was born for the same reason. Grandmama had Dennis and me help paint the low parts or the back of the tomb, where nobody would look. When Daddy asked if we helped, we could honestly answer "yes."

Fifth row, second tomb, right side. I shuffle through scattered acorns and stand as far back as I can, the backs of my knees butting against the grave behind it. My maiden name carved across the top is unsettling. My grandparents are listed one after the other—beloved husband/wife and father/mother—followed by Uncle Dale. His death was twenty years ago. I hadn't heard.

Beneath Dale is my father's name. His date of birth. A hyphen. A blank.

So now I know—though I assumed all along, because we'd have been alerted by some government agency or lawyer or something, but the stark black letters on the family tomb makes it official in my mind. He's never been found.

I take a photo and text it to Dennis. I don't know what to say so all I send is the photo. A few seconds later, he texts back: *Not very helpful, is it?*

I text back: *He never was.*

Terry returns with the papers I printed with the locations of my cousins and aunts and uncles. We go up and down the rows, kicking aside acorns, and find them. I take pictures of each one and text Dennis, who sends back responses:

A long and happy marriage, bless 'em.

Is that name for a man or a woman?

Thank him for his service.

Seven months? That's sad.

1919. The Spanish flu, maybe?

There are a few tombs with photographs attached to them, small oval pictures behind convex glass coverings and a silver framed embedded next to the deceased's name. These freak Terry out.

"That's the weirdest thing I've ever seen," he says, recoiling, but I find them fascinating. I study each one—usually old women or men, some so warped I have to check the name to figure out the gender. There are a few couples, but no children.

Only one of our relatives has a photograph, a woman who died in the 1960s at an advanced age, though the photo must have been taken at midlife. Still, the black and white photo shows a face lined from working outdoors, gray hair pulled back in a bun, a sharp chin and hawkish nose, arms folded over a plain dress and striped apron. No smile. I suspect she'd had a hard



life, but I feel sympathy about the photo. Who chose to memorialize her with this unforgiving image?

Then again, maybe there was a good reason.

I hear crunching of acorns. Terry. I point at the photo.

"I wonder if that's Moira's grandma," I joke.

He bends forward. "Yikes."

I send a photo of her to Dennis with the text: *Cousin Violina*

He texts back: *You have her eyes.*

We stay an hour. Terry is getting restless; there's only so much to see in a small cemetery half covered in acorns. There are no more photos to send to Dennis, no evidence that we were pre-deceased by anyone with the same liver disease that will take my brother away too soon.

But that's not why I came.

We walk back together, debating po-boys or gumbo for lunch, but when we reach the fifth row, I tell Terry, "Go on ahead. I want another minute."

I run my fingers along my father's name. I can't picture him, and that's my brain's choice if not mine, because the human mind sometimes protects itself from what's too hard to recall. Traumatic amnesia. I have a mended bone in my right arm from the time he broke it, and Dennis...Dennis has more. He remembers more, too, though he was younger.

My hand turns into a fist. I press it into his name. "You son of a bitch," I say.

"He was that," a man's voice says, and I swing around, so startled I can hardly catch my breath. I didn't hear any acorns.

The man is tall and lean, wearing a deputy's uniform. I turn back to the tomb and double-check the date. Dead twenty years, but here he is.

"Uncle Dale?"

He tips his old-fashioned police hat as if I am a stranger on the street.

"I figured you might come back someday," he says. "How's the boy?"

The boy. Dennis. My little brother. We were supposed to always be together.

I shake my head. My eyes fill with tears. "Not so good," I say.

He doesn't look surprised. "I'm sorry to know that," he says. "Tell him, when the time comes, I'll be watching for him this time. I should have done a better job of that before."

He pulls off the hat, turns it in his hands. A breeze rushes up, and the acorns begin to roll, twirling and bumping up against each other before settling back into a pile.

I try to remember. There was a fight, but not with Mama. Mama was with Dennis and me, hiding. We were in the front yard, crouched under the porch, Mama rocking Dennis back and forth, his head bloody. His eyes were open but he wouldn't cry.

Above us, voices raised and footsteps pounded and then it was silent. We stayed under the porch, but I could see clear across the bayou at the Sheriff's Annex, and after a little while, a cop car pulled out from in front of the jail and showed up at our house. Not to take us away because we were bad but because Grandmama had come in . . . and said never again . . . no more.

"You knew where he was?" I say. Guess. "You knew all along?"

Uncle Dale nods, says yes, and puts his hat back on.

I face the tomb again and look at the blank behind Daddy's name. No date, no information I can confirm or verify.

I ask. "Where?"

I turn around, but Uncle Dale is gone.

I back up and, ignoring the sacrilege, sit on the lower grave behind me. There is no wind and, I realize, the blackbirds have all gone silent. No one else is here. No one else has come since we arrived.

On the tomb, black letters say *Beloved Husband and Father* beside the grandfather I never knew. I look at Daddy's name, but I still can't picture his face.

Maybe a person can only disappear if nobody goes looking for them.

The grave feels cold and hard under my bottom. Dennis wants to be cremated. No grave or marker or brick in a remembrance wall. *Fling me to the winds. Don't waste a bunch of money on funereal nonsense.* I agree about the nonsense but not the flinging. At night, I look at urns on the Internet but I don't text photos to my dying brother. I wish I could ask Grandmama: If I put him on my fireplace mantle, is that staying together? Would that be keeping the promise?

I think of what Uncle Dale just said. *Tell him, when the time comes, I'll be watching for him this time.*

Around the tomb, the piles of acorns quiver. I stand to go. Terry is waiting in the car.

Ramona DeFelice Long's short fiction and personal essays have appeared in regional and literary publications such as *The Delmarva Review*, *Literary Mama*, *the Parhelion Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, and *the Arkansas Review*. Ramona has received multiple writing grants, and in 2017 she was awarded a Masters Fellowship in Fiction from the Delaware Division of the Arts. She is a transplanted Southerner now living in Delaware though she can most often be found at open mics, literary readings, and writing retreats.

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Each Morning I Pray to the Microwave

Poem by Claire Scott

I see God through greasy glass
or is that last week's potato
I forgot—I am sick of potatoes
with their many staring eyes—
I prefer God to a potato most of the time
unless I haven't eaten for days &
no feast hath been prepared at the table before me
which is most of the time since Sara left
in a bitter cloud of flying shoes, DVDs & fuck you's
complaining my refrigerator looks like
a failed science experiment
stacks of newspapers cover the couch,
the chairs, the kitchen counters
complaining the cat rarely uses its litter box
preferring the bathmat or the carpet
or the sweaters in her closet
complaining I crunch potato chips in bed
leaving crumbs on her side
why is either side hers when I paid
for the humongous thing, lugged it up five
sweaty flights because she found my futon
too cramped, too creaky
but I am losing track here
the point is God is preferable to a potato
most of the time—each morning
I say a prayer to the blurry God
behind the glass door
hoping his many eyes are
growing nearsighted and he can't see
the mold, the newspapers, the cat



Claire Scott is an award winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has been accepted by the *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Enizagam* and *Healing Muse* among others. Claire is the author of *Waiting to be Called* and *Until I Couldn't*.

My Father Sells a Vacuum Cleaner to James Michener

Poem by Barbara Buckman Strasko

On the writer's doorstep of a large house overlooking the river, my father speaks to the housekeeper. Inside he dumps dirt on the rug, sucks it up in one whoosh, shows her that the Electrolux will even suck up a steel sphere. Mr. Michener hears the noise, comes to the front hall. Agrees to buy the vacuum cleaner. Invites my father into his office where an Underwood sits on a large mahogany desk, in front of a photo of the author and John Kennedy shaking hands. Mr. Michener asks about my father's family history in Bucks County and is surprised to find out the salesman is a descendant of Edward Hicks, the folk artist. That my father dropped out of pre-med during the Depression and built airplanes for WWII. How would the Quaker Hicks paint a Peaceable Kingdom in 1964? A war raging in Southeast Asia, the civil rights movement on the move, the next generation not accepting anything less than peace. They speak of these things as if they might solve them standing in this doorway. A canoe floats downstream on the Delaware River in front of them. On the way home my father will buy corn from a farm stand where they let him cut it from the field himself.



Barbara Buckman Strasko was the first Poet Laureate of Lancaster County. She is the 2009 River of Words Teacher of the Year and is the Poet in the Schools for the city of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Her poems have appeared in: *Best New Poets*, *Rhino*, *Nimrod*, *Brilliant Corners*, *Ninth Letter* and *Poet Lore*. Her book of poems, *Graffiti in Braille* was published in 2012. Her poem "Bricks and Mortar" is engraved in granite in Lancaster's main square. barbarabuckmanstrasko.com

Conversation between Saints

Poem by Evan Anders

gladiolus gather in an attempt to deflower spring.

doves console a dying falcon.

a fig utters a final prayer as ants read last rites.

please do not pluck my feathers in public.

a dozen oysters reject their pearls
a dozen minnows are swallowed by los angeles
the cardinals swear i am saved.

ordinary cities rest laughing upon history.
there are no more great kings
it's better this way.

the crabapple tree waits to die
as a conversation between saints
dissolves into hymns.



Evan Anders brews coffee for mass consumption in Philadelphia. His poems have appeared in *Five 2 One Magazine*, *California Quarterly*, *Foliage Oak Literary Magazine*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, with work forthcoming in *Third Point Press*, and *Drunk Monkeys*. He changes diapers and thinks Bob Dylan was best in the eighties.



My Cousin's Love Affair with Slime Mold

Ona Russell + photos by Lauren Kahn

It started innocently enough. A hike in the Oakland woods after a heavy rain. The ground still wet, the dense foliage sated and glistening. She hiked for exercise, to meditate, to escape the demands of a job in graphic design. It was a routine, an enjoyable way to recharge.

But then, fungi! That was the beginning, the gateway. Suddenly, she noticed them—there, and there, and there—as any of us might do in our own yards: mushrooms. The kind we, and even our pets, sense would kill us with one bite. Yes, my cousin, Lauren, noticed the fungi before anything else. Sprouting up overnight, matted in the dirt, tangled in the weeds, clinging to

bark. Varying in placement, infinite in color, size and shape. The more she looked, the more she saw, a modern day Thoreau peering into a seemingly bottomless pond. Fungi. Orange and red, spotted and striped, top heavy and skinny, clustered and solitary, all of them called to her, and she responded with awe—and her camera. Obsessed, evangelical, her images were stunning, her enthusiasm contagious.

And yet, this was only a prelude to something deeper, something both smaller and far more vast. Like *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, whose profundity grew as he shrank and ultimately merged with the universe. For despite their beauty, their endless photographic potential, fungi were discrete, had limits, the hunt for them a beloved, but self-contained, hobby. Slime mold, well, that was something else. That was a passion. That was love. That was the meaning of life.

My cousin and I are like sisters. I'm three years older, perfect for corrupting her early, which I did. I taught her about cutting class, forging signatures, and especially about boys, leading her astray before our parents knew we were gone. But she taught me a few things, too: about driving ninety miles an hour in the Hollywood Hills, about smoking low tar cigarettes, about the possible side effects of immersion in another culture. After a few months in Paris, she returned unable (or unwilling) to speak English, requiring me to rely on my high school French to communicate with her.

More than anything, however, Lauren taught me about nature, the appreciation of which began in her childhood home. Both of our dads were physicians, but hers was also a naturalist, her house a kind of urban zoo. In the backyard was a giant tortoise so big you could ride him, although I never did. The den was a dedicated aquarium, with built-in viewing spots for my uncle's rare collection—vipers, lion fish, poison dart frogs from the Amazon among the most exotic. Sadly, some of them didn't make it. But none went to waste. In the guest bathroom medicine cabinet were jars filled with the pickled unlucky, a surprise if you happened to be looking for an aspirin.

I'm sure there were other unusual pets lurking around. No





animal living at my cousin's was mundane—even the dog. Duchess was her name, and she looked and acted the part: lithe and regal, a descendent of royalty. So when she went into heat, my aunt celebrated the bitch with a wedding and a canine gown that would put "Say Yes to the Dress" to shame.

When her daughter was young, Lauren followed in her father's footsteps, harboring a menagerie of rats, mice, preying mantises and enough crickets to feed an army. Today, however, she only has a cat, to which I'm deathly allergic. She likes dogs, although, maybe because of Duchess, not enough to own one. Moreover, because of her aversion to interspecies mingling, she nearly pukes seeing me swap spit with my collie and two rescues—something to do with what occurs on the molecular level. But slime. Slime is another matter.

"First," my cousin says, "slime molds aren't mold at all. They may seem more closely related to animals than fungi if you see them in their creeping phase. Because they're so unlike anything else, science has found slime mold difficult to classify. They transform dramatically during their life cycle going from an on-the-move feeding phase to a fixed reproductive phase. Some of the fruiting bodies I witnessed through my close-up lens were stunningly alien and beautiful; pink elongated jelly beans on stalks, fuzzy netted puffballs, geometrically spaced iridescent orbs, tiny blueberries hanging from delicate threads."

Also, although they are only one-celled, like amoeba, slime mold change form and possess striking intelligence. Indeed, they can solve mazes, optimizing information so efficiently, that scientists are studying them in connection with research on transport systems. All that from the tiniest of entities, something that one can confuse with "dust, dog barf or insect eggs."

And they can be mercenary, too. Take the *Badhamia utricularis*, for example, a slime mold predator that "feeds on the poor fungi unable to make a run for it." It may in fact be the slime mold's superiority to the fungi (at least in this case) that is partly behind Lauren's fascination with the creature. Not that she's abandoned her first love—fungi, in all their wondrous glory, will always hold a place in her heart. But slime mold may lead us to more answers about our own existence. And that, for someone

like my cousin, is head turning.

See, Lauren is an atheist, who believes that while there's currently a limit to scientific explanation, it's ultimately science, not a god, that's more likely to tell us who we are. So slime mold, being part animal as well as plant, is a closer model. According to nature writer Adele Conover, even though in some ways slime molds are "like aliens from another planet," they can help us understand our bodies as "great aggregations of once separate and independent organisms," metaphorically as "communes." (Smithsonian Magazine, March 2001, *Hunting Slime Molds*.) In other words, we might have more in common with slime mold than with fungi, and thus the knowledge acquired from them is more relevant.

But what can slime mold do for me? I'm non-committal, indecisive, one of those pesky agnostics. Science is science. The earth is round, climate change is real, vaccinations work. Yet somewhere in me is a space all that data can't fill, a space I cherish. Call it the fancy, the supernatural, the shadows. It's where mystery lives, a space that lets me believe that my deceased grandmother helps find my constantly missing eyeglasses. It's where I go to hope the things I hope for are true, to create worlds of my own making, to counter despair.

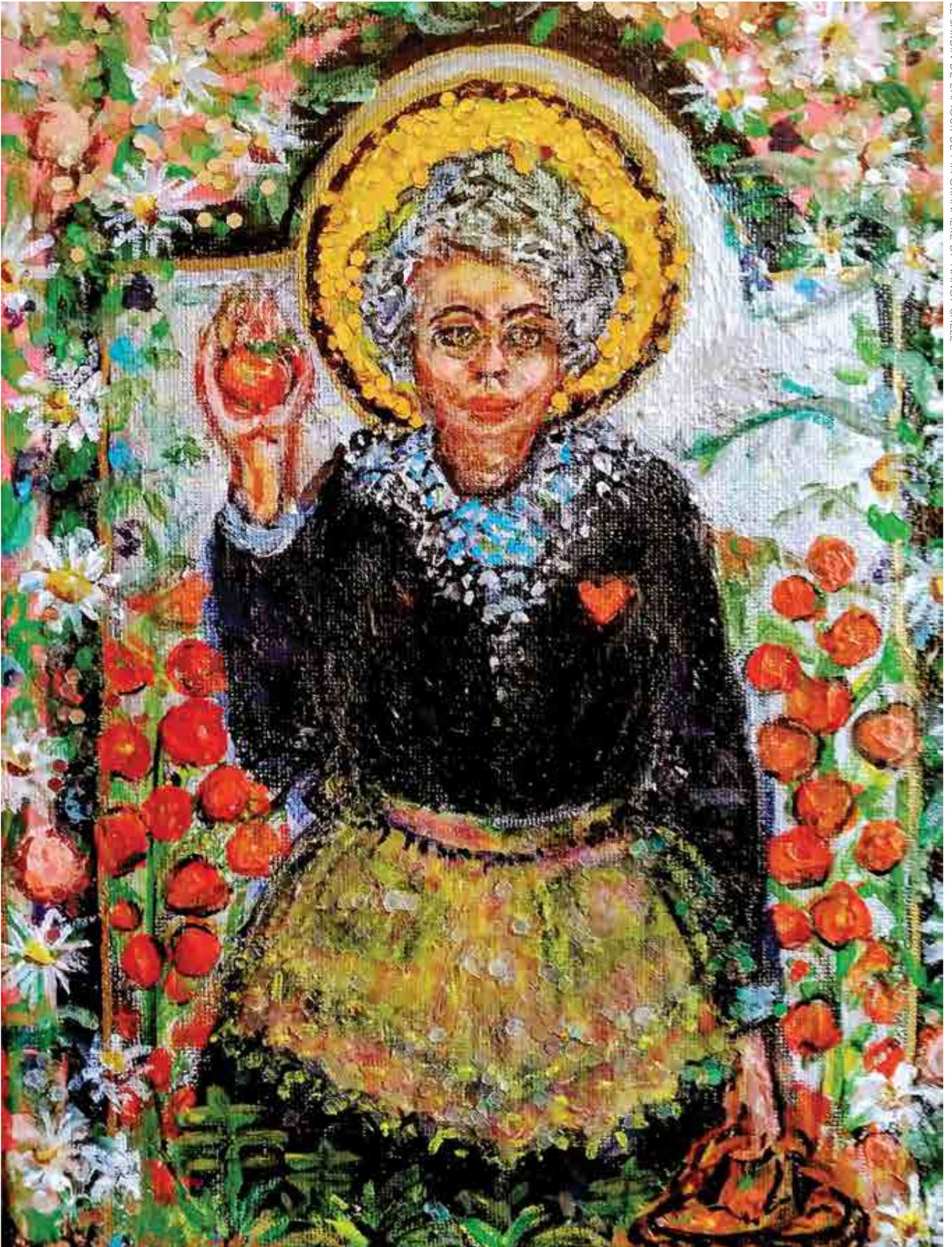


"What do you do to escape the madness?" Lauren recently asked me. She meant politics, madness being the code word for the person whose name we refuse to utter. What do I do? I'm a writer so I tell her I wait for rejection notices. "What do you do?" I said, already knowing the (slimy) answer by her adoring tone.

But maybe I've been too hasty. Maybe slime mold is more than its name, more than the sum of its parts. Maybe in its ability to thrive in chaos, to transcend temporal concerns, it exceeds its classification, becoming part of the mystery I hold as sacred.

Maybe. But it could be that I'm just jealous. Like back in the day when my cousin got the cute guy. It could be that I'll never be into slime mold because it's just not that into me. At the very least, I wonder if she's thought this relationship through. I warn her that she might get hurt, that the slime might overtake her, like the Blob. But she waves me off, heading straight for the woods, certain that the romance will last.

Ona Russell is the author of three award-winning historical mysteries and has been published in a variety of other venues, including previously in Philadelphia Stories. Ona holds a PhD in literature from UC San Diego, where she also taught for many years. She considers herself a Philadelphian once removed—her mother was born there, her brother lives in Narberth, and her great uncle, architect Louis I. Kahn, had a little something to do with the city. For more info, please visit onarussell.com.



Philadelphia Stories Spring Event Highlights

Philadelphia Stories had a busy spring! Events included the LitLiFe Poetry Festival, Sandy Crimmins Prize for Poetry Awards ceremony, and two issue release parties.



Editorial Director Carla Spataro greets the audience at the Sandy Crimmins Prize for Poetry Awards ceremony.

Sandy Crimmins Prize for Poetry Awards
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R.G. Evans, recipient of
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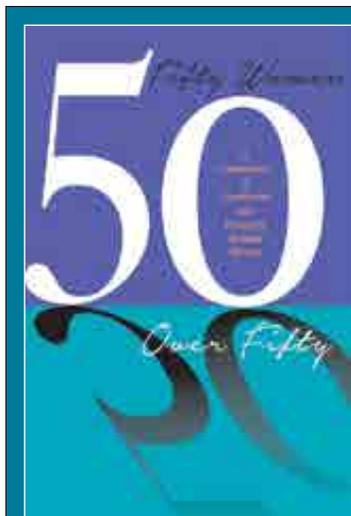


One Book, One Philadelphia's Brittanie Sterner introduces the readers of the Winter issue, our second themed issue done in partnership with the Free Library of Philadelphia.



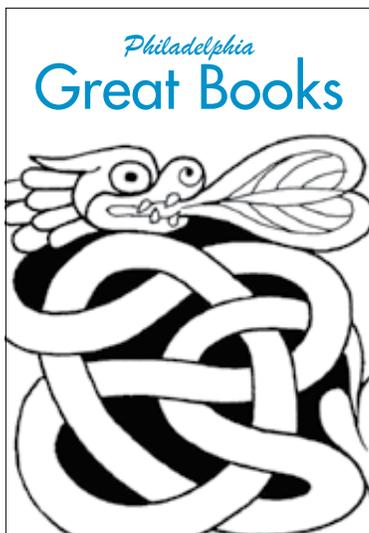
Families come out to celebrate the release of the new issue of PS Junior, our magazine by young writers and artists, produced in partnership with Mighty Writers.

RESOURCES



50 Over 50 is a collection of poetry, essays, and fiction by women over age 50. This anthology features work by notable authors like Robin Black, Bonnie Jo Campbell, J.C. Todd, Vickie A. Carr, and Rachel Pastan. While many of the writers included are emerging authors, all of the work has something funny, thoughtful, and compelling to say about sex, family, loss, and love.

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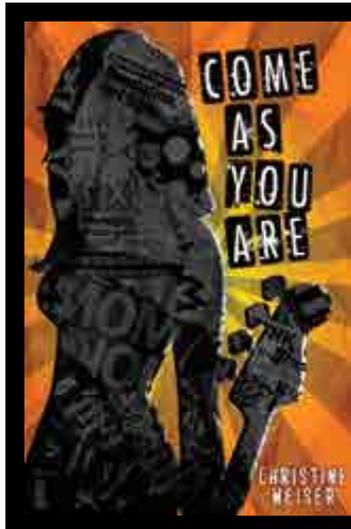
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