

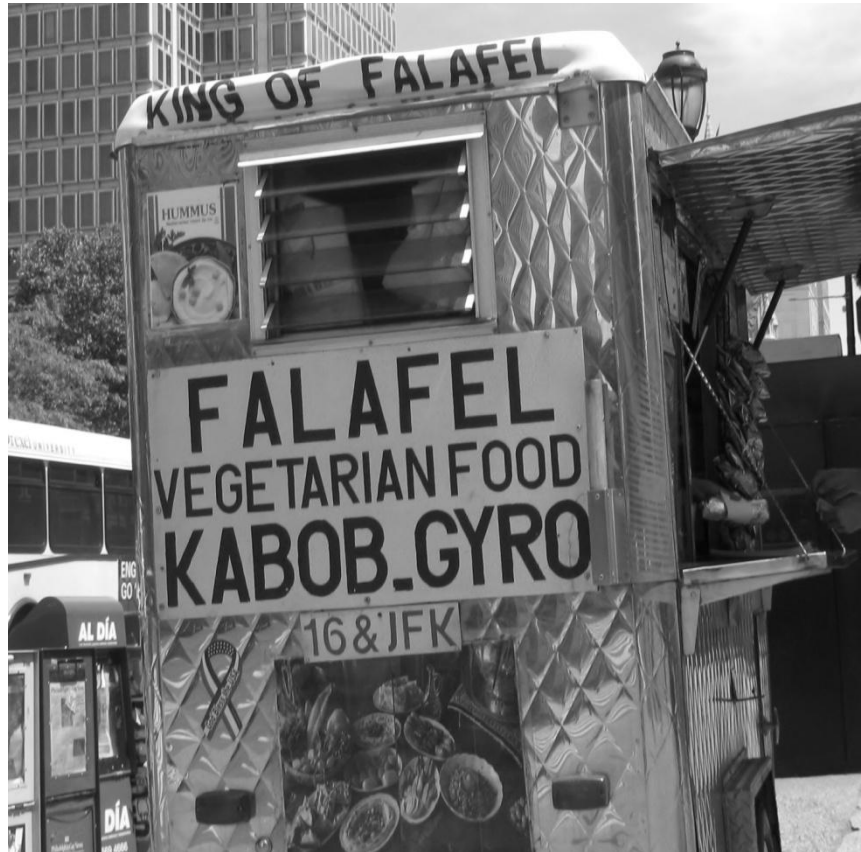
# PhiladelphiAmble

**Daniel Schall**

**Abstract**

These poems are inspired by Baudelaire's original poetic image of the flâneur, the poet ambling through the Latin Quarter in Paris, absorbing the city's increasingly rapid modernization. A crucial difference, however, is that these poems also play into the words of Michel de Certeau, who reminds us that there are (at least) two ways to "see" the city: through the minimizing and totalizing lens of aggregation, or as part of it, moving and swimming through the arteries of the city and letting the poignant smells and personalities stick to one's skin. The photographs and collage elements of this piece attempt to marry these two views of the city in their interactions with and supplements to the text. Baudelaire had the keen sense to stay removed from his own poems; his speaker was imbued in the works, but rarely did he make a cameo appearance. I find that to do that in the city today would be impossible.

West



Surrounded:  
behind

the masonry spire  
whitewashed stone carved  
flat and round—

giants dwarf  
either side,  
16th and Market Streets,  
blue glass and gray steel

so high that clouds slip  
from the sky,  
slink onto the polished mirrors

Business people—  
not artsy folks  
or rag-tag teenage crowds  
but real PEOPLE,  
    messenger bag,  
    briefcase flail,  
        lapel flap  
in the gusting  
mildew-scented air

nothing  
    One Liberty Place  
    the massive, iconic spire  
    stepped like a glass terrace,  
        angled steep over a thousand feet of  
makes Billy Penn turn his  
bronze back and burn  
in shame below.

Is this Philadelphia?

where, above the earth,  
NASA satellites capture it  
a bleak, pallid scar  
carved from hunter green land  
blistered at the mouth  
of the ink black bay

The Penn Centers  
stand as sentinels,  
before the sun

The clouds pass  
and everyone  
moves!  
    in a solid  
    throng at the green  
    an amoeba of people  
    sloshes its way across the street  
    to find the shade again

Comcast Center  
the axis mundi  
abrasive as it shouts  
over the rest of the antennae

“C’mon, let’s watch the big screen.”

clop clop  
of too-big red heels  
behind

passes the street vendors  
avoids their eyes  
behind  
shades

The vendors on 20th  
draped in steel  
boxes

tug-of-war on street corners  
for well-dressed customers

a man in flotsam slacks  
worn to shredded khaki,  
floats between the busybodies  
strolls up to the window  
the real cultural treasure trove:  
hotdogs  
shish kebabs  
cheesesteaks  
soft pretzels  
cheddar jack quesadillas  
beef and bean burritos  
falafel  
baba ganoush

a smell like smoked flannel  
issues from the box—  
no chimney  
no ventilation—  
the man inside wipes a grease  
tattoo from his sooty forehead

the man outside slaps  
his bills on the vendor counter

“Yo, man, what can I get for this?”

Outside the IBX tower—  
another glass monument—  
Temple red  
and white T  
flaps on flags  
hung from the light posts  
holes punched in their middles  
to let wind gusts slip through.

in the rough  
flutter in  
chaos—  
beating  
gray skin beneath  
feathers  
pumps fervently,  
wild  
march  
of shiny dress shoes

Flock of pigeons  
ballistic  
bluster,  
waves of  
the muscular  
of taut bird wings  
leathery  
thick clay  
red eyes  
to escape the

They reconvene at 22nd  
outside Murano Condos  
(1 and 2 BEDROOM  
APARTMENTS AVAILABLE!)

Thick-necked man  
with a BlueTooth  
earpiece  
blinks  
blue  
blinks  
blue  
walks towards the Hoagie City  
by The Forum  
("NUDES NUDES NUDES  
YOUR CENTER CITY  
XXX SOURCE!")

Acrid scent  
of rich tobacco  
shakes from his  
round body  
he stares under the curved  
shadowed tongue  
of his Official NBA cap—  
the back covers

what looks to be  
a bullet hole.

Digital news ticker  
above the fresh new  
black newsstand  
says

3:13 PM Partly Cloudy 64F SEPTA northbound trains halted due to engineer killed on  
tracks CBS CBS CBS White House Advisor claims that Obama has "a weakness" for apple  
pie CSB CBS CBS

both delivered and dusted away  
so quickly

Past 23rd,  
muddied Schuylkill,  
two concrete and steel  
balustrades keep

the bridge aloft

Across the river  
the Cira Centre  
strikes the sky  
with its blotch  
of mirrored glass  
lonely

30th St. Station  
tan square stoic  
Art Deco Ionic columns  
at its vanguard  
disrupt the taxi line  
and rushing commuters

the tangle of tracks,  
looks complicated  
but in fact is well planned  
and simple  
a Rubik's cube of steel  
laid out on dirt and chipped stone

pigeon lands on  
suspended traffic signal  
turns its body  
and white

gobs

pour from its cloaca

spatter

on the sidewalk  
a lactic starburst  
Beyond the station  
past the painted  
train track overpass  
endorsed  
in blue and gold  
DREXEL UNIVERSITY

looms a beige building  
always quiet—  
the sign says “Bennett S. Lebow  
Engineering Center”  
but I’ve never seen  
anyone enter or leave.

On 32nd Street  
an apartment strip

SUVs and sports cars  
scattered—parked  
across double yellow lines  
and solid whites, crooked  
up on sidewalks and lawns,  
traffic rolls around the mess—

two police cars behind,  
plus the poignant smell of pot  
escapes the wide  
open apartment door  
and it starts to make sense

Three officers,  
dark blue windbreaker  
"STRIKE FORCE" jackets,  
stand guard while a fourth  
frisks his victim.  
    "Do you have any weapons?  
    Knives? Firearms?"

The man, bald by razorblade,  
stubble on cheeks and skull  
shakes his head—  
    looks as though  
    he just woke up.

    "Are you in possession of  
    any illegal substances?"

The question seems moot:  
    "Marijuana? Cocaine?"

    Another man  
led out from an open  
apartment door  
cuffed—  
    muscle-T tinged yellow and  
    skin sunburned to a deep red—  
    flashes against afternoon glare  
    like hazard lights.



South



South Street!  
5th and South  
where people go to  
WAKE UP at night

where Johnny Rockets, in all its malt shop glory,  
is always open  
(the Original Hamburger!)

and tourists rumble through the  
hazard cone lined streets

traffic is too scared  
to dare cross

people rush  
behind the constant  
bump bump bump bumpa  
bump bump  
dance beats  
that rush from the storefronts  
and nightclubs—

flowery women  
share their astonishment  
for the world.

“Oh my God!”  
“Right?”  
“Who does that kind of thing?”

restaurants lined with  
hungry shoppers, who  
eat Baja meals and  
drink Piña Coladas by Tiki torch light

T-Mobiles, GameStops  
and a buzzing Dairy Queen  
an empire of packaged products:

cell phones video cards cookies and cream  
soft serve running shoes fancy hats designer  
shirts designer jewelry designer hosiery  
designer condoms

Condom Kingdom looms  
between 4th and 5th:  
only the bravest souls enter  
guided by the rainbow colored  
painted sperm cells on the ground

Head south on 5th;  
yes, south,  
no tourists walk here-  
off the safe path

past the sideshow stores  
and alternative foods:

Ernesto's Clothier  
and Golden Empress Garden—CLOSED  
Too late for a Saturday?

5th and Bainbridge—  
the din fades.

Soft shoe step behind?

Outside the Coquette  
Bistro and Raw Bar  
in the candlelit sidewalk seats,  
an old, flaccid couple—  
    sharp tailored,  
    dainty table manners,  
faces a warm  
yellow glow—  
think on life and  
cut quietly,  
just the light scrape  
stainless steel on porcelain,  
into thick, double-butterflied  
chops of pork

(maybe harvested in Cloverfield,  
where Philadelphia siphons off its  
meats and cheeses—

the captive pigs and cows  
seem happy as they roll  
through dirt and soil baths  
to cleanse their itches,  
like belly-up fish)

Here the burden of 5th Street  
becomes clear:

    down the road  
from the Bistro  
a ragged man  
    thick with grime  
    yellowed teeth and eyes  
    steeped in his own urine  
        rests on the bench  
        across the Y-intersection—

the couple sees him,  
the worlds meet

and sift between  
like collided galaxies

Passyunk	Old
Bainbridge	Rich
5th Street	Poor

Should I stare?  
Why do they let him linger?  
Take action: Either feed him  
or shoo him away.

I pass on.

5th and Fitz,  
tree-lined,  
street light sheds  
a modest orange on the leaves,  
would be quaint,  
if only it weren't for the

dumpsters  
recycling bins—banana reek wafts from them  
air conditioner pocked facility  
housed in a brown brick  
and wrought iron shell:  
Meredith Elementary School

decked out kid— half-goth half-gansta,  
chains dangled from thick vinyl pants  
with neon green stitches  
and a sideways Phillies cap,  
round gold 59Fifty sticker still fresh on the bill—

shuffles down 5th like his leg is broken  
He walks in the street  
methodically between the cars

bobs his head  
dark frizzy curls pressed against  
the plastic headphones divider:  
his phones  
blast a thick  
beat that drops along to his sway a

beat that drops along to his sway

black and gray metallic  
garage doors attach to  
stoop-less houses  
they pour their light  
right onto the sidewalk

(beat that drops along to his sway)

the neighborhood so cramped  
that even the alleys have become  
their own streets,  
doors unlatch into tight darkness—  
paved corridors—  
Do people squirm by undetected here?

Old lady in dingy sundress  
waters the tropical weeds  
that infest the cracks in her  
plaster wall,

the side of her home,

How is she not chilly?  
She sings softly in Spanish.

*Adios, o Virgen de Guadalupe.*  
*Adios, o Madre del Salvador.*

Past Catherine and Queen,  
barred up houses and shops,  
no visitors welcome in this place.

By the "NO Thru Trucks"  
sign at 4th and Christian  
I wait to catch a Rte. 57.

Shadowy man in heavy jacket  
stands by iron bar gate that warps  
around empty parking lot—  
long draped fabric covers his hands.

Mister Softee ice cream truck  
turns corner, disregards the signs,  
headlight glare

the tires roll slow  
predatory

Above power lines criss-cross  
in space at the intersection,  
blueblack ink clouds skirt  
across stars, light specks  
washed dim from the  
rusted street lamp glow

Christian  
Religion?

Catherine

Queen

The hard Cs and Qs and  
Rose Garden Chinese Food place—  
Have I been here before?—  
and long jacket man  
melt away into the white noise  
of the bus as it brakes before me

Inside, heavy gansta rap,  
a gray boombox nestled  
in the corner behind a seat  
and the back wheel

(boom boom)  
(boom boom)

its red-eyed owner twists the knobs

The nighttime bus crowd  
has their own language,  
a series of grunts  
for the weary,  
laughs for the high—

some combine them  
for more variety

There's always more variety

"I'm allergic mold and pollen  
and when I get round  
them things, man—!"



North



Three-day? Maybe three-day-old

dogshits  
hardened in smooth, textured shells  
liked cooled Pāhoehoe on the damp sidewalk

these splotches of rainwater,  
expressions of an April swell

ease away into the  
rough scent of  
mold and asphalt

An unknown complex, boxy,  
rigid, square, cubed—  
did the architect struggle  
with the normalcy?—  
outburst of plate glass  
from the 12th street side  
flushes with the corner

across the street a brown building  
hunches, more chunked in design  
with modern angles and gray plaque  
“College of Engineering:  
Temple Architectural Program.”

Breezy would not be the word—  
throttle—  
yes, throttled by the wind  
I edge with caution down  
12th street past Norris.

In the chain-link  
fence bound  
parking lot

a little girl  
plays hopscotch  
hair wound tight  
thick braids  
branched out  
in all directions

bright colored  
butterflies  
snapped closed  
on the dark frizz  
keep the braids bound

throws her stone—  
a shard of rock  
from the North Broad  
train tracks:

One

12th and Diamond  
bright red paint facades  
mask the struggling structure’s  
faulty sway

Two

Three

left side collapsed—  
postmortem of sand  
powdered rock stone  
wood dust plastic debris  
from the gash  
in the buildings

Four

Rte. 23 pulls up  
against my  
right of way—

Five

Six

I barely hear  
the mechanized voice  
greet in the open air  
the people that depart

“Welcome to  
Route  
Twenty-Three  
Service To  
South Philadelphia  
via Germantown  
Avenue  
and  
Twelfth Street”—

Eight

Nine

Mother and son escape the sweat  
of the machine that growls away  
behind us

he squirms  
resists against the pull of her arm—

Ten

settles and stares at me:  
deep, vacant eyes  
almond  
an intense, knowing stare

Eight

Nine

amidst thick curls of hair

and dirty scabs he's picked—  
his mother slaps him

Seven

his teeth part  
he whines, loud—  
no crying  
(he's been hit before,  
so much so he's immune)

mustard stain  
on his chin  
on his dark blue shirt

Five

Six

12th and Susquehanna  
corner convenience store lingers,  
roof propped up with center pillar—  
dull blue gray paint chipped  
and soured away by rain and termites—

bright red and white sign looks new:  
FOOD Base  
Right Where You Live  
feels like the store is spying on you

Four

Abandoned pool,  
filled but unused,  
waits barricaded inside  
a tall rusted chain fence  
(a sunny enough day, but so much wind!)  
poolhouse windows shattered  
and bricks spray painted in colorful  
gang symbols,  
a mural of feuds.

Two

Three

12th and Colona.  
The mechanical hubbub of the bus and  
chattering of people,  
long gone.  
Distant sounds reach me,  
far off motorcycles,  
sparrows that pop out  
their calls over the quiet.

One

the homes are stumped,  
squarebottom brick teepees  
drawn back from the road  
by brown patches of lawn

wrought iron bars surround the patios—  
even protection can be beautiful

Out of a low project  
house tumbles an  
androgynous elder,  
hair in loose gray  
curls,  
    dusts off a blue fleece  
    sweater to its zip-up  
    collar—

How can I feel for you  
when you look so smug?  
Squinted eyes against  
the high midday glare,  
he holds up something  
to me as I pass,

    A bottle. Glass. Whiskey. Tips. Pours.  
Wipes mouth with sleeve. Walks inside.

It's only then I realize—  
    no pants.

I turn down Dauphin St.,  
escape other eyes from the patios.

Dauphin, past empty grass lots  
where condom wrappers  
and razorblades meet,  
past the boarded up pharmacy  
POSTED – KEEP OUT  
past Torres' Mini Mart  
where people pick up  
in throngs—they limp  
from place to place.

Crazed ladies step out of the store,  
flip through plastic bags, rifle through  
smushed bread and soured milk

Notably segregated—  
there are four degrees:

1. Chalked up to chance.

“Don’t buy any more pocka-books!”

2. Others force it.

“I’m a pocka-booka-holic!”

3. By choice (retain the last shreds of faith).

“You bringin’ Kristie n’ Karen?”

4. Reality is so strong, it is no longer questioned.

A fleet of kids  
speeds by on bikes  
not watching  
where they’re going  
    quick pulse and click  
    of spun bike chains  
    against steel sprockets  
Extra-Large T-Shirts flap  
behind them like flags  
in the wind they create

they turn on Broad;  
I’m close now.  
13th and Cumberland—

By the steel rails,  
at North Broad  
where Ruby—  
the hopscotch girl  
who may be named  
something else, but  
I have named her Ruby—  
perhaps picked up  
her shard of rock,

a balding, rotund man  
in battered blue wind  
breaker hands me  
a small pamphlet—

sheer, yellow paper

I  
must  
tell  
you  
this

typed in white  
on the front cover—

inside Jesus dies for our sins,  
yet I look around and cannot help  
but feel defeated.

Down Cumberland to Broad  
I see the stop  
                                  the C bus.  
At the corner of Sunny's Diner  
and the Wheel Thing mod shop,  
I wait with muscled bruiser,  
shorn hair pencil thin mustache  
t-shirt bulged to limits—  
on his left bicep  
a tattoo:

Karema  
7-13-09

Is it a birth  
or a death?

East



Wait on the solid amber hand

the boxy yellow  
traffic signal

does it obstruct the traffic?

Here, Center,  
a masonry tower

City Hall  
whitewashed stone carved  
flat and round—  
  
now sleek pillared stone  
once rough native rock—  
circles  
fans out  
pumices the cross streets into right angles

Penn Square  
Juniper Street  
swallows cars  
buses, bikes,  
pedestrians  
the hundred daily thousands  
into Borders Quizznos  
the Happy Jeweler  
green newspaper machines  
glass and concrete office facades

a man in deep slick black  
suit flares by  
“Excuse me, excuse me”  
clap clap clap clap  
of his dress shoes  
sporadic as he dodges  
between the stationary throng  
at the corner

Bronze Billy Penn  
at the stone summit,  
alloyed eyes  
watch  
he grasps his treaty,  
signed in Lenape love,  
hand extends

over Philadelphia,  
Shackamaxon,  
anoints

bless you  
bless you

Juniper and Market  
KYW  
News Radio  
1060  
partly cloudy, 34 degrees  
thru blasted speakers  
of a scratched blue Ford Focus

in the gray traffic box  
on the gray pole  
a sound like coins  
slipping into a vending machine

Solid amber hand gone  
Solid white fellow appears

Walk

people

spring

engulf and pass  
flow and bend

brush me away

as a river to rocks

knowing

it will outlast

any impediment

a pressure change  
at my feet between asphalt  
and thick iron manhole cover

Booted feet follow on sidewalk,  
pressing thru  
just a few layers  
where snow  
accumulates

the top half  
of a boot print  
forms in a patch of snow

little hexagons  
imprint into valleys and plateaus  
from cold rubber molding

Slushing thru  
unkempt sidewalk:  
two kinds of people:  
those who create filth  
those who avoid it—

They rarely meet but when they do BOOM

No one on this street  
holds a sign that says  
THE END IS NEAR

they all seem to know  
the end is near

It doesn't win them any money

Below the sidewalk grates the EI runs  
with the comfortable smells of home:  
electric smoke urine steam sandwich

below ground  
Suburban Station  
by the hallway  
to the EI tracks  
seven men:

glass eye, with paper cups, three sizes  
missing arm, toothless bongo drummer  
greasy sneak, oily throwaway work clothes  
solemn, legless vet, blues guitar  
harmonica player, bandaged always on crutches  
ringleader in thick Phillies jacket, lays by the coins—

shares the pocket change  
of their talents  
(it's not my problem)

sometimes  
they sit, fermenting  
on wide sheets  
of cheesecloth  
hats upturned  
soft fabric clinking

occasionally  
in floats a \$1  
and a scramble  
ensues—  
they stare down  
Suburban Station marble corridors

at my beat up briefcase  
handle starting to feel sticky  
from my sweat

Mount  
the damp lime  
stairs  
I must exhume  
and catch up  
to my material body  
blocks ahead

round Walnut stage exit  
where fancy people gather  
waiting for a leading lady  
feather boas and scarves  
thick suede  
cashmere coats  
sartorial perfection  
ladies mapped in thick  
creased makeup  
“Yes, her performance  
hardly makes up for the rest—”  
“True, a bit jejune.”  
strangling the nearby patient, parked limousine.

The doors fly open and yes!  
the polite claps begin  
Ms. Actress walking easy outside  
dressed in a light coat and tights  
the glass door behind clamps shut  
she strolls to the clapping crowd  
takes a pen from her cleavage  
and signs slips of paper

Down the sidewalk,  
pressed into a gap  
between modern  
boxy marble columns  
a sleek office building  
Jefferson Hospital for Neuroscience  
an old man,  
sooty and ashy skin shining  
dirt and grease  
pale whiskers stained yellow,  
buried in fluffy, army green

bomber jacket and plaid cap,  
jangles paper coffee cup of change  
deep yellow mucus in his eyes,

“Baby” he sings, bluesy, “Baby, baby!”  
“she kissed me once. But now she hurts me so!”

I must watch my signals  
watch where I’m going  
almost slammed into  
Washington Square  
Old City  
concrete paths plow thru  
to the central fountain  
    pigeons and sparrows  
    diving between cooper and concrete  
    for an unknown morsel  
    at a lurching woman’s feet

children play along the stone circle  
    plastic wheels from toy cars  
    grinding the edge  
    army men plunge  
        into the fantastic empty lake

two college girls  
bundled in coats  
read quietly on wooden benches  
quotidian

high above the fountain  
if I could see it  
    like I hope some aliens down south  
    retouching the Nazca lines  
    can see it

the X-marks-the-spot crossroads  
from the paths  
saying “Dig Here!”

beneath the concrete  
and mounds of grass:

beetles  
apple cores  
crumpled paper

soggy earth  
clay  
wing bones  
old pennies  
broken glass  
empty bags of feed  
tupperware  
rings  
veiny roots  
shards of styrofoam  
dogshit  
cracked lantern boxes  
horseshoes  
nightcrawlers  
plastic bags  
hundreds of bodies  
(yellow fever victims)  
used needles  
fingernail clippings  
credit cards  
water bottles  
feathers  
cigarette butts  
flattened ointment tubes  
ID cards  
bullets  
silt

the list rolls thru  
my mind past

I have forgotten  
what I am doing

classy wrought iron  
table and chairs  
    hazarding the sidewalk

the restaurant district  
brief global compass  
where Red Sky and Mizu  
meet Mediterranean and Pizzicato  
Jim's and Pat's like the poles

Lights on  
Ben Franklin Bridge  
boats beneath  
splintering rose and gold  
sunset  
meshed among the concrete  
Camden towers



### **About the author**

Daniel Schall is the Director of the Writing Center at Arcadia University near Philadelphia, PA. He has had poems published in *Parody*, *Moria Poetry Journal*, *Cactus Heart Press* and *Right Hand Pointing*.