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Northern Liberties

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Northern Liberties · *Jeanne Murray Walker*

This time I am going to tell the truth about what happened
the day we drove through your childhood by mistake.
As you were shifting into third, you said, "My God, it's Commerce Street,"
and there we were, idling in front of the yellow brick house
you lived in with your Jewish grandparents and your young, crazy parents,
the wrought iron gate you climbed still standing
underneath the giant lilac bush. The store where you bought caps
was advertising Jewish religious articles. Across the street
a Roman Catholic Cathedral with pink marble pillars and blue tile
loomed holy as a witch's sugar house, selling Novenas on Tuesdays at ten.
We turned the corner and drove around the block following an arthritic
trolley
past the long gone open market with beets lined up on trays
like the earth's skinned hearts. When we came back
to stare at the old house again, the sun had shifted between buildings
and shot us in the forehead. The lilac breathed fire.
I could see where you had fished for mackerel from the second storey
window,
where your pets lay buried, where you dug a hole to China with a
tablespoon,
where your Irish father leaned across his tart-tongued Jewish lover
with the improbably beauty of a tree turning in the fall.
In a minute the Rose of Sharon spread all over your back yard like applause
and the door to old Mr. Greenhagen's house slammed shut again.
You shifted into first. "Well, that's it," you said, looking at me.
And you pulled into traffic as though out of a dream.
I did not lay my finger on your wrist to stop you from going
anywhere you wanted even though it may be to the place
we both now know is China. Time has already stopped
so many things you want. I will say nothing that is not true.
When I looked back, I saw, beside the lilac bush which had turned
its green and natural self again, a boy running the streets of Northern
Liberties
into his feet, looking for you.