

Yolanda Wisner

5 South 43rd Street, Floor 2

Sometimes we would get hungry for the neighborhood.
Walk up the sidewalk towards Chestnut Street.
Speak to the Rev holding the light-skinned baby,
ask his son to come put a new inner tube on my bike.
Cross Ludlow, past the mailbox on the corner,
Risqué Video, Dino's Pizza, and the Emerald Laundromat.
The fruit trucks tucked into 44th Street on the left,
house eyes shut with boards, fringes of children.
Once we went into a store sunk into the street,
owned by a Cambodian woman. She sold everything,
from evening gowns to soup. Over to Walnut and 45th,
where the Muslim cat sells this chicken wrapped in pita
draped in cucumber sauce. The pregnant woman
behind the counter writes our order out in Arabic.
We grab a juice from the freezer, some chips,
eye the bean and sweet potato pies.

Back into the hot breath of West Philly, sun is setting.
The sky is smeared squash, tangerines in a glaze.
Three girls and one boy jump doubledutch. A white man
hustles from the video store with a black plastic bag.
We look for money in the street, steal flowers
from the church lawn. The shit stain from the wino
is still on our step. Mr. Jim is washing a car for cash.
John is cleaning his rims to Buju Banton.
Noel is talking sweetly to the big blue-eyed woman.
Linda, on her way to the restaurant. The sister
in the wheelchair buzzes by with her headphones on.

One night, a man was shot and killed on this block,
right outside our thick wood door. But not today.
Today is one of those days to come home from walking
in the world, leave the windows open, start a pot of
black beans. Smoke some Alice Coltrane. Cut up
some fruit, toenails. Hold on to the moment
as if time is taking your blood pressure.

Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg

You might come here Sunday on a whim.
Say your life broke down. The last good kiss
you had was years ago. You walk these streets
laid out by the insane, past hotels
that didn't last, bars that did, the tortured try
of local drivers to accelerate their lives.
Only churches are kept up. The jail
turned 70 this year. The only prisoner
is always in, not knowing what he's done.

The principal supporting business now
is rage. Hatred of the various grays
the mountain sends, hatred of the mill,
The Silver Bill repeal, the best liked girls
who leave each year for Butte. One good
restaurant and bars can't wipe the boredom out.
The 1907 boom, eight going silver mines,
a dance floor built on springs—
all memory resolves itself in gaze,
in panoramic green you know the cattle eat
or two stacks high above the town,
two dead kilns, the huge mill in collapse
for fifty years that won't fall finally down.

Isn't this your life? That ancient kiss
still burning out your eyes? Isn't this defeat
so accurate, the church bell simply seems
a pure announcement: ring and no one comes?
Don't empty houses ring? Are magnesium
and scorn sufficient to support a town,
not just Philipsburg, but towns
of towering blondes, good jazz and booze
the world will never let you have
until the town you came from dies inside?

Say no to yourself. The old man, twenty
when the jail was built, still laughs
although his lips collapse. Someday soon,
he says, I'll go to sleep and not wake up.
You tell him no. You're talking to yourself.
The car that brought you here still runs.
The money you buy lunch with,
no matter where it's mined, is silver
and the girl who serves your food
is slender and her red hair lights the wall.

Elizabeth Leo

At Monongahela River Alone in West Virginia

(Monongahela meaning "falling banks" or, "where banks go to cave in, or erode"
-the Lenape Language Project)

Falling banks, I can see that in you, everything
hill here, everything falls down to you.
In banks I see shoulder blades,
the back of the woman who waved and walked away,
water running between them. I see

all of this, and I hear Septa ringing in my ears, welcome
to route 65, service to Germantown and Cheltenham Avenues.
I am looking for the Schuylkill in you.
I can almost smell it. And I say Wissahickon aloud
trying to name you something familiar.

I don't miss the sound of Philadelphia, the shape
it makes on my tongue, the grinding noise of survival,
plain and desperate. I miss its habit though,
the rivers' constant, sudden rising up.
I don't think I'll know your falling.

What can I bring you so that I can love you?
And when we speak at the last, will you tell me
what water to swallow to kill the sickness
for home, when you sing finally,
in your falling down, will you make it habit in me?

Let it ring out in my ears when I sit
near another river baffled
by how quickly life is changed, shrugged off
and wondering how to survive
alone near water uninterested in my names?

Over there on the dock,
their shoulders pressed together,
that young couple is trying to kill me.