Fortress*

YVONNE

Not a single ceiling or window fan
In our stifling apartment on the top floor.
Mother and I, forced out the front door.
Across the bricked-in street, dead-end,
An ice cream factory stared us down.
A lumber yard to the south—no way around.
We turned north, crossed Woodland’s trolley track.
Escape cost a long up (and down) hill trek.

Through Clark Park’s dappled green,
Past stony College of Pharmacy,
We were off to see the wizardry!
Spun in darkness, a movie-house screen
Could cool for an hour poverty’s sting,
Make a vagabond, a king.
The far-fetched caught by a finger.
Like White Rabbit—no time to linger.
Past Baltimore trolley—Cedar, Larchwood, Pine
Spruce, Locust, Walnut—a roll call—
Spirits unfurled like prayers on a spool.
Along these streets did wealth of another kind
Shudder behind the sheerest heirloom curtain
As Mother and I, strange shadows in pastel cotton,
Far below peaked attics, Gothic spires, flat-tarred
Rooftops, trudged on and upward?

At journey’s end, at peak of Walnut Hill,
Its electrifying name, The Commodore,
Magnifying fame with nonsense, trash or treasure,
Moorish in style, our refuge, welcomed all.
Today, once upon a time is gone.
No sign above the parapet. Just a skeleton
Of steel. New dreams proclaim this edifice
Now a mosque. Indeed, a fortress.

*420 Row, on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, is a collection of eight ornate homes on the west side of 42nd Street in University City. The three-story homes were designed and built by G.W. and W.D. Hewitt in the early 1880s, the first Queen Anne-style development in Spruce Hill.