

Construction in North Philly

This paint smells like poverty, rust red fish oil. It stains itself and everything it touches with stickiness and oil the color of a fresh bruise.

I can feel it way up here when they drop the loads of bricks halfway down the block. They tumble into piles over themselves, dumb, sending dust shoots high up into the air, suspending, while the machines drive their unbearable weight in search of easier construction, leaving giant tire tracks of dirt and old history criss-crossing over 17th St.

Valerie has been wheeled out again.

Her room is to the side of the hall through the tall parlor doors when you walk in. It is open sometimes during the day. All of her furniture is covered in checkered blankets, softening all corners with afgans blue, yellow and black. The dark burgundy shades always down. Her room and all its angles softened for her frail condition.

Sitting below me and three stories down she is tipped back in her wheelchair, rigid, knees bent inward, feet propped up in white ankle socks and fingers crooked. Her whole frame is visible through the gaps in the planks. Body too slight to bend her seat. She is out to watch the day pass, one hand at her chin, her brown leather chair warming in the sun. Brought outside to be left alone, face out, now the responsibility of anyone who walks by.

In the backyard a concord grapevine has steadily engulfed everything in its path. The fence now a measured canopy reaching for the house, entwining electrical lines, standing on end with seemingly nothing to lean on, promises pink shoots to everywhere without the slightest shape of fruit. Patches over repairs upon quick fixes. The immigrant brick laying and old world trades meant only to be laid once. The air is dense with need, ready and reaching forward, absorbing the littered backyard into its bounty.