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GRACE MASSEY

MY FATHER SCULPTED MERMAIDS WHILE I SLEPT

My father retreated nightly
to sculpt yet another mermaid.
Clay daubed on wire, wax,
plaster, arms slinking skyward
breasts
navel
scales
my mother's body
with a dolphin's tail,
unseeing eyes, lobeless ears
and her narrow
nose, high cheekbones
that he never quite
got right.
After he died
my mother smashed
the mermaids with a hammer.
Tails, arms, scales
littered the floor
plaster dust
turned the air aqua
and among the shards
my mother
remembering how she
was once a mermaid
with long seaweed hair
rustling the waves
with her powerful tail
making long soft love
in a warm sea.

**ERIK
ROTH**

A NEW SONG

*Or else our changing flesh may never know
There must be sorrow if there can be love.*

- W. H. Auden

My epiphany – an end to forever –
drew me in like undertow. Barely eight-years-
old. Smith Point, Long Island. Spending forever
surfing funnels cycling bright sun, forever
chasing gulls flitting round patchy spume, staring
through space – clear, blue – I found an end to forever
in thunderclouds. They rolled through the forever
of empty summer sky, offered an endless
reminder: days turn dark on a dime. *Endless*,
they urged, a word to apply to change. Forever
a song rearranged, the rains left me wanting
to sing. Of wanting the light to last, wanting

guidance through a gathering storm. Of wanting
the ocean's pact with shore – together forever –
the waves eternal promise, return. Of wanting
what the tempest washed away. Of wanting
what it saved after breaking. Of the years
I combed for a voice inside a shell. Of wanting
to collect its echo, its rhythm. Of wanting
it in my fingers and hands. Of staring
down at words buried in wet sand, staring
at verses drowned in ambient surge. Of wanting
to stand and fight to breathe in that endless
wind on dunes, my chest tightening as endless

gusts snapped flags planted on the belt. Of an endless
stretch of beach flooded with memories. Of wanting
home, and its roads out there that ran endless,
long drives when our promises appeared endless,
too. Of sharp turns taken when forever
measured distance between me and you, endless
fears of us ending in a tailspin, endless

attempts to save us from sliding backward, years
doomed to what finally cut us loose from the years
tying weight to youth's lost balloon, the endless
days and nights attacking with our eyes, staring
down things we wished we never knew, staring

at a star flared into separate truths, staring
at a supernova from dark moons. Of endless
outbursts, toxic fumes, me and you staring
at an end to a dense, collapsing core, staring
at a black hole, fading inferno, wanting
its dust to touch us as we let go. Of staring
at remnants until they went dead, staring
at unmade space in a frozen bed, *forever*
pressed deep to the root of my tongue for forever
when I plead: *How long must we keep on staring
through a lie about love we were fed?* Of the years
it coated my throat with stone. Of the years

it swallowed time, choked out light. Of the years
it stretched the night, left me, alone, staring
at shadows. Of you, everywhere, nowhere, years
in darkness laid bare, taking in the years
of our lives together like an endless
supply of thin air. Of my prayers for the years
of lost breath to return, and for the years
to scatter what burned in fires of wanting
words to hurt each other more than wanting
them to be heard. Of my prayers for the years
to move on, for the rains to leave me, forever,
singing a new song. Of no end to forever,

no end to the scores in my palms, forever
open, full of the unknown, empty. Of wanting
to read their lengths, creases, scan the endless
lines. Of a past written in the sky. Of staring
toward a future, clouds disappearing with the years.

OUR FIRST TIME

Two half-drunk
glasses of white burgundy.
Small mountain of shrimp

tails. Jar of remoulade,
teaspoon buried in thick,
creamy, pink. A candle

burning in the center
of the table – hints of red
currant, sweet almond –

birds chittering outside
the open window. This is
our first time

free writing together, and
we keep our hands moving
non-stop – me, releasing

demons – you, releasing
little giggles arousing
my curiosity toward your

notebook. Are you drafting
a poem for this moment,
our first time

knowing we're really in
love, laughing at the script
of our lives loosening

into illegible loops
making perfect sense?
Breathless, collapsed

on the bed, we float
in a quiet daze, your leg
draped over my belly,

our lips touching
in the warmth of our
feathery being. At night

after you return home,
I find myself still
wondering about what

you wrote: if I read it
will it reheat my blood?
Will my heart start beating

in my hands? Will my hands
find something in your
words that I could hold?

JAMES CODY

LITTLE HANDS

In the garden with Emily
we split marigolds apart
for their seeds.

In her tiny fingers
she followed my lead

Stripping them
of their petals, pistils, and stamens,
maybe feeling her first reckless abandon
Or process delicately accomplished.

For a fleeting moment, I wondered
were they better as they were or
better for their potential in Emily's hands?

The thought drifted soon enough
into dimness while I focused on her little hands
mastering the art curiosity.

With a few decapitating strokes,
She did not know how much was in her hands.

NICOLE POKO

TANGLED ROOTS

A meadow of wild weeds had grown from my driveway
By midsummer. A measurement of the time I spent calculating
the best way to arrange
the dried flowers in my home and the cost
of reviving a friendship left
in the north-facing sun with no water.

You say the driveway looks pretty with all of the blossoms
and I know what you mean
But the thistle pricks me thirty times on my thighs
And when the sweat soaks
into the cuts, it stings like the third time
we promised to never speak again.

The last time we said goodbye
I drove past my summer's work of creating this meadow.
The chickweed blossoms made me their fool.
Daisy-like white petals hugging the afternoon sun
rooted in stone, nourished by a drought.
Stubbornly thriving like this painful old friendship.

I thought of making you a bouquet from my wild weed meadow
Bundle up the hurtful thistle and sly chickweed
Wrap them in twine to leave on your porch but
Instead I pulled the weeds out with
my callused garden glove hands
And placed them in the attic to dry upside down.

The delicious crunching sound of my tires rolling
over the stone as I pull in and out, going about life, won't be missed.
A paved driveway has been arranged for the fall
and the weeds won't have room to grow.
Not for a while.
Not until the pavement starts to crack.

MY HEROES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN COWBOYS

I was cradled with glee the rare times
Tommy's voice, my favorite voice,
spilled out of the door and onto
the willow tree in our front lawn
as I got off the school bus.
His voice booming but tired, amplified only
to cut through the desert sand
and cigarette smoke caught in his throat.
His S's whistled and he rounded off his sentences.
He was a black-hat cowboy with a past
so by association and love
dad was a cowboy too.

When Tommy visited dad, they'd talk
for hours while chain smoking Marlboro reds.
Westerns and country music had cowboy
heroes for children but compared to Tommy,
John Wayne and Waylon Jennings
were costumes and jargon.

Tommy was the only person I ever knew
who killed someone, a woman.
Dad dammed up emotions while collecting
towels to help wipe the blood off
the bumper of Tommy's black cadillac. I went with him
that night. Dad tended to Tommy's
sorrow and shame
through bullshitting over a starving
ashtray and M*A*S*H* reruns.

On the drive home I asked if Tommy
was going to hell because he killed someone.
Dad broke character
about his tales of heaven and hell and god.
White-hat cowboys and black-hat cowboys.

The woman got off a commuter bus and ran
into traffic, embraced by Tommy's guiltless bumper.
Tommy cradled her
and spoke to her with that voice
that anyone would want to hear
while dying.

C. RHEES

POLYCEPHALY

Beneath an upturned kayak bellying the shore
of the Delaware, the lawyer, kissed by fish, who
wanted to learn how to become indivisible

from water, but in death became pale under-
tow and blue lips. We, just boys, left to find
a phone and took with us the sight, and left

the smallest boy to tie the kayak to a dogwood
strung with fishhooks. That day slipped over
that boy like an endless hide, a lion's head

from a goat's back. Re-skinned him as he kissed
softly those he loved with lips cyanotic blue. He sprouted
memory like air pockets along a trapped belly. Sprouted

like how small, asymmetrical weeds teem where we
least want them. How deer slip his mother's azaleas
between their too-human teeth

so that she wilds and takes

a bud in her mouth

and apart

THE ENDLESS TALE

We ask about the origin
of curses. Our fathers
demonstrate what sets
the dogwood apart
from air and other eager

limbs. There is always
a curse — for trespass,
for living, for no
reason but the rain

decides it is so.
The great gray revelation
of my family
was the only appliance
we shared with commuter's

in their McMansions
above our farmer's
driven-under field. Rain
teases its fingers
through our skin,
to get at what underlies.

Generations of specters
who never miss a feast,
or tried to hang themselves (no
luck!), or swapped coats

with a devil of light — that's us!
A vinyl-sided family
huddled under
grandfather's skin
on this dirt where poverty
grass should be.

DELIQUESCENCE ON THE SOUTH JERSEY COAST

Forcing water from blood I hurled myself
hard into waves, a suture in saltwater. On shore,
swallowing sun, I thumbed brittle egg sacs
until there was nothing but empty. When nothing
wriggled out, my face tumbled into salt.
In learning the intricacies of killing fish,
I learned the eyes burst first, almost perfect
tears roughing the sand. The other boys deconstructed
jellyfish with driftwood wands. In water
their stingers became tide and I,
pink for days after, knew my skin was only
one layer burning
 above
 an abyssal plain.

NAT BOTTIGHEIMER

NJ Poets Prize Honorable Mention

OLIVEIRA AND MEDEIROS

*...among the things we see ordinarily there
are wonders so incomprehensible they surpass
even miracles in obscurity. —Montaigne*

I always enjoy a good I-Thou discussion,
A ramble with Levinas or Buber, some
Gymnastics on how saving a life may
Redeem the whole world. It is good
To exercise thus and important, the
Peril of dismissing anyone being
The loss of one's self. But then a term
Such as "radical other" lacks sufficient
Heft really, the abstraction obscuring
What it means to deny wholeness in
You name it, wife, beggar, Tutsi, dog,
What it means to desiccate a being,
To cause to sleep in the dust. So I find
Myself moved at a bout's end by
The mutual regard of embracing fighters,
Greased – the delicate concern to stop
Skin from splitting – and varnished
With their conjoined sweat, and smeared
With spit and sprayed blood. The tenderest
Care for one another, the most practical philosophy.

LESSON

When I was fourteen Adam sat
Behind me in home room and
Accustomed himself to vexingly
Giving me noogies. If you think benign

Omniscient authorities police wrong-
Doing and protect the molested, and
If it never occurs to you, oh innocent,
To risk the punishing eye then a seething

Pressure builds until the day you tell Adam
One more time, man, and you'll punch
Him in his wire-rimmed glasses.
Perhaps it's your red pink and white

Gingham shirt with mother of pearl
Snap buttons or possibly it's the sky blue
Shetland sweater the shirt is beneath
Or your bowl cut or evident inexperience

In the ceremony of pre-conflict negotiation,
The mutual interrogation that communicates
Fine gradations of willingness and capability,
Like bidding in bridge, but whatever the cause

Adam doubts your resolve, doubts your ability,
Doubts the probability that the comically named
Mr. Deus will ever intervene on your behalf
To arrest him, and so

After reflecting on your hand for a spell
He gives you another noogie. When you turn
Smoothly no resistance from the white plastic
Chair to your blue corduroy pants and slug

Him as vowed and return to face forward
The most surprising nothing ensues. No
Punches from Adam no intervention from
A just authority no hooting from the

Classmates who surely could not have
Been unaware, only a perfusion of
Adrenaline and a trembling expectation
Of doom until when you're leaving the

Classroom Mr. Deus touches your shoulder,
Says sotto voce "You did the right thing."

ELLEN JUNE WRIGHT

BLOOD ORANGE

Heavens lost seed, lost flower that spent not
one extra hour in the womb of her mother,
the mother that wanted her more than anything
but father was nowhere to be found.

She closed her eyes and made him up,
became a painter and painted him on canvas,
on the sidewalk, on the sides of buildings—
muralized his absence everywhere.

When she needed a mirror,
she cut into a blood orange and squeezed.
She painted self portraits as a bread fruit tree,
an akee tree, as sugarcane cut by a machete
in the hands of a Maroon.

She went up to her roof,
her alter. She worshiped there under the big sky,
sang Nearer My God to Thee, heard her own voice
echo through the district and onto the sea.

**MICHAEL T.
YOUNG**

A WORLD TO BELIEVE IN

If I've watched waves clawing up the beach
and thought them some animal struggling
to free itself of this oceanic hold, it rises
with the thought of birds learning to fly,
with my children as they learned to talk,
to mouth their needs in the shape of a hope
that love will respond with water, bread,
with warmth and a hug that holds, then
sets free. We are such contrary creatures
believing the paradox of our desires
will make everything possible. So we persist
in building out of the most fragile materials
a world to believe in: sandcastles, paper kites,
mud houses, Solomon's Temple or the Tower
of Babel, the Library of Congress and its books
stored there as a shore against the relentless
roar and retreat of tides. We hope by this
not to forget to teach our children how
to pile the sand into heaps for building,
and to pack it tight, then decorate the gates
and battlements with mussel shells, those
black and nacreous shields, encrusting it
with the kind of deep, wishful thinking
that comes on a night of bad news, when
we cuddle with everyone we love, reassuring
each other the walls will hold till morning.

NOCTURNE

The bottom of a puddle is lost in the dark,
tucked in corners of an owl's passage overhead.
In time the mind dims toward that kind
of unfathomable wake, even its shallowest
memory. A tail slips under a carpet of moss,
a feather or key sparks a moment, then folds
into a crease of bark not to be found for a season.
So nocturnal is the name we give every animal
dreamed of on a night someone left us.
These are the nests we burrow down to,
these the quilted beds we curl up into
with the hope of hibernation on our lips,
the last cold words spoken that fill sleep
and sustain the broken creature till morning.

**STEVE
MYERS**

PYROTECHNIC PASSION RED

--hymn text for the organist, Christmas portion

In my head I hear the soprano air
from Messiah again—How beautiful
are the feet of them— seated on a chair
across from you, love, holding a vial
of polish in my hand, ready to paint
your nails the cheekiest, raciest red
available, to celebrate the saint
who, encouraging all God's beloved
in Rome, channeled Isaiah, but as well
to reverence my beloved's feet. Once, footsore
by Dublin Musick Hall on Fishamble,
yet fresh from the pubs off Temple Bar
and feeling again the gladsome tidings
of a jar or two of Guinness singing
in the blood, it struck me, there where Handel
premiered the timeless oratorio,
how the prophet proclaimed as beautiful
the sun-scorched, thorn-pierced, stone-abraded soles
of the swords-to-plowshares folk, coarse, unclean,
a mite crazy, but whose peace-talk assured
alchemies of transfiguration—
a new heaven and a new earth, a word
made flesh. How many miles of city streets
and country roads we've walked these 40 years,
I wonder, cradling in my lap your feet—
twin doves, flames, weathered vessels that sail bare
over the pedals, lifting rich heraldings,
quick and — God your witness— crimsoned, flashing.

THETA PAVIS

DRIVING PAST THE BAYWAY REFINERY

Slender spires of flange and fire, flashing lights
and broil of fume. Linden is a pungent dreamscape
on the side of the turnpike. A sprawling sci-fi city.
A whispering unknowable hiss of chemicals, invisible
benzene floating vapors heavier than air. Figures in chalk

white overalls move slowly around the snake world
of pipes. The workers climb, past fat round vats, holding
tanks so large there are spiral staircases bolted and curling

around the sides for them to scale in their steel-toed boots.
The whole place is a machine making fuel for other
machines run by humans crawling over massive drums.

In the air a skyfull of gritty plumes, a reeking system,
a wondrous menace of nitrogen oxide, carbon
monoxide, sulfur dioxide, hydrogen sulfide, leaving
behind effluvia and cancer, the price per gallon.
The chemical pink of a New Jersey sunset.

WANDA PRAISNER

AT WINDSOR FIELDS

Princeton, 2021

Under an October sky weighted
with clouds the color of ash, I've come
to see my granddaughter race.
Runners of all sizes and shapes
move by in varied speeds,
school names across their jerseys:
Penn State, Princeton, UConn, Cornell—
she here for Stony Brook.
I cheer them on. Each time she passes,
I miss getting her picture.
The need to move from starting points
to finish lines. Each race she blurs past
before I recognize her gait, the sway
of her pendulum-like ponytail. Sun gone,
it's cold, I go watch from the van.
Sarah, done now, neither cold nor tired,
hurries to hug me. I applaud her.
Though disappointed with her personal
time, she smiles, poses for me,
while behind her a blind girl runs in,
a sighted guide alongside.
I clap even harder.

GEORGE MARANO

VITRUVIAN MAN

Le proporzioni del corpo umano secondo Vitruvio

In working out how to fit man simultaneously in a circle and square did Leonardo sketch perfection? Four million years of evolution halted in a genius renascent mind that seemingly stopped our time in pen and ink on paper. Wisdom teeth crimped in the jaw's confinement scream out for more freedom. Predatory vision restricts us to 200 degrees while the rest, unknown darkness, creeps up from behind. The limitation of two hands and arms cursed when fumbling for keys loaded with groceries. The eight limbed array of cephalopoda makes escape from their past all but certain. The wasteful alimentary system slows us down and backs up all for the need of energy and regeneration when its elimination could be photosynthetically greened by a crown and dorsum solar array. What of embedded wheels in the soles of our feet that would conserve energy in the roll on our hills and street. The latest version of Vitruvian Man will be 3D printed in the mind of Da Vinci's heir.

Ekphrastic Poem

THERESA BURNS

Winner of the 2023 NJ Poets Prize

WHEN I GOOGLE MY NAME, I FIND THIS GIRL

Theresa Burns, 1971-1988

They found the man, so they've stopped their searching.

Found closure all these years later.

It's true, I am nothing to look at now. A few shards, baubles including my sophomore ring from chorus club, thin gold bracelet the twin of one my best friend wore that year because neither of us had a boyfriend. Some remnants of the dress my parents laid me to rest in, the coffin closed for obvious reasons. A few of the youngest cousins remained in the dark until they could understand. No way to explain six bullets to the face and head on a Thursday, no undertaker talented enough to restore me. How pretty I felt that morning! As I walked to school, I was any girl from the eighties—hair I rolled with a round brush till it framed my face like Farrah's. My favorite white turtleneck highlighting my frosted lips. When my brother found me, I was still warm. I'd only gone home to change my clothes after gym, my period seeped through my bloomers. Back then in Mishawaka, only passing throughs and spinsters locked their doors. When someone rang the bell, I let him in. Shortly after, my father had his breakdown; my brother says he's never trusted anyone again. *This isn't Mayberry anymore*, my stepmother tells anyone who asks, which is everyone. Everything's changed. Though I am the same girl I was that day—sixteen, and blonde and light as ash.

MOWING THE LAWN FOR THE FIRST TIME AFTER MY SON LEAVES FOR COLLEGE

What I didn't realize was the heft of it
as I pushed it loud and hot over plugs of crabgrass, the squirrel-dug rivets
and tunnels, the berms with their hacked off standpipes

and sizable turds some unknown animal had left us.
I thought it was a vacuum for the lawn. Expected the grass to silk right down

in rows as I rolled over the wall-to-wall of our yard, a single hand steering.
Instead, I heaved the gas-sputtering hulk in ragged diagonals—
the way I watched you do since you were 12—

the fumes making me a little sick, my hands so slick with sweat
I thought I'd have to let go

what Dad calls the "dead man's handle," that bar you release
if you discover too late you've run over your feet,
danger never far from your own hands. Yesterday a student opened fire

at your school, and now three young men will never
mow the grass again. I push hard against the fact

of this, sticks and acorn guts flying up in my face. I let the roar
drown out imagined outcomes, phone calls, the music we'd choose
to conjure, without a doubt, you. It's when I'm done

the hardest work begins. To sit down beside this suddenly ravenous quiet,
and wait for rain.

LADDER

A woman lowers herself
into the pool, gingerly. Her son,
slim-shouldered, forties,

waits for her, waist deep
in the Hockney blue. He is somewhere
on the spectrum, her forever

companion all the years
we've come to swim laps, laze
in the shade with a book.

By the looks of it, she is right
in his range. He is all

refraction, a mirror of her
but for an error
on the spiral. Later, she towels

him dry, feeds him fries
and ice cream. What would become
of him if she slipped

and fell, never woke up?
She handles the ladder

with reverence, every rung
under her bare feet
a god she must please.

NICOLE SENSENBACH

MONARCH

I never wanted the change
my caterpillar self misses the extra legs.

on quiet mornings I dream of thickening, condensing into my
most essential parts
gone is yesterday's gauzy forethought,
when a twilight shower could spell death as much
as the sharp bite of a jay

Paper wings are blown by thin breezes
and whip-hair legs leave no footprints
but feet move the earth

My straw—for it is a straw, without teeth or chin or bite—
can never crunch,
though now it is easier to drink from dewdrops.

I tear into the milkweed leaf like it is spun sugar floss,
the kind that melts at the lightest touch
I stomp and romp and leave a trail of craters in the
rain-soaked garden.
the storm returns and fills them into ponds, lakes

From beneath the leaves of an ash,
I study my reflection in the water.

**STEVE
NICKMAN**

REVIEWING A LIFE AFTER WATCHING “BOARDWALK EMPIRE”

I like the way I play Bach badly
on my Baldwin upright, though I do tend
to kill bonsai that never misbehaved.
What can I expect, since I grew up
without grandfathers?
I haven't done badly overall. I have a shelf
of children's autobiographies, a bodhisattva
I bought from Napoleon's great-great-grandson.

My parents are contained in red filing-boxes
and refuse to be interrogated. My mother
won't tell me why she gave all my letters back.
She had high hopes for me, maybe she thought
my biographer would need them. My father
in his army fatigues advances toward me
carrying flower-pots as I take his picture,
resolute, as though I'd better step aside.

Still, I hold it against them
that in summertime we never soared together
with the gulls and terns over the beach
in Atlantic City, dropping clams from our beaks
onto the rocks, swooping down
in a light wind, in perfect fellowship
under sun and clouds,
to eat the sweet meat.

AMAL FERES

Translated by JONAS ELBOUSTY

PAIN

You would be standing there,
At seventeen, I couldn't understand you well.
To that place, I used to carry my heart to you,
Toss it between your hands and flee:
The pained infant of our souls,
That was born speechless through overflowing desire
Like prison-borns,
He never opened his eyes
Because he was lifeless.
We become baffled by the thought that we're still living.

**JENNIFER
POTEET**

MY OWN MOTHER BECAME LOST WHEN I LEFT HOME

I wasn't friends with my neighbor, Victoria.
I was never inside her place,
but when her oven gave out,
I finished baking her blueberry pie.
She taught 7th grade English,
and spoiled her twenty-year-old daughter, Ava,
who'd read The New Yorker next to her Dachshund
sprawled on a hammock as I hauled the garbage cans past her.
Victoria and I were the same age – fifty-eight;
she looked older,
especially in August
when Ava moved to DC with the dog.
Leaning over my deck rail,
I asked my neighbor how she was doing,
living alone. I'm fine, she said,
and regarding Ava, It was time.
It was Ava who called me at work
after the police removed her mother's body.
Two months passed before someone came
to clean out the house.
Victoria's black Ford Fusion is covered with leaves.
The tires are going flat.

WHAT COMES BACK

Although I've never seen one, boomerangs.
Bowling balls. My Black-eyed Susans.
Chives, with purple flowers that bees love.
Hemlines. Skinny ties. Where I've been
and places I've forgotten I want to go.
The smoky timbre of my mother's voice,
her giggle. I reach for her linen shirt,
slip the collar over my head and nose.
Tobacco and oolong and starch,
no matter how many times I launder it.

TINA KELLEY

NJ Poets Prize Honorable Mention

SHOULD'VE LIVED TO BE EIGHTY

She swam in the conservatory pond,
25 years away from the sea. Om Sin
they named her, Thai for piggy bank,
endangered green sea turtle confined

in brackish water. Nine hundred fifteen
coins, a bolus like a bowling ball, broke her
shell, kept her still. Coins thrown
in for good luck, for longevity, not for Om

Sin, who saw, weekly, that, something
shiny. That, twiddling
down. Diving bug? Tasty grass?
That, hard, poisonous superstition.

After a seven-hour surgery, in the gap
left by \$37.59 in cash, her intestine
folded in, strangled itself, started dying.
Volvulus, they said, and too much nickel.

She never woke up. "She is my teacher,
friend, and patient," the veterinarian said.

SHE CAN'T BEAR NOT SEEING YOU AGAIN

“Grip Strength Predicts Longevity”

Studies show it's a far better crystal ball than blood pressure or weight. Think of close-ups of fingers tightening their grasp on a high bridge, tugs of war, heroes hand-over-handing up ropes above snapping sharks. Too bad all the milkmaids are gone, they could teach us ways to get older.

It makes sense that the wall puncher who breaks his fist doesn't thrive or last – stupid anger's maladaptive. Maybe guys who can tear decks of cards in half live forever. Do those elders who can't open their jars starve? No. But those who hold onto railings fall less frequently, play bridge longer.

Grip strength's a sign of social and psychic health. Men who have weak handshakes stay single longer, miss out on free nursing, company, sex, better meals, reminders to call the doctor and pack the sunscreen. So, keep a death grip on life. Bike no-handed only if you crave danger.

Brake hard. All day, I have just this one way in to mom's anger, her vexed, down-the-hall stare: squeeze for yes. Is it pain? Or hunger?

MOVIES LIE. THERE'S NO GRAND SWELLING AT THE END

I learned from time in assisted living
and dining rooms, there's no soundtrack.
People go in a heartbeat or just sleep
more hours of each day. It's all artifice:
denouements, rolling credits. Nobody
gets a last word now. Mom's was maybe *yes*
or just the *s*, answer to a question, six
months before she passed. Grim, my gracious
hostess and confidante falling mute, then
silent. Where's a moral to a story,
a wormbin of mess tucked in, forgiveness,
grace, philosophy? Maybe the *s* just nailed it.

She had x'd out names of the dead that day
we called everybody to say Dad died.
I imagine pushing a pencil through
Neela, Diane, Laura, Emily, Liss, Kat.
Ghastly to outlast them, fatal otherwise.
No one gets off Earth alive, I tell you.
How had everything but *Hamlet*, really, led me
to believe death was elsewhere? May my last
words share my mother's acceptance: *all right*.

YUAN CHANGMING

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR: A CROSS-CULTURAL POEM

1/ *Denotations of I vs 我*

The first person singular pronoun, or this very
Writing subject in English is *I*, an only-letter
Word, standing upright like a pole, always
Capitalized, but in Chinese, it is written with
Seven lucky strokes as 我, with at least 108
Variations, all of which can be the object case
At the same time.

Originally, it's formed from
The character 找, meaning 'pursuing', with one
Stroke added on the top, which may well stand for
Anything you would like to have, such as money
Power, fame, sex, food, or nothing if you prove
Yourself to be a Buddhist practitioner inside out

2/ *Connotations of Human 人*

Since I am a direct descendant of Homo Erectus, let me stand
Straight as a human/ 人, rather than kneel down like a slave

When two humans walk side by side, why to coerce
One into obeying the other as if fated to follow/ 从?

Since three humans can live together, do we really need
A boss, a ruler or a tyrant on top of us all as a group/ 众?

Given all the freedom I was born with, why, just
Why cage me within walls like a prisoner/ 囚?

SIAMESE STANZAS: SNOWFLAKES

with
as little noise
as much leisure
as possible
you came
to perch
at this cold spot of time
like a pale word
fallen on the wasteland

merely
a voiceless being
never heard
yet ready to
herald
the glaring
thunder

of

summer

to melt
soft and quiet
before you
vanish
tracelessly
in the green
wind

time

JUDY ROWE MICHAELS

GIFT OF PEARS

Try to think your way inside
the box. There in the dark, nested
in green tissue, twelve pears
are ripening. This is day five
since delivery. Plucked hard and green
from their orchard three thousand miles away,
they were tucked into the magic
box. Always one pear arrives wrapped
in foil, queen of pears? Spokes-pear
for the rest? This is just to say
all twelve of us will gleam gold and flavorful
given time in the dark.

Instinct says, give light, air. Open
the box. Set each Royal Riviera softly
in your best blue bowl, sky-blue,
place bowl in your sunniest window.
This is the faith you were raised in.

No, you must trust the box, the science
of its special liner—photosynthetic?
Compressed sunlight? Extracted from
cucumbers? Do not part the pears
from their secrets.

Read the liner notes:

For best flavor please keep these remarkable
pears in their box. You'll know they're ready
when flesh at the base of the stem yields
to gentle pressure.

Then place in refrigerator.

Yes, but first, preserve this moment
between ripe and ruin: Film their yellow-green
skin splotched brown and rose, record
in dance ecstatic first bite into pale silk
flesh, juice's flow between fingers.
Become the slow, silent ripening
of twelve pears in the dark.

RUTH HOLZER

HIS MOTHER

Her fifth child, born at home
on Walnut Street,
like all the other issues
of her arranged marriage,
was Aryeh the Lion.
Louie, as he was called
only added work
to her never-ending days.
No time for nursing,
she'd stick a bottle
in his mouth and leave him
upstairs on the floor,
until she heard it
rolling around
and knew that he was finished.

LOUIE'S FATHER

drank Jack Daniels neat
and filled the parlor with cigar smoke
while poring over his ledgers.
Anyone would think
he'd be happy with his first son,
feel a touch of paternal pride,
but he never quite
warmed to the boy.
He fashioned a nine-tailed lash
from a couple of old belts
and whipped him whenever
he made a nuisance of himself.
Morning and evening
he offered up murmured devotions
to his own harsh deity.
In his will he left Louie
a one-dollar inheritance.

LAURIE BYRO

THE BAKER'S DAUGHTER

*They say the owl was a baker's daughter. Lord, we know what we are,
but know not what we may be.*

- Ophelia

When I was stricken by lack of Challah, not having the choice of yeasty
brown or the crumbs off rye, I became astonished with the night
and the flight of backwards or forwards. A wiggle worm was easy,

or a timorous mole, but the quickest snare of my grip, the rush of branch
against deep dark green, made me know God. The hare turning
its frantic eyes towards heaven, towards me made me seek God. For then

I was able to take or give back--Lord, I had no business with raising
the dead, sparing the lame. But when a burst of star blinded me in snowflake
and hush, it was then I knew there are other lives worth saving and mine

worth remembering. A sweet crust, like a host would echo softly
on my tongue. This ache was no match for a mouthful of scurrying
mouse's feet, the life I abandoned was no sacrifice for what I am now.

MURMURINGS

For Sharon, who insisted

He's humming through the trees, lighting up the dirt road
like a lightning bug--ever since he became a man of a certain age,

he is stunned by nature, most himself when surrounded by trees.
He hears his own heart throbbing through his chest, so I hear

it first, a cacophony-wave down the road aways. I am alarmed
but he doesn't hear it, so busy pointing out each new scar in bark,

the face of a bear that appears like a Stigmata on beech-flesh.
"Nature doesn't cheat at cards" he says. I am wary, he doesn't

play cards, men of a certain age are strange. The sound rises,
puffs up, becomes a billowing black roar of smoke from

an ancient volcano or an invisible chimney. He sees them then,
a flock of starlings murmuring, we may be at their mercy

as they swoop and lift before us. Thousands of starlings
are swooping, somersaulting and whistling over our heads.

He's vibrating with excitement, we both are. This winter river,
this communication of wing and cloud, creates a dust storm

around us. He pulls me close, they tumble and race above,
we are stones being smoothed out in a river of birds,

in a mansion made of sky. "Hush" he says trembling.
"With any luck. Maybe they'll take us with them."

**ILENE
MILLMAN**

AFTERMATH

There have been more mass shootings than days in 2023.

hailstorms of condolences
pummel our airwaves,
slick and slippery
chunks of words piling up
to astonishing depths,
the deep drifts taking weeks
to melt away
as they always do
some people say
for things like this
there are no words
but what they mean is
some words pulled and stretched
so far left and right
they are transparent
like thoughts and prayers
and some words riddled
with bullet holes
and poured into
concrete slabs
so heavy
we cannot lift them
to the page

THAT GARDEN?

Ours was the place for throwaway plants,
the ones that arrived bruised
with acronym-stained tags
fat with description:

this one's an unruly weed, upsets the neat rows (he's ADHD)
this one's spindly, so unlike our typical variety (she's language delayed)
late bloomer, way too late (he's dyslexic)
will never bloom, don't think you can save them.

I was a gardener there for 35 years
propping up plants with consonants and vowels,
mostly vowels, soft short sounds
a, e, i, o, u
like whispers brought close
to those who are hoping.
The plants grew slowly
sometimes shrinking back for a season.

Isn't it really hard work, people often asked
and I found myself saying
Oh, I don't know, I really like it.
And just sometimes I'd add

chances are, you've never heard of *Selenicereus*,
that cactus group: ropy looking, covered with spines
stringy and frayed aerial roots grasping.
No one sings its praises,
extols its unique botany, the shape of its spikes
the functioning of its root system
but when it blooms,
late to be sure,
the flower is immense, a full foot across.
We have those.

**SUSAN
PERENY**

THE POEM

In the dream you read what I wrote
A vibration behind your closed lips
“Yes,” you say,
nodding
and maybe you have a cigar
Poetry might be the most self-indulgent
but also
my attention span...
my robot vacuum chirps
requiring rescue
and the cat stays sleeping on his chair
but when it first came out of the box
it sent him under the bed
where I was once sleeping
and by sleeping I mean thinking
about giving you this poem

CONTRIBUTORS

NAT BOTTIGHEIMER is an urban planner and poet who lives in Princeton, NJ, grew up on Long Island's north shore, and lived for many years in Silver Spring, MD. He loves fishing; places where you can walk, bike, ride buses and trains, and read in public; and taking the family dog Archy to meadows and wooded trails. Nat is married to an astrophysicist who studies how stars form.

THERESA BURNS' debut full-length collection of poems, *Design*, was published by Terrapin Books in 2022. She is also the author of the chapbook *Two Train Town*. Her poetry, reviews, and nonfiction have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Prairie Schooner*, *New Ohio Review*, *Verse Daily*, *America Magazine*, *The Cortland Review*, *Plume*, and elsewhere. A two-time Pushcart Prize nominee, she has been shortlisted for both the New Jersey Poet's Prize and the Allen Ginsberg Poetry Award. Burns is the founder, in 2019, of the community-based reading series Watershed Literary Events and teaches writing in and around New York. She lives with her family in South Orange, New Jersey.

In January 2011, **LAURIE BYRO** was named "Poet of the Decade" by the IBPC competition for her 2000-2010 work. She stopped competing in 2021 after 60 awards, including having been named "Official Poet Laureate of Allendale NJ." Her children's poem "A Captain's Cat" has appeared in *Cricket Magazine* and a textbook *Measuring up to the Illinois Learning Standards*. She has 6 full length books published, one chapbook, most recently: *Hopeless Romance* via Cholla Needles Arts and Literary Library-- all available on Amazon. Her work draws on myth and fairytale and her experiences of foreign places in the years she worked as a travel agent. Laurie has facilitated "Circle of Voices" at libraries in New Jersey for over 25 years, currently at the The Albert Wisner Public Library and Poet in Residence at Pacem in Terris, Warwick, NY.

YUAN CHANGMING edits *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Yuan in Vancouver. Credits include twelve Pushcart nominations and chapbooks (most recently LIMERENCE) in addition to

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JIM CODY is an English Professor at Brookdale Community College. He completed his doctoral degree at Drew University and was awarded the university's Robert Campbell Prize. He has published poetry for the *Paterson Literary Review*, *Journal of New Jersey Poets*, *White Crow*, *New Jersey English Journal*, *Rear View Quarterly*, and *Sojourn*; and scholarly articles in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, *California English*, *The Journal of Basic Writing*, and *Teaching Cather*. He authored an article for the 2017 *Tearing the World Apart*, an anthology on Bob Dylan's twenty-first century music and film, and an article for the 2018 *Something Complete Great: A Centennial Study of My Antonia*. He currently lives in NJ with his wife and three children.

JONAS ELBOUSTY holds an M.Phil. and Ph.D. in English Studies from Columbia University. He is a writer, literary translator, and academic. He is the (co)author of three books, and his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *ArabLit*, *ArabLit Quarterly*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Banipal*, *Prospectus*, *Sekka*, *Journal of North African Studies*, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Comparative Literature*, among other venues. His translation of Mohamed Choukri's two short story collections, *Flower Crazy* and *The Tent*, is forthcoming from Yale University Press.

AMAL FERES is a Syrian writer, poet, and translator. Born in As-Swayda in 1982, she currently resides in Rochester, NY. Prior to her move to the U.S., she lived in Venezuela. She translates from and into Spanish. Her articles have been published in several newspapers and Arabic websites, including *Romman*, *Raseef 22*, *Al-Jumhuriya*, *Ultra Voice*, *Dahnon*, *abwab*, *Takween*, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, *Jadaliyya*, among others.

RUTH HOLZER is the author of eight chapbooks, most recently, *Living in Laconia* (Gyroscope Press) and *Among the Missing* (Kelsay Books). Her poems have appeared previously in *Journal of New Jersey Poets*, as well as in *Blue Unicorn*, *Faultline*,

Slant, *Connecticut River Review* and *Plainsongs*, among other journals and anthologies. She has received several Pushcart Prize nominations.

TINA KELLEY's *Rise Wildly* appeared in 2020 from CavanKerry Press, joining *Abloom & Awry*, *Precise*, and *The Gospel of Galore*, a Washington State Book Award winner. She reported for *The New York Times* and wrote two nonfiction books. Her poems have appeared in *Cimmaron Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *The Best American Poetry 2009*, among other publications. She received a 2023 Finalist award from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. She's the senior education reporter for [NJ.com/The Star-Ledger](http://NJ.com/The-Star-Ledger). She and her husband have two children and live in Maplewood, NJ.

GEORGE MARANO was born in Hoboken in 1954 and has been a lifelong resident of New Jersey. He is a graduate of St. Peter's College, having earned a BS in biology and then attained an MBA from Pace University. His early career spanned pharmaceutical research, sales and marketing. Now retired, he spent 31 years as a career counselor and academic advisor at New Jersey City University. Several of his poems were published in the 2022 edition of "The Pavan", St. Peter's University's literary magazine, in celebration of the University's sesquicentennial founding. A memoir essay and several poems were featured in the 2023 edition of "The Pavan".

GRACE MASSEY grew up in Haddonfield, NJ, and spent many summers in Strathmere, a tiny town that even Jerseyites don't know between Ocean City and Sea Isle City. Her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *Quartet*, *Tiger Moth Review*, *The Orchards*, *Thimble* and others. She is a retired editor who spends her free time studying ballet and Baroque dance and socializing feral cats.

STEVE MYERS has published a full-length collection, *Memory's Dog*, and two chapbooks. A Pushcart Prize winner, he has recently published poems in places such as *Callaloo*, *Kestrel*, *New Ohio Review*, *Open: A Journal of Arts and Literature*, *The Southern Review*, *Tar River Poetry* and *Valley Voices*. He heads the poetry track for the MFA in Creative Writing at DeSales University.

JUDY ROWE MICHAELS is a poet for the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and for twenty years has been a poet in residence at Princeton Day School. Judy has published five books of poems, most recently *This Morning the Mountain* (2023, Cherry Grove Collections), and three books on teaching writing and poetry. A MacDowell fellow, she's also received residencies from Hedgebrook and the Banff Centre for the Arts. An ovarian cancer patient, Michaels speaks to medical schools in New York City and Newark via the national program, Survivors Teaching Students.

ILENE MILLMAN is a retired speech/language therapist who worked with children who learn differently for more than 35 years. She currently tutors adult literacy students. Her poems have been included in anthologies and journals including *The Journal of NJ Poets*, *Nell*, *US 1 Worksheets*, *Passager*, and the *Connecticut River Review*. Her poetry book, *Adjust Speed to Weather* was published in 2018; she is hard at work on another. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2022.

STEVE NICKMAN's poetry collection, *To Sleep with Bears*, is now available from WordTech (2022). He is a psychiatrist who works mainly with kids, teenagers and young adults and has a strong interest in the dilemmas and experiences of adoptees and their families. His poetry has appeared in *Pleiades*, *Nimrod*, *Summerset Review*, *Tar River Review*, *Tule Review*, and *JuxtaProse*. He lives in Brookline, Massachusetts and is a member of Poemworks: The Workshop for Publishing Poets.

THETA PAVIS is a poet and educator from Jersey City. Her chapbook *The Red Strobe* was shortlisted in 2022 by Yellow Arrow Publishing. Her writing has appeared in *Spillwords Press*, *The Red Wheelbarrow*, *Mom Egg Review*, *Why to These Rocks: 50 Years of Poetry from the Community of Writers* (HeyDay Books) and others. In 2021, the Society of Professional Journalists-NJ Chapter named her the "Journalism Educator of the Year." Her freelance journalism has appeared in publications such as *Wired.com* and *Medium*. At New Jersey City University she co-founded the White Faculty, Staff and Administrators for Racial Equity group. She is currently the associate director of Strategic Communications at the New Jersey Institute of Technology in Newark.

SUSAN PERENY is widely considered to be a person from Pompton Lakes, NJ. She attended the College of New Jersey, where she received a BA in English language and literature, and earned an MA from Montclair State University. This is her second appearance in *Journal of New Jersey Poets*. She currently works as a medical speech pathologist. Susan lives in northern New Jersey with her distinguished cat, Leo.

NICOLE POKO (she/her) earned a BFA from Montclair State University in Visual Arts and completed a post-graduate program at School of Visual Arts in Multidisciplinary Art. She is a NJ-native and owner of a café tucked onto Main Street in a small town in Hunterdon County, NJ.

JENNIFER POTEET lives in Montclair, NJ and is a fundraiser for public radio. Recently, her work has appeared in *The Night Heron Barks*, *Swim*, *Thimble Journal* and *The Paterson Review*. Her chapbook *Sleepwalking Home* was published by Dancing Girl Press. Her manuscript "What Comes Back" was a finalist for the Laura Boss Narrative Poetry Award. Jennifer's website is jenniferpoteet.com.

WANDA S. PRAISNER is the recipient of 19 Pushcart Prize nominations, the Egan Award, Kudzu Award, Princemere Prize, First Prize in Poetry at the College of NJ Writers' Conference, and the 2017 New Jersey Poets Prize. She appears in *Atlanta Review* and *Lullwater Review*.

C. REES is a queer Pennsylvania-born poet, teacher, and MFA candidate with the New Writers Project in Austin, TX. They grew up along the Delaware River between New Jersey and PA, spent their childhood and young adult life traversing the river's mutable borders between the two states. His work has appeared in *Sonora Review*, *The Shore Poetry*, *Frontier Poetry*, *Bat City Review*, *Rust + Moth*, *Grimoire Magazine*, and elsewhere. Selections from his ongoing series of poems, *Bomb Pulse*, responding to U.S. nuclear history and atrocities have been featured in *Territory* (<http://themapisnot.com/>)

ERIK ROTH holds a BA in English from Colgate University and EdM in English education from Rutgers. He is also a

former recipient of a poetry writing scholarship from Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation. Proud keeper of a poor sleep routine, he nods off most nights while still fully dressed and with every light on in the house, usually after putting in more time on some poems, the most recent of which will be appearing in the summer 2023 issue of *Modern Haiku*.

NICOLE SENSENBACH is an Environmental Planning undergraduate at Rutgers University. She enjoys writing poetry and science fiction in between her studies and working at the university's botanic garden. To shape the world with written word and built form, she aspires to become a published novelist and urban planner.

ELLEN JUNE WRIGHT is a former language arts educator who consulted on guides for three PBS poetry series. Her work has been featured by *Verse Daily*, *Rappahannock Review*, *The Good Life Review*, *The Closed Eye Open*, *Passengers Journal*, *Scoundrel Times* and *Banyan Review*. She is a Cave Canem and Hurston/Wright alumna and a 2021 and 2022 Pushcart Prize nominee. She currently lives in Hackensack, New Jersey and is working on her first collection of poems. Find her on Twitter and Instagram @EllenJuneWrites.

MICHAEL T. YOUNG's third full-length collection, *The Infinite Doctrine of Water*, was longlisted for the Julie Suk Award. He received a Fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and the Jean Pedrick Chapbook Award for his collection, *Living in the Counterpoint*. He also received honorable mention for the 2022 New Jersey Poets Prize. His poetry has been featured on *Verse Daily* and *The Writer's Almanac*. It has also appeared in numerous journals including *Main Street Rag*, *Pinyon*, *RATTLE*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, and *Vox Populi*.

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THERESA BURNS

for

“When I Google My Name, I Find This Girl”

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