

Reading

“West of Philly”

by Yolanda Wisher

they asked me to write a poem like a lush life,
a **johnny hartman**¹ poem. a poem that would make
your fake eyelashes fall off. a poem with the city all
up in it. a poem, matter of fact, like a city, one that
can only be reached by train. yeah, write us a poem
like a train, but not like **coltrane**². just write a coltrane
poem that contains the essence of the city, the way
the horizon sounds like **elvin jones**³ playing cymbals
& trash trucks. i mean, just write a poem that contains
the essence of west philly—a poem you’ve already
written—write that. yeah, write a recycled philly poem
about a philly that doesn’t exist anymore. write the
sequel. write a new **romancing the stone**⁴, but set it in
philly, starring a black woman poet & a **belizean sailor**⁵.
write that scene where your angry neighbors shut down
a fast food joint with danny devito or those motley kids
discover the smirking mouth of a creek buried under
43rd.⁶ make sure it’s juicy with brotherly love & that other
stuff. drop-in a cheesesteak, but make sure it’s gluten-free
because our audience is particular. y’know, like people who
don’t like poetry. not that you can’t write what you want,

¹ **Johnny Hartman**: American vocal jazz musician active from the 1940s to the 1960s.

² **Coltrane**: American jazz saxophonist from Philadelphia, active from the 1940s to the 1960s.

³ **Elvin Jones**: American jazz drummer active from the 1940s through the 1990s.

⁴ **romancing the stone**: 1984 action-adventure comedy film about a white female romance novelist from New York City who travels to Colombia

⁵ **belizean sailor**: A sailor from Belize, a country on the northeastern coast of Central America.

⁶ Allusions to the movie *Romancing the Stone* and *The Goonies*.

but for now, just write it like you love every damn inch of the city. even the hawks & vultures & raccoons & the characters like knives sharpened by the week, or like fruit bruised & first-frosted. write it like you believe the city has seasons, that it can change in its deepest cracks, unseen corners. write like you know these corners, you know why this building is painted pink, why this one is empty, why this one is a missing tooth on the block. write it like you know what it's like for a tooth to be taken. write it like you know what it's like for a home to be lost. or try writing it like you carry the voices of lost homes to bed with you. like they are evidence & you are a detective. like they are memories & you are family. write it like you can see beyond seeing. like you know the origin of shoulders sharp as **javelins**⁷, can decode 3-pointed stars hunched under streetlights. like you are related to the men selling socks & incense, oils & belts. like you can read the compass on their faces. like you can recreate the **arpeggios**⁸ of the one-eyed singer or the \$200 upright with beer-colored keys at the thrift store. just write a poem like a secondhand store full of dishes & leather jackets. vibrating with the leftovers of people. bleeding in solidarity with a woman in a ripped red sweater like an ear, wailing in the street one summer night. a poem full of peach seeds & lightning bugs. a poem that can change the color of the sky.

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⁷ **javelins:** spear designed to be thrown, once used as a weapon.

⁸ **arpeggios:** a broken chord where the notes of a chord are played individually rather than striking them all at once.