

Pearls In The Sea is a coming-of-age novel about seventeen-year-old J-Man, who is growing up in River Rock, a town shaped by gang violence, fractured families, and survival at any cost.

Pearls In the Sea

By Phillip Shabazz

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*In a city where power
means violence and
survival means silence,
J-Man discovers the most
dangerous thing he can do
is speak.*

PEARLS IN THE SEA



PHILLIP SHABAZZ

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Choices

Before I ever picked up the pen that saved me, I was seventeen, and it was Fred who shoved me toward the edge.

Wednesday meant homework, rain, and trouble. After school at the library, I stopped mid-poem, clutching my pen and elbows on the table. Fred, my friend since seventh grade, slammed his fist on a math book. His blue hoodie sagged, soaked, cornered, eyes wide with something between fear and fury. He said the Shock Boys jumped him, blacked his eye, busted his lip.

Outside the window, the rain-gray sky shadowed his face. I patted his shoulder, the heaviness of his silence settling between us. I'd never seen him so shaken. He said he was thinking about joining The Club, a group of River Rock kids known for basketball and always watching each other's backs. He told me to join him. Said it was smart.

To me, "smart" meant the street code: keep your mouth shut, no snitching, and be ready to rumble. Earn respect. Rock a white T-shirt and a black skullcap. Prove yourself.

I asked, "Why do we need a club? Why can't we do something else?"

His eyes kept darting to the window, not at the rain, but past it, checking if they'd followed him inside.

"I'm not getting caught out here by myself," he said.

I couldn't ignore the quiet panic in his voice. I closed the notebook.

"Cool," I said. "Until somebody's cool with your blood on the pavement. One minute you're in, the next minute you're holding someone who can't open his eyes. You'll be tagging walls, laughing about fighting fifty times a day. I don't want that."

Fred's knee bounced under the table. He was so sure. But I wasn't.

"I'll make it up to you," he said.

He'd asked for things before. Last time, I lent him fifty bucks for a bike. He still owed me.

"I wouldn't ask if I thought you couldn't do it," he said.

His rubber boots darkened the floor. Two police cars, lights flashing, sped past outside. His eyes twitched at the sirens. A homeless man sat alone at the bus stop, snatching a nap. The rain flooded sewers, filled potholes, and swelled into puddles on the sidewalks.

My unfinished poem waited in the notebook. Fred stared at the table, long-faced. He stood, stuffed the math book into his bag, and pulled the hood over his head.

"Let's talk later," he said.

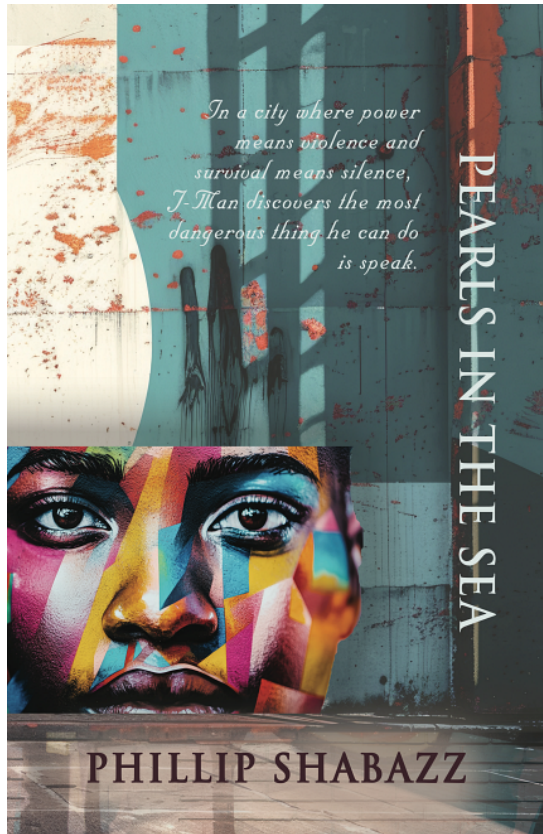
I didn't answer. I watched the rain drip from the tire spokes of my bicycle.

Fred left. The weight of his words hung in the air. I opened the notebook. I wrote: If I don't join The Club, I'll have to fight the gangs by myself.

Then I thought: I'd rather write poetry. Or run full court in a basketball game, hit a buzzer-beater, and hear the crowd roar. But they don't need another basketball star. Their team's winning trophies without me.

That's when I thought about joining The Club. But it was the last thing I wanted to do.

River Rock ran through me, buses, cars, trucks, all bound by streets that never slept. Gangs made me desperate. But part of me still clung to peace, the kind I found only in my boy cave, or maybe imagined in my little piece of the world, that part of me wasn't ready to lose what little calm I had left.



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