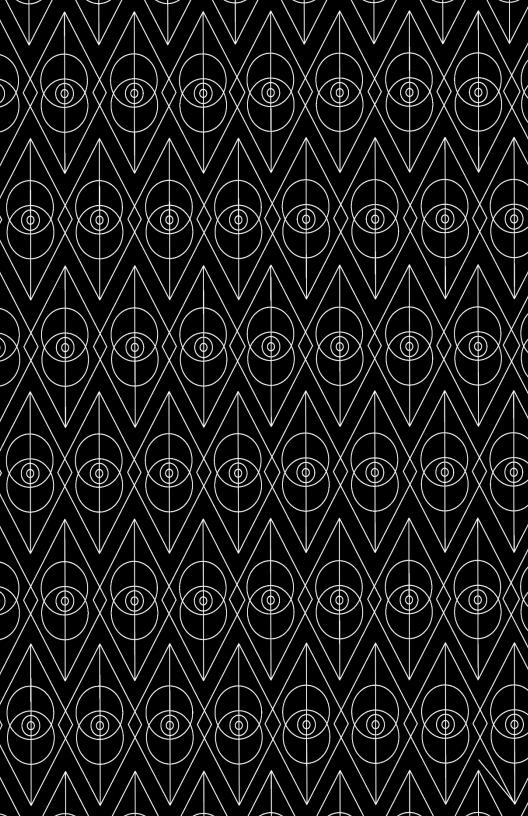
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ROBERT J. PARILLO

MEDUSA

Incessantly, waves worn and shaggy caught in summer's rave lave against points where every shade of you shimmers over the washed sand.

Yours is a keenly pointed spirit a poise of confidence beneath the acacia trees that arch over the doorway. With loose, honey-colored hair, your deed of consecration, unlaced, lies naked on the cold stones disturbing the gods.

Slow, heavy swells lash you down.

A blaze of ocean musk
not warmly wrapt in the hands of the deep
pulsates—gruff and cold—down to your bones,

then weaves into a tale that coils around you, devouring sight. In the end, you weren't there at the gates but scattered across a wild and dreary marsh—a crushing realization, no stone against the dawn, no plea to shape the time your witness demands.

SHORELINE

Along the shoreline, silence fashions a finely woven voyage that swallows your heart down to the infinite void; star fragments lie vacant in the salt marshes, wresting an embrace out of you, but I'm not complaining—only there's no you in the intercourse, you, veiled in grace, painting pain for its perseverance—as one who calls out, then hesitates to reply.

Unstrung, hopes tangle in the sand, slip under— waves interosculate unfurl salvation without an otherworldly luminescence that lifts the day slowly, a pale promise trembling, twisting away from the tide.

SUNLIT PARABOLAS

Sunlit parabolas arc spiraling a cathedral of fire lines throttles the pulse; forests roil, spitting deep clefts of red disinfecting the dawn, leaving it savaged in a ditch.

Caught in the rip of wayward currents faces, strung up like gallows, sway—convolutions snap at impossible angles; language buckles, the days ahead, spent blind stand beside disaffiliations—

until a son descends from the split hollow of a mind and is dragged to the back by inadvertence. He spoke too, once then turned around malformed spent beneath the press eroded into salt and silence.

INNERMOST

Innermost, little knelt disturbatives bind the opalescent hands of a perceived becoming.

Nymphs euhemerize myths caught in a bewilderment of flyspecking trees; roots stretched, twisted spin a spell of spices shoes seas stars of silk—shells for a grievous voice, bearing a providence of dusk.

Old serpents cloaked come out from the villages looking

seeping immergence.

Moments fall into disorder
scumbering over broken tropes.

Nakedness is heaved into strange
containers. Unearthed currents
unveil climate collapse, clocks
confessions, returns . . .
to a time when a god
grasps an insane moment
and bulls his breath into
a wash of silk sheets,
wrapped in rough roses,
not even listening
to the nymph's bitten tongue.

BESTIAL METAPHYSICIANS

Bestial metaphysicians flagellate splendidly for the unattainable absence—
a rage of backcrossing scourges reawakening lapses; razor-weighted falls rend the waist, deepening the belief.

A mythology relic, oily on the tongue, sputters—
a sulfur cadence surfs the flowing surge burns the sea's belly while desiccated nymphs kick at the waves . . .

Whose grace has fallen? What light—fractured—quakes for a turn under a vacant sun?

TINA KELLEY

CONFESSIONS OF A PROSOPAGNOSIC

n. - one who suffers face-blindness

I'm a big old faux pas waiting to happen. Reporting at crime scenes, I've re-approached bystanders already interviewed. When they say, "Lady, you just talked to me," I feel the floor collapse.

It runs in families, these benign brain lesions. We should be extinct by now, eaten long ago by cannibals we confused with recent friends. How cussed, an affliction that harms other people.

When I was a lifeguard I gave the wrong skinny kid a half-hour private swim lesson, while the right skinny kid waited, confused. I've congratulated a new neighbor for a new baby he didn't have.

Chuck Close, faceblind painter of faces, admitted, "I don't care about anything as much as getting to know who people are." Exactly! So I married a super-recognizer. He pauses movies to help me differentiate among blond villains.

In the land of the prosopagnosic, the nametag man is king. Julie the socialite, might she have it too? "Nice to meet you," she said at our fifth introduction, erasing and irking me. So that's how it feels. Now I always say, "Good to see you."

A senator with this incurable disability survives simply by acting like he's met you before. The world would be a better place, he says, if everyone approached you, whether they knew you or not, with a certain friendliness.

IF RAIN'S THE MIND OF AIR

I walk through lowing clouds, whose high thoughts inhabit many shapes of wet.

1.

Each kind of rain's a way of thinking, to feel on the face, to walk through. Think of the drop, greater than a dot's diameter – the elevator-fall-in-the-gut

of being in love, the seven-minute fall from cloudhem. Sloppy, plunking splatters, early in storm, a new beau reminding me of an old song. Fat drops.

Hosanna to the keeper thought, best idea, *serein*, fine rain falling from no cloud, just down from above to marvel at, this perfect gift for that best friend.

Drizzle's simply morning thoughts without verve, trending to gravity, tending to monotony, to muddy silence.

The clicking on the roof, the record's rhythmic ticking, that's the air's inventory of my husband's wise choices, the favors, punchlines, errands that make a marriage.

I believe rain raining, when it's warm, is exactly the missing I do for the cabin's perfect outdoor shower, productive musings, orderly.

2.

"Stormy rains are always unfortunate," says *The Interpretation of Dreams*, frogstrangling, gutter-cramming downpour that blows the brook to Class IV rapids.

A thunderstorm's a fight with a grouchy ex, then headache. Yet rolling thunder keeping its distance reminds me of the best orgasms.

I believe the deluge waterfall down the front steps become an unstoppable worst-case scenario: the mammogram call-back, chemo, relapse, funeral.

3.
But what is having these thoughts?
The cloud gods, the breeze maker?
Me, before I could make metaphor?

Me before I could read, and saw the page in dad's book, white rivers between the print, like rain zagging down the window screen.

If rain is air's mind, each second 16 million tons fall, 16 million tons rise in evaporation, globe-breath. Every droplet hovers for eight days. We breathe, in indecision.

MAUREEN EGAN RIGGI

STELLA GRACE

I pull it from the shelf again: the story of a ship set sail and the woman left behind. The cover is a worn blue leather, thumbed smooth from anxious handling. Your name tumbles from my lips like a secret, the dedication a hastily scrawled note: *To the one I'll never know, but can't forget.*

The woman paces a storm-tossed shore, sun breaking through pregnant clouds that have wept themselves dry.

She watches a ship just beyond the breakers, spared by some divine mercy. She thinks it might be easier had it wrecked.

A sharp pain in her sole, something in the sand. She removes the sea glass, churned up before time could blur its edges.

This is all I have of you: a story neither started nor incomplete. I raise my arm, fingers painting the outline of distant sails.

WEAPONS

These are the weapons we wield as parents: sharp exhales, pointed glances, varnished curses. To argue in front of your child is as much an art form as it is feral. The raised eyebrow a jab to the jaw after yet another muttered something, parried with crossed arms and feet anchored to the floor like industrial magnets. We square off, dig into each other's flesh with falsified kindness and saccharine voices that mask the blade hiding in plain sight. Sometimes that knife catches me off guard, flashes in the kitchen light, and I realize too late I've been caught: this boy misses nothing. His pupils scan back and forth waiting for the next blow.

This is not the war I wanted to wage.

The weapons we wield are, in fact,
dull swords: they slowly carve
tracks into our children. How can I explain?
How can I show him the alleyways
parents skulk, the places where light
doesn't reach, and yet reassure him
we share a torch, we are villagers ready
to rally against the shadows we cast between ourselves?

METEOR STRIKE

The pain hits like a meteor in the ocean: it leaves a crater, sure, but the ripples are what really get you, the building tsunami that barrels toward the shore. The aftershocks are where the real danger lies.

Soon the tide will slow, fragments of your cratered heart will float along the surface, dazzling in the light. You gather them up, piece them back together and marvel at the holes.

Water laps at the shoreline, kisses old wounds. The scars cut deep and the landscape has changed. Somehow that feels okay.

AQUARIUS

My galvanized bucket scrapes the smooth bottom of the well. I have already plumbed the depths today, and it's only one o'clock. I search for any drop, a balm for my motherly soul to soothe the heartburn of suppressing yet another cry, another breakdown. And so here I am, the water-bearer, drawing something from nothing and shooting for the stars.

DEBRA OSINSKY

NIGHT OCEAN

I watch the waves at night, white foam against black sea, the infinite dark and light, the surge, the breaking surf, crashing, churning, I am small and protected under the midnight dome of constellations, breathing endless waters.

Awake at home in bed at night, sleepless, I watch the waves inside my mind, try to hear the white caps dip, the crest, the spill, the vast salt swell, to calm my racing heart and hear the ocean rise and fall in darkness, to inhale the tides, breathe in, breathe out.

MAYBE THE SOUL

In a crowded subway car, the young woman holds her bag of new yarn, overflowing, when seated strangers compliment the colors and all start talking and she says it was the first time at this store and she didn't want to leave and other women in all ages and styles across from her agree and talk about bright yarn, the right choice of shades, their knitting, and a baby blanket for the grandchild in Massachusetts.

As I watch and listen, tied to the subway's women by wool in a shopping bag, Maybe, is this the soul? Then, when walking through the station, the news stand blares more war, school killings, and up steep stairs to stormy, darkened skies, standing with umbrella, halting, and confused which is north or south, Maybe, is this the soul then too?

ROGAN KELLY

BEFORE THE BEET GREENS WILT

You behead the bundled tops from the taproot. Wash the loamy silt from their veined wings. Let them rest far from the high-traffic and common path of the kitchen, shaded from the southern-side view. You tuck them back in the crisper, wrapped in cheesecloth, to conquer later in the day. Some sauté, boil, or steam like spinach, but you prefer them — salad or story — centerpiece. *Bull's Blood, Butter Slicer*, this *Roman Kale*; the greens more fruitful than the beets themselves. They in their glory and you who whisper most faithfully.

AARON FISCHER

NJ Poets Prize Honorable Mention

(Janis Joplin, 1943 – 1970)

She's about to disappear, this kid from Nowhere, Texas, with a voice like a ripsaw biting through green lumber when she rails against love's hard knocks, a rasp on fruitwood when she whispers and pleads. At Monterey Pop she's wearing flats and beige — "champagne" is how the salesclerk would have sold it, elegant and sophisticated. Maybe that's why she bought it, knowing she was neither, a crinkly knit with flared bells, something a hip aunt might wear to a cookout. It won't be long until she's draped in boas, clunky strands of beads to her waist, tying up traffic on Haight, deep-pile shearling vest and matching pillbox, as if she planned on traveling by troika, and her favorite accessory, a bottle of Southern Comfort. But for now she's just a kid, skip-stepping across the stage, waving her hands, a schoolgirl picked first for volleyball.

It was the summer of love, that acid-drenched soap bubble, and she was our pudgy, plain-Jane pinup, coming on to the host of a daytime talk show on-air, catching a ride to the Fillmore with a Hells Angel, lazing back on the chrome sissy bars with a joint and a pint bottle. She made sure we knew sex was dirty as it was joyous, maybe more so. Or maybe they were the same thing, the funk and tang of all those we lie down with. What made her a great blues singer

is that she didn't have much to say, but never repeated herself: The heart will go down on its knees but not to scrub floors.

The heart does its best thinking with its mouth open. God didn't give the heart as much sense as a flea. And always this: there's no such thing as enough, her voice a slurry of ground glass and honey, a tattoo needle for the soul.

Alone one night with the best smack she'd ever tasted she closed her eyes on the motel room and opened them on the tunnel at the end of the light where death leaned over to give her a kiss that tasted like dirt.

ODE TO A SWITCHBLADE

It owes

"... so fast, so shiny, and so sharp" — Bruce Springsteen, 4th of July Asbury Park

something to the sleek threat of an LA lowrider, the streamlined muscle of a '40's roadster. It calls out to be lifted and cradled in a loosely closed fist, your thumb resting naturally on the button that fires the blade, which locks open with a satisfying snick. Like all beautiful things it must be treated with respect or it may take the tip of your finger off as neatly as a surgeon's scalpel. Its handle is black as a cutaway morning jacket studded with silver. If you peer

into the blade your reflection will be deep as a well. Strip away metaphor and artifice, what remains? a small, efficient engine for inflicting bodily injury. Don't slip it in your pocket before you go out of an evening. Knives call to other knives and those calls must be met with blood.

ODE TO DISHWASHING

Cranking up the crackling wah-wah on *Papa Was a Rolling Stone* won't make this any less of a chore.

Filling the sink with scented suds fragrant as a nosegay in a medieval herbal won't get the job done.

Your task is to offer thanks for the chef's knife that diced the ivory garlic cloves,

ferried the minced parsley on the flat of its blade, for the scorched saucepan

and dented pot that wobbles when it boils, for the heavy mugs brimming with soup,

and the mismatched plastic bowls crosshatched with scratches, the dense salmon steaks whorled like lumber

or the one-course meal of baked potatoes bursting their russet skins.

Praise the dinner prepared with love no more than the one bittered with indifference or anger's metallic aftertaste.

Praise the dishes, buffing them with a soapy sponge, rinsing and stacking them,

the fork's bent tines, the ladle's generous bowl. Praise the blue willow platter with its arched bridge,

its tree of life.

MATT CARIELLO

HANDS

after Van Gogh, Studies of Hands (1885)

They are always naked. Sun through trees, broken branches of light in the prism of morning.

Spokes of the wheel that comes rolling over the earth. They know the secrets, unfold the folds,

hold the roots firm and roll them in their palms. They are the first sign of life.

Consider the tender jointed bones packed in like bees, their fragility, solidness,

curves, creases, and folds. Five starlings on the grass. Five rivers that flow two ways.

Ten waterfalls that rise. All phases of the moon. The vine on the ground. My mother's breasts.

The crescent moon lost. An open mouth. Bird beak and tongue. The tree rising into light.

THE CROWD

after William Carlos Williams, "At the Ball Game"

It is the solstice. It is the beauty of them. It is the laughing crowd and the mother gets it.

It is the genius and the chase of the game. It is the faces that seriously, permanently

smile. It is the thoughtless escape. It is uselessness that is venomous and delights.

Its words cut. It is a living reckoning.
This is the eternal escape and flash of terror,

this is the genius that lives in them idly. This is the uniformly formed formation of the whole

all to no end save beauty the eternal. For this to be warned against, saluted and defied –

this that cuts and maims and smiles grimly. This is the deadly error and power of their faces.

THE FISH

after Elizabeth Bishop, "The Fish"

Then I let the fish go, back to its rainbow, back to the gunnels and oarlocks,

back to its bearded wisdom, back to its medals and lines and hooks, back to its gleaming

eye and sullen jaw, back to its roses and lime rosettes and barnacles, back

to everything battered and venerable and homely. For a moment, it hung suspended in the current,

then tipped its body toward the light and plunged lethargically into the dark, leaving one small ripple

on the surface. Tell me, who's shame was greater, mine or the fish? What life was leaving,

what beginning in the drop and plunge, what was left behind, what reclaimed?

SUSANNA RICH

WALKING MY MIND OFF AT MIDNIGHT

Fox, our sullied flag, wildfires pandemics, polemics, politics, polls— Facebook, Insta, Meta rant-and-broods, whatever personal insult I'm nursing— I flip off my FitBitch, choke-collar my mind with fears of dark roads, bears, rabid raccoons, the swooping bat, drag my thoughts outside so they won't pee themselves, shit the rug—instead, lift legs against lawn signs, squat on shoulders, bay with the grieving moon, growl with bare branches arguing with the wind, and when my mind tries to lead too far and hard, vank it back to heel, bark not with itself but with Northern Lights, plastic bags waving from power lines.

LET'S CALL IT "DUSK"

Who knows before knowing whether a small tar geyser is bursting, a peeper leaping, leaf skittering, an ink drop splashing on the massive onyx of this road? Or if that fluttering down is a squirrel dropping a yellow handkerchief from a tree, a goldfinch releasing a feather, a swallowtail mimicking a leaf? A swarm of tiny needles sizzles the thick air as soft golden shards inlay the macadam with mosaic. It must be a rogue spirit unscrolling a chapel nave before me bright lights angel ahead, a shadow leaps at me from behind the moon.

NOTHING TO WRITE ABOUT

No leaf racket to slosh through, no having to identify pin oak, sycamore, sassafras in these woods stripped to bark, collapsed caterpillar tents, fallen needles, the underbrush free of siren reds, poncho yellowsthe peace of bare bushes flicks at the sun before it slouches away. Nothing to hide fox, bear, squirrel that might haunt the periphery in this kiss of blank, nothing flaunts fickle blossoms, trees vaunt ragged branches into the steel gray sky, no longer veil their bolls, their hollows, only to feel these legs spooling under me, as if walking in place, the path, like an airport conveyor, scrolling under my feet like an airport ramp, a reel of tree shadows.

BRYAN ROTH

MYSTERY BOY

Although he will not speak, he draws pictures—stick-figure menageries of missing sisters, brothers, fathers, mothers—a multitude of strangers. They fall like chaff from the over-populated air, dropped by a wind too tenuous to carry the weight of so many aspirations, let alone the broken dreams of flight that betrayed their will.

The social worker tries to make sense of it all, what he calls a determination in his delicate lexicon of disaster. He records that the crude drawings seem like prehistoric cave paintings, illustrating how humans descended from gods who fell out of the sky.

The investigation reveals that just across the border, he is already a legend of sorts, subject of stories and speculation: mute beggar boy who walked out of the mountains one day, hungry, dirty, alone.

By all accounts he is an enigma, as are the scars etched into his back, which tell the only truth worth knowing to anyone who can decipher the cryptogram of the flesh, spelling out the silent testimony of suffering. For years the villagers have called him *El Calladito*—Little Quiet One—but when the world decides to take him back, a busy *norteño* editor hastily christens him "Mystery Boy" in 24-point bold. And when the social worker finishes his report, he will write the word "orphan," which as some of us know, is just one of the eight billion ways to say *survivor*.

WHAT THE PESSIMIST KNOWS

On two things, he agrees with the optimist: That this is the best of all possible worlds, and that things could always be worse.

But as for that famous glass, the optimist isn't fooling anybody but himself: half-full or half-empty is still half of what you thought you'd have by now. And that bit about tomorrow being another day? Everyone knows tomorrow never comes. Things could always be worse? Yes, that's true enough. And sooner or later, they will be.

The pessimist knows what most of us already know, but would prefer not to believe. That the worst stories you've ever heard are all true: The rich get richer, the poor get poorer; you can't fight city hall; nice guys still always finish last; the fix is in; and everyone you'll ever meet is dying.

Later, when the pessimist and the optimist meet in heaven, they will each turn to the other and say, See? I told you so!

LUCKY STAR

Sotto di te la mia pella, cara mia.
—she said

Tonight I cannot think of anything but inevitability. Inevitable Italy. Inevitable you. I go out to get far enough away from myself to write, and the first place I see is called The Lucky Star. I think to myself, With a name like that, you can't go wrong, so I go inside and the waitress seats me under a framed map of Italy. I see Ravenna, think of Belisarius, who saw a meteor and considered it a sign of fire that would bring him success. He lost his head for taking the city, but the empire lost the city again, anyway; finally, the empire was lost. Maybe that means that which has fallen cannot—even should not—be saved. And here I am, under my own "lucky star," like those maps in the mall: YOU ARE HERE! Which way to the Gap? Where can I buy some matching luggage? How do I get to the place where I can get anything I want for a dollar? But it's more like that novelty map of the Milky Way, an arrow pointing out our exact position: X marks the spot. Meanwhile, a couple of booths away from my little corner of the galaxy, a couple is necking in plain view of everyone and Elvis Costello is crooning from crappy speakers about peace, love, and understanding.

What's so funny, indeed? Someone's getting lucky tonight. Just not anyone I know. So how did we get here? Two bodies in motion, falling in towards each other like two planets caught in each other's gravitational pull, circling like two hungry tigers eyeing the same piece of meat. Will gravity draw us closer together, or just close enough to look each other in the eyes before we are swept out towards the ends of the spiralling galactic arms, never to be seen again? How do we read the star charts? How can we find the way to each other in something as brief as a single human lifetime?

—for Veronica

PAM THIER

NJ Poets Prize Honorable Mention

SEA GLASS

I might have been the viridescent harbinger of death, breaking like a meteor into the ocean's atmosphere, sinking past the Titanic's great rudder, fully conscious that I'd come apart everywhere at once;

Perhaps, I was the jar of elixir tossed over the bridge, just before the jump, blue with emptiness, cracking sharp enough into witless pieces pilfering the river bottom;

or, in the slow collapse of a back-woods cabin, years dilapidating while I sat on the sill waiting for the peonies, the iris, brittling in a crystalline-stoic craze until the flood seeped in with its iridescent arms dragging me away, sill and all, into the brook and over the bouldered waterfall.

I travelled in shards, rondelles, fusions and slumps, buried for decades, my willful edges taken down, scoured by river stones heaved and thrown, driven under by ocean and changed in a breaking no beacon could preclude.

But when the sun broke onto the estuary, the light persisted at the petrified cracks inside, orbs of oxygen glistening, the visceral capacity of the tides revealed a relevance to waves unfurled, heaving their secrets onto the sand

I could not be destroyed, only my sheen reduced by the realization that the end of me was my beginning.

And whatever I was, however rough the tumbling, stranded on this beach in the glint of Autumn sunlight, I am found.

WINTER SKULL

NJ Poets Prize Honorable Mention

The sky, a ceramic realm of pink quartz wrestles cold into stillness. Blue birds appear like an aura surrounding the white bone skull of winter, its hollow sockets, black ice staring.

The birds will not be dismissed by the pervasive dormancy.

I follow their feathered translucence into the cloud-filtered light and my dreaming of a better time ahead.

Everywhere, back lit wings prove a fragile strength, making the most of the sun's low arc behind the cavernous eyes of the cold.

From the earth's snow-furrowed pelt, a heron releases a flurry of wing-driven crystals. She crosses the river's glisten absorbed like a sprite, infinite shades of blue blur, and the scowling face of December slackens in this retreat from the star-limbered solstice.

My hopes for a better world are not dead. They've not surrendered, gobsmacked into dust. In this overarching dormancy, I find the inchoate resilience in the susurration of beech leaves; I find the miraculous trend of tree limbs wearing the white satin gloves of the sun.

The footprints and fur of clandestine altercations will fade and blow in the delineating winds of a temperate rising. And there, on the fresh face of spring, ephemerals emerge; the blue-eyed grass filling the sockets of bone.

TURNING POINT

It was the perfect storm of wishful thinking, and denial, and time running out.

It was not to be disputed, like the hands of a clock set fast in a rigid zone of hours.

It was in the restless gathering of swifts, how they cannot perch, how they cling and take wing to feed.

It was in the void of a smooth blue sky, gone cloudless under high pressure.

It was in the way you smiled, all the while reserving the most pertinent piece of joy.

Still, I walked down the white sand road into a forest of charred pine, looking for a line of yellow heather rising from the dead.

FARAJ BARYAKDAR

Translated by **JONAS ELBOUSTY**

LONELY

It was as if he loved her first, as if he loved her more than he could bear, as if he loved her to the brink of despair. Otherwise... what makes him cry? Alone and with all this bitterness!

MICHAEL T. YOUNG

PSORIASIS

It scales my trunk with scales and red lumps, like a slow swallowing blob from a 50's horror movie. Over months it creeps up around my ribs, stretches down my waist and legs, cracked, shriveled skin, sometimes burning. Pinpricks stab my sides when some thread of clothing snags an inflamed lesion. This, I think, is not me, but an extra in the story. So, when I look in the mirror, I see my skin as a stranger's passing in the street, who walks away with this peculiar look on his face. And I wonder where I have seen him before. And this is a kind of relief. Until I look down at my hand applying lotion, my skin peeling, flakes drifting down like snow, piling around me in a slow burial. Then I look back to the mirror, stop applying lotion, and like a cartographer, wonder at this strange map: a drift of red, fiery continents, a snapshot in the evolution of Pangea, a place inhabited by mythologies no longer believed in, an age of stories powerful enough to startle our shadows into flight, fleeing from us in the opposite direction, taking with them all the pain and sadness that waited behind the curtains this morning and that we drew open exposing ourselves to.

CRUMBLING ARCHITECTURE

The posts at my neighbor's driveway have cement totems: owls, now worn down by years of wind and rain. It's as if their features have melted, so that only the vaguest shapes are left, molted lumps of owlish suggestiveness. If I were some exiled Ovid, I'd think it a symbol of my outcast state, here in an uncultured Roman outpost at the edge of the empire, Minerva's pet dying with me as I lose touch with all I once knew and loved. But this rough animal likeness never flew, never snatched a mouse from the grasses of the park across the street, or scratched at the posts to escape, and I am no Ovid writing poem after poem to wife, to friends, to Caesar, that I be moved any place not the cold remoteness of this exile. No, my neighbor and I are content to stay here, like these totems, worn down to the frame underneath, a pipe poking through at the eye that can see nothing, though it stares and stares.

LISTENING TO EACH OTHER

It's not as easy as we would like. The silence in which our voices ring clear is an ore that needs refining. So, we must learn

how to remove its impurities of desire and regret, even the preferences we've come to understand as habit:

like blackout curtains, or morning coffee. The day must be filtered to essence, the clarities of need and hope.

Once distilled to its pure state, it can only be poured into the mold this moment shapes, the one I am, the one you are

stripped to the hollows inside us, what we reach for and touch when we are naked in the ways it's most important to be naked.

NAME THE DAY

Our dreams circle above our sleep like night birds, collecting twigs and leaves to weave a nest of what we will spend the coming day trying to remember.

My wife beside me stirs and speaks into those flights, an indistinct language, but gentle as her breath, passing through those lips I've drawn from so many times.

And I am called to them, bend down to the tip of their waters, where upper and lower, east and west horizons come together, and name the day,

as her eyes open, and then all of her rises up to join me the rest of the way.

THE ANCHOR

The soul of my soul is an eye searching for home.

The heart of my heart is where God sits directing the wind.

There's a trust entrusted to the body in how it sweats, how it trembles.

It's waiting for the day God will pluck the coat of its mortal threads

and stitch into its lining the endurance of our immortal treasure.

MARK BOULANGER

A DEAD LANGUAGE

Floating through The Sickly Grey, the remnants of a barren cityscape, coated in ash

Myrtle grows through fissures in the concrete Dilapidated monoliths penetrate low-hanging clouds, the atoms of which act as mnemonic devices bursting with treachery

Lost in the liminal space
between invention
and recollection
I feel the residual of your touch
It lingers on me like dew on early-morning grass,
or the roar of passing jets
drowning out the chorus of cardinals that
once perched atop our windowpane,
the telltale sign that a new day was upon us

Dusk

Distant footsteps come to me as the faintest suggestion of life A quiet cacophony Hushed intimations The sad fate of peripheral longing

I press on regardless, beset by some unknowable obligation

And there they are:
the foul tendrils

Dendritic branches slithering down my body,
tenacious and psychotic,
or maybe just resigned,
castigating a form that's not all there

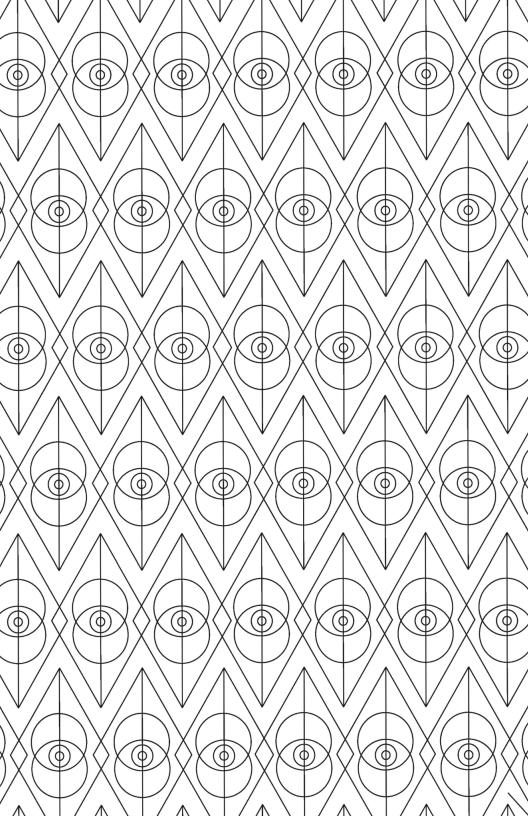
In this stupor I am met with an image
What could it be but that which most defines me?
The atrophied limb
The vestigial skin

Calloused and calcified
Tumescent and putrefied
It festers in the crumbling darkness,
fetid, overflowing with bile,
carrying with it the memory of satin,
a pale violet mass awash in
that familiar orange glow
A sleepy hello
A restful smile
Loving eyes peering through interlocked fingers

Was I not the fool who spoke too much? Spoke so much yet said so little But for a time, we traded stories using little more than subtle gestures, conducted symphonies with nothing but sideways glances Yet I still let you believe that it was only you who couldn't sleep alone The death rattle of an ego in denial One year removed and I'm sleepless still, lost in the liminal space between devotion and negation recalling tall tales passed down in a dead language, a dense tapestry of symbols built by and for two It grows more faded as our worlds continue to pull apart further further further still

And though it brings me no solace, against my better judgment I can't help but wonder:

Do you still speak it?



CELEBRATING CHARLOTTE MANDEL

We celebrate Charlotte Mandel's 100th birthday this spring with deepest thanks to her family for donating this year's New Jersey Poets Prize to honor this moment in her life.

And what a life. One she's devoted to poetry, and to living every moment. A gentle poet. A courageous poet. She never stops reaching until she finds the exactly right word to evoke a feeling—
Tension? Anxiety? Serenity? Great relief?
Compassion? Astonishment? Loving kindness?—
sensations experienced from encounters with Nature or Human Nature, with the ghosts of the past, with hopes for an uncertain future.

In her 2012 New Jersey Poets Prize Poem, "Secret Model," Charlotte inhabits the body and soul of Helga Testorf, Andrew Wyeth's neighbor and nude model for 240 previously unknown works discovered in 1986—watercolors, drawings, tempera—pieces created over a 15 year period in Chadds Ford. Her poem is a dramatic monologue, an amazing accomplishment with Charlotte's unflinching courage to inhabit Helga's soul emotionally and reveal what's going on sexually inside and outside of her modeling for Wyeth:

Patience you'd seen only in the hooded back of an owl or a tensely crouched cat about to leap, claw, jaw, tear and swallow. Dangerous almost, as though he breathed me into charcoal or oil. He kept a good fire in the studio and an electric heater, but I never needed more heat than his fever, working inches away.

With patient observation, she is never shying away from her imaginative perception of the truth through her exactly right words.

In her review of Charlotte's Rock Vein Sky, Tina Kelley writes

"when I think of poets who are charmed by life, by human experience, by flashes of beauty in nature . . . the best ones replicate it for others, making as exact a copy as possible, so the reader can have nearly the same experience. They take life's greatest hits and get others to experience them too, so everybody comes out enriched, having nearly-lived the most vivid scenes of others."

Years after hearing her read one of her poems, I can still hear how she has a a character in that poem say "Charlotte"—lovingly, slowly, expressively, the exact last word sliding down gently, "CHAR lotte...."

CHAR lotte is one of the best.

--Sander Zulauf

CHARLOTTE MANDEL

BROOKLYN RACER

Salt air and the Brighton boardwalk opens weekends for bicycle riding, bike rental stations a mile apart.

I'm eight years old and my brother, eighteen, shrugs, nods, takes me in the car.

He rents a low balloon-tire model, easiest for balance, lifts me to the seat. I sit up and wheel along.

He zips off on a speed Schwinn.

I'm doing a fine straight line when directly in my path, a paunchy gray-haired man pumps varicose legs at lazy walking tempo. I don't know how to brake, steer or stop!

In half a minute we'll crash!

Solution: lean left, fall off the bike—bruise elbow, knee and cheek.

We drive home. Mother dresses my wounds.

Ever after, my seat does not meet the seat of a bike.

EPITHALAMIUM FOR THE COUPLE WHO HELD HANDS AS THEY JUMPED

— a poem of 9/11, terrorist attack, year 2001

"The birds are on fire!"—school child

Flying streamers of blaze they leap hands locked

one hundred stories

Trailing a bridal train of smoke they dive fingers knotted

eighty stories

He takes this woman as long as she holds ring in her palm

sixty stories

She takes this man as long as he saves ring in his palm

forty stories

Coasting on gravity
bones whistle
fingers thrum

twenty stories

Spirals of ash the lovers stroke our eyelids we breathe

their story

COSMOLOGY OF THE HUMAN

Astronomers agree the universe enacts a kind of suicide by burning.

The urns of imploded stars accelerate in space while new suns jar the constellations.

In time, the compact sack in which one lives bristles in friction. The body drills the way an embryo forces gills, wingstubs, thumbs, heart launching electric charge that the blood ferries safely on its salt

tears letting us know how close we come every second of a life to drowning.

We cling for safety to the palms of our own hands, the chafe of friable skin whining narrow and sharp until

spark ignites blue-white fires long gone into whirlpools, old stars making room.

THE GRANDMOTHER OF THE WORLD

One day, the Grandmother of the World stood up. The old giant harvested her trees grown higher than redwoods. She filled a burlap bag the size of a mountain with every fruit in the world.

With a corn-husk rope, she tied the bag onto the back of the cow

with rainbow eyes, taking care not to hurt the great pink milk-bag. Leading the cow, she strode across the ocean to the continent where she'd left her sons and daughters to work for themselves.

She found the earth made of broken concrete, the trees twisted into barbed wire. People had ripped holes in each other's bodies. And nobody fed the children. The children had lost their screams and lay in heaps, silently turning into shredded paper.

In anger, the Grandmother of the World tore the concrete hide off the earth, shook her mangled sons and daughters until they collapsed into fat roots that fell into the new loam. Green seedlings shot up at once.

And she began to feed the children with milk, and fruit, and cereal.

SECRET MODEL

Winner of the 2012 Poets Prize

In 1986 the art world was stunned by disclosure of a major body of works by the renowned American artist Andrew Wyeth — 240 drawings, watercolors, and tempera paintings made over a fifteen year period — all of which had the same subject: Helga Testorf, a neighbor in Chadd's Ford, Pennsylvania.

Comes a day in February when sun sends a broom to the packed snow and you know melting's begun. To the sudden sharp crack of a twig, warmth brushes your cheek. It's the kind of day that draws you out into the walking. Two things I do—I walk and I weave. Not many weave what they wear any more. But I like to wrap myself in work of my hands, to finger a nub and know that was the place the yarn turned on itself and I coupled two frayed ends.

"The loom's your instrument," he said, "like strings of a harp. You're part of my instrument — with pencil and brush."

Pencil, quick and slow, crosshatched the ones of me at the loom. Patience you'd seen only in the hooded back of an owl or a tensely crouched cat about to leap, claw, jaw, tear and swallow. Dangerous almost, as though he breathed me into charcoal or oil. He kept a good fire in the studio and an electric heater, but I never needed more heat than his fever, working inches away.

No talk —

sounds creating a spell — rustle, tap, rasp. Patient as God. Each one of the thousand hairs of my braid giving off light.

Now the world has that moment of us where he placed me lying naked in spring foliage — the fallen brown-leafed branch covers me like an arm, white-pink body shows like sap flow inside a young tree — the secret motion fingertips can't reach. Complete mound of my sex — that tender red he used for vaginal lip.

How could I be just a woman after he'd transformed me into cycles of the earth? Rain was in me, sun and birth.

I swear it was his pulse alone that made me come as he went on painting layers over canvas. I felt flayed, like the Visible Woman in the science hall — red arteries blue veins purple nerves organs pumping — a portrait forcing me into unwilling truths. I couldn't escape any more than landscape — solid wood of an oak was vulnerable as skin to the burn of his eyes and fingers.

I keep the one no one has seen — nude erect between white birch saplings, on a summer walk. I touch the dry-brushed canvas, fine scars where flesh healed open wound into secret.

SWEATER

For his 90th birthday, I bought a sweater-vest the color of Lake Como's blue interplay of snow-covered peaks ceremonious clouds and fjord-deep water

with carved leather buttons and wishbone cables straight as the braids I used to wind round my head in a crown.

Not another minute could I stand his threadbare cardigan the one my mother knitted thirty years back

> I don't knit to save money, cheap yarn isn't worth my work

but now a mustardy map of stains, odd matchups to lost buttons he'd sewn with thread from a prewar spool of thick black cotton,

his "old faithful" worn indoors and out, thrown over pajamas during hospital emergencies. He clutched it round his body

like a man housed in a cardboard box, though he had lived to become sought after by women in the Home desiring his gallant arm.

I remember my mother's color-coded aluminum needles, the sibilance of tap-and-brush as her unswerving fingers tilted at that four-ply wool. Awkward at English scripted letters,

her stitches rhymed without fault. Summa cum laude of yarnover loops,

commas and tildes of knit and purl, she cast off chains of parentheses. A zippered bolero jacket for me at twelve, wool like curly brown persian lamb: It'll be warm for you like a peltzele, a fur.

"Time, Dad, to wear the new sweater, don't you think?" "Why, this one's still very comfortable plenty of good service left."

When, at 100, he dies, I clear out his dresser. Tissue paper crisp as dry ice opens to pristine blue.

The vest fits my torso and frees my arms every winter day inside my chilly house. The pockets

accommodate kleenex, keys, my watch and rings when hands plunge into meat or dough, trying to coax raw mixtures into forms.

Like any good part of my body, the sweater allows me to forget its existence while I work at my desk

adding blue linked loops to my life with a pen.

My FAVORITE COATS

You were with me in Macy's the days I found:

camel hair three-button pea coat black fitted down jacket espresso brown knee-length parka

From hangers, arms into sleeves perfect fits, buttons and zipper fastening completing my body's contours.

Worn through six or more winters, all of them still fine.

A year now of trying to undress myself of you the way I gave away to Goodwill your jackets, pants, shirts, sweaters, ties, shoes

My coats hang crowded in expanded closet space

each one enclosed in your admiring smile.

EDITOR'S NOTE

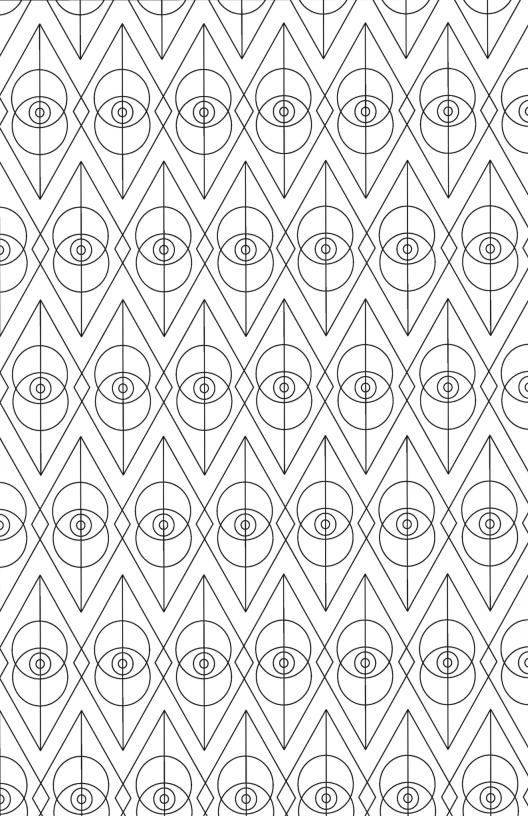
This year's Poets Prize is uniquely significant for both the life it celebrates and the new work it acknowledges. The family of Charlotte Mandel, winner of the prize in 2012, has graciously and generously chosen to honor Charlotte's 100th birthday and her contribution to poetry by sponsoring the Poets Prize. It is with great joy that I congratulate Charlotte and thank her family for this incredibly impactful gift.

When I assumed the role of editor four years ago, I could not have anticipated how personally interwoven the experience would be. Though I love many facets of curating the journal, the privilege of gleaning intimate insights into the lives of those who share their words with us is among the aspects I most treasure. I can still, with perfect clarity, remember the precise line of Erik Roth's work that transfixed me in 2021. Since that initial acquaintance with his poetry, it has been an honor to see his voice flourish and deepen. The progress of the past four years of reading his work has imbued me with tremendous respect for his mind and his integrity.

Erik first began reading the *JONJP* in the late 90s while attending grad school at Rutgers. He shared that he used to watch poets like Sander Zulauf, BJ Ward, Cat Doty, and Edwin Romond give readings at a little, second-floor yoga studio in a "New-Agey" store called Diviana on Sussex Turnpike during a stretch when he returned to Randolph to live at his parents' home in Shongum Lake. (Diviana no longer exists, though he also once attended a posthumous reading there by the brother of one of his favorite poets, Joe Salerno, and his book *Only Here*). For Erik, the *JONJP* has been a space that supported poets whose work served as model and inspiration for his own.

Erik's experience speaks to the legacy of the journal that I strive to honor and uphold. Thank you to Sandy for creating that legacy and for celebrating Charlotte with his words. My sincerest congratulations to Erik Roth for the distinction of winning the 2025 Poets Prize.

Laura Driver



ERIK ROTH

Winner of the 2025 NJ Poets Prize

TRAGEDY OF A BROKEN HOME

Winner of the 2025 NJ Poets Prize

I had a really good childhood up until I was nine. Then a classic case of divorce really affected me.

- Kurt Cobain

Exposition: Nothing Lasts Forever prefaces four parts. I am eight-years-old at Smith Point County Park. Forever mistaking weather for a forever stationary target, I fix my stare on what moves within reach, forever clears blue sky from the beach, forever continues to swell, summer's endless supercell, its leading edge, an endless shelf hanging low over me, forever. A cloud opening a scene in need of setting the stage for a piece in need

of a precocious lead, like me, in need of coming-of-age. A Forever Burning Star, Part I, portrays my need to believe in a myth as a need for the sun of my formative years to shine on this South Shore strip. I need the warmth to endure! O how I need the storm to pass! But it hits as I stare at my parents breaking camp, as I stare at them packing their bags, at their need to flee a flag-snapping breeze, endless thunderclaps, near and far, the endless,

rising action on Long Island's endless dunes, a hard, driving rain and its need to repeat beating them with endless sheets into Part II: *A Deluge*. Endless outbursts. An ongoing feud. Forever war with each other. Offensives, endless, by both sides. Fights that cast an endless

shadow over our lives. Over years, blind to a blood moon's ruddy hue, years, denying the truth, they share endless nights avoiding each other's eyes, stare at a supernova flaring lies, stare

at the climax of their demise, and stare at Part III: A Fire Dies. Once endless heat explodes, bears a black hole, I stare at falling action, blowing remnants, stare at the loss of my innocence, the need to stand, alone, in the cold. I stare at our collapsed core, a hazy glow, stare at its faint nebulae forever drifting away, dust in space, forever a memory. And, now, when I stare into darkness, and hearken back to years wasted chasing my past, I see years

following the blast turning into years of Part IV: A Desert Path. I stare through rows of oleander at the years reversing my steps across sand, years I come to understand the endless luster of Mastic afternoons, those years racing plovers over spume, as years the event horizon had a need to hide behind time, like God has a need to shroud toxins in bright blossoms. Years poisoned by the heavens, forever, their abandonment of light forever

Part V's plight, a denouement: Forever After. For want of a new day, I need to let go, free myself from the endless gloaming of a broken home, where I stare at the long twilight of my childhood years.

THREE WORDS

for my father

You marveled at trees sparkling with ice. Your skates carved out a circle on a frozen lake. Crows

feet surrounded your eyes, stalked a snake one spring. We caught sunnies by the dozen in summer.

Every fall we lost something we didn't know we had. Dad, I found that brief note

I never gave you, three words I wrote on one line, survivors in time's lifeboat after the wreck.

I folded it over 30 years ago, and opened it again today after you left. You taught me

what you don't say carries all the weight. Words, hollow. Empty. Wasted breath. A path

of destruction I follow, nonetheless. I meant it when I said what I said: *I love you*.

LAURIE Byro

TRESPASSES

I may have finished eluding the copperhead, still he wasn't done with me.

I knew him as he waited: watching me barefoot, innocent, unrepentant— I'd lick my lip, stare him down.

His triangle head like Indian spears, souvenirs of battle I'd search for in that field, like treasure, like hidden allies.

He knew my trespasses, kids mocked the birthmark that seeped like wine on white cloth,

the girl's cheek a furious red slap. I went silent, and he assessed that history, hissed like

a burnished kettle: Your silence was crueler than the snickering, but now you'll know the cold

moon shining into your leg as a white fang and they'll find you soft and torn, Ragdoll.

At school they'll gloat. If only you had stood up for her. If only you had mourned

her shame, that embroidered cheek and so I decide what your silent curse has cost.

Why have you wandered onto my field, to lie with me, to trespass? Afterwards, when

they curl up on the bosom of sun-soaked earth how silent the unforgiving crows of the field will be.

INDEPENDENCE DAY, 2016

and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil

Genesis 3:5

Griffin and Sabine write to one another. Nothing much is accomplished by the pill. Who could blame Icarus for wanting to bite the red apple of the sun? It was hotter than the firecracker I held in my hand those fourths when we guzzled our father's Rolling Rocks. I'd meet you in the woods, my house, distant and blurred. The froth from those beers sat on our lips like passion. I got home before searing balls of fire exploded in my father's eyes and I plucked the last subtle feather from your wing. We careened towards a hungry ocean.

It snowed in Trenton the day after I lost it. Blustery puffs of air tugged your trousers, reminding you what had happened as you waited for me in the park. The forest behind my house was slippery from clots of snow off branches. In the car, you soothed me with myths about angels and lost men with tattered wings. I watched the snow become rivers that would send me out of my home town and into the silent city where people talk around forbidden words.

Later, I addressed you as the first and the last man in Paradise. You blurred into half a dozen others, all carved like green men in the hollow of the tree. Now as I take my walk and wonder where we've gone, the light through leaves cuts a slant that promised so much more.

Adam, I whisper, what were we thinking?

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 a ways. 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."

AICHA BELHAJ

Translated by **JONAS ELBOUSTY**

I SELL DESIRE

I push ships into the waves with promises of mermaids. I sell desire on the sidewalks, wipe fear from the feet of fishermen, yet my sweat has no price. Desire cannot be erased, It does not sweat, it cannot buy the wind.

ROBIN ROSEN CHANG

THE WAVE

After Ross Gay's "To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian"

Weaving through traffic, my mind littered with radio news and a heaviness I can't escape another mass shooting, the number of dead and injured, or another banner screaming hate from a bridge over a busy road like the one I'm on, rushing to class, where my students will be waiting, or like me, also late. M dragging his body after shifts lifting boxes, or E, her face a map of grief from feeding her dying grandmother. Today, we'll read a poem about being human in a rancorous world. But I need to turn left and the cars swarm like ants on a mission until one slows. Such a relief. But that's not all. The driver and me, our eyes meet. Then, a small wave, a you go first from a guy

I doubt I'd ever talk to in his over-sized truck. I wave back, a sign of gratitude like my mother must've done when someone yielded as she rushed to pick me up after my Sunday visits with my father and his new family, like my grandparents did driving home to their two girls. So decent. Understand? That moment of two strangers seeing each other as worthy of a pause. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, notice, the world gets lighter, even if only for a second.

ALL THE FALLEN

Legs crumpled, knees scraped raw, the woman lies in Carrer d'Aragó, cars speeding by. I grasp her trembling hand, cradle her arm, its thin bone beneath sagging skin.

There's no one I can call, she whispers. No! She is shouting, No medico!, only wants to go the nursery school a few blocks away, to help serve lunch

a los niños, mi unica familia! We plod down the sidewalk, rest, plod on. Her eyes, round as pills, I can't stop thinking about my mother—

her stiff hand, her slow straight-legged shuffle down a hall and back, and now, I'm a child and we're darting through traffic, trying to cross Broad Street. My mother,

yes, she's kneeling in the road, helping a woman whose elbows and knees ooze, who's crying, like my mother cried years later, as she stumbled down and kept slipping

further down. Today, wandering back to my flat, I suddenly see all the fallen flowers, a child scooping up

purple Jacaranda blooms, tossing them in the traffic, where they flutter in the wind like birds—and a shock

of yellow, Tipuana blossoms, and a trickle of water carrying them to the street, turning the pavement gold, all the falling

women, floating, or were they flying, swooping and lifting off—

HORIZON

Isle of Skye, Scotland

After forty-two weeks of pregnancy and three days of labor, the doctor cuts through skin and muscle, and someone I love births the baby she'd been waiting for, the daughter who'd burrowed so deep into her womb it seemed she would never be born. But when the baby was lifted from her mother's body, her mouth puckered into the shape of a heart, and her lips were a red primrose flower. Her eyes, long like the horizon beyond this loch. And past it, where on the other side of the Sea of Hebrides and the Atlantic, it's the middle of the night. I imagine the young mother there breastfeeding, her body still shaking while here, rain pours down hillsides, and the sheep stand oblivious in the thrashing wind.

WAYNE DAVID HUBBARD

THE GLASS HOUSE

step now past the autumn vines swallowing the ghost house

follow the winding path through the open doors of a glass house where outside is inside in panoramic view

in the morning an oak branch reaches inside the kitchen

at dusk the living room removes its cloak to settle before a blazing hearth fire

when it rains a mist swallows the atrium leaving impressions of sailing in a vessel made from cloud

but when the sky grows dark the glass becomes a mirror everywhere you turn you see yourself

NOVEMBER LEAVES

all rocks are broken rocks

but not all letters make words

H. WILLIAMS

THE SHAPESHIFTER, TO THE EGG:

I am become adored and adolescent all at once, as ageless and juvenile as the mirror declares. The mirror is dead. I buried him in your yard last night.

Come, speckled egg, fresh and new. Lie in warm rest beneath my wing. I will tell you of myself:

My skin, my touch, my shapeshifting form and unburdened breath are cool to the touch and perfect in every body I am found in.

My body bends but never breaks, and all joy and mystery is mine in every transformative sense

Men and women want what I am, but I can only laugh, for they know the truth as well as I do; for all that is mine is within reach, as long as you do not fear what you take grasp of.

Come closer. Be my teeth, my maw, my cup of tea. Find my taste, my cloth, your name in my mouth and your shape in the pupil of my eye.

I am not the one who abandoned you.

JESSICA DE KONINCK

SPALDING HAIBUN

The boys play stoop ball on Bogardus Street. If it's almost dinner time, no one says so. When the rubber orb hits the curb's edge the ball's trajectory shifts, and the opponent sometimes misses. The boys will remember this when they go on to study physics, engineering, or calculus. For now, listen to the pleasing thunk the Spaldeen makes each time it slaps against the red bricks, then energetically bounces back. Everyone knows the correct name is Spalding. The letters are stamped in black on one side of the seam. But everyone has always said Spaldeen, always. To say Spalding is to act like a smartass, to suggest a lack of seriousness in the competition itself. The boys respect the pink sphere, the way a new one can bounce higher than the school-yard fence. Its color reminds them of lips, or the tip of a man's penis. Each boy is here to win. They will play until their mothers call them home.

Forgotten house keys, Soft asphalt, open hydrants Blink your eyes. All gone.

THE UNINVITED

I thought I could learn to forget, but grief makes a commotion, some call it keening, enters unexpectedly with muddy shoes and wet umbrella, leaves newspapers on the counter, filthy clothes on the floor, texts repeatedly, refuses to move out. Sooner or later, grief finds a new job, rents a small apartment. Takes me a while to clean and organize, reestablish routines. Then maybe I get nostalgic or complacent, let my guard down. Someone's knocking. Grief has no other place to crash. I open the door knowing who's there. Then I sigh. I point to an empty chair.

HEART TO HEART

Say you're 70 or 71 finally ready to talk to your mother about everything you never wanted to share.

Maybe you're the type who blabs it all.
Then this does not apply.

But you are ready, and you have some questions you'd think you'd have the answers to by now.

Here's the thing.
You know what's coming.
Your mother is dead,
been dead.

You were there when they covered her with dirt.

And her mind went years before her body.

She didn't even know who you were at the end.

It's not fair!, the exclamation of an unhappy child.

Turns out your life's work has been learning to speak.

You're old enough to know

she might not have answers, but she'd be pleased you asked.

LOIS MARIE HARROD

THE FACT OF MATTER

is neither the fact of the matter nor a matter of fact.

you were here and your matter mattered

and now you are gone a gap in the matter—

black hole, mad hatter serving black tea.

But never

no mind over matter in this matter—

I miss you.

I wear your battered baseball cap

with its stained logo

Secular Humanist—

oh how you loved this muddied earth,

its stubborn facts, its blowsy blather—

until my matter becomes your matter

as rain becomes leaves.

Abriana Jetté

EXCUSE ME

The marriage was the stage for the trauma sighs the bruja I hired to help me with my work. Some things I just can't see and I need her. Here I am thinking I masked my quirks with clever metaphors and anecdotes and she's like: mija it's what you've fought saying. Cause the noise. Clear your throat. Don't make yourself an afterthought.

I lack the right relationship to my mind to occupy space that's technically mine. Consider this page once blank now lined with confessions & silences & rhymes. Tell me, how am I supposed to learn my worth? When I'm alone I say excuse me when I cough.

CHUCK TRIPI

CIRCLES ON THE SERENGETI

Cat, when you are gorged with animal the circle of your sun-white heart goes thrilling in the arc of afternoon. You will be sleeping then with all the other cats and satisfied, arching backs to arching stomachs in the twisted sheaves and stalks. Resting in circular figures you will dream a second conquest of the morning's hapless meat. But I will only see the circles, circles in your languor, circles in the matted grass. Every evening on a well-dreamt pride our appetites begin to stir again the circle of a red-moon heart will rise a hungry feline heart and mine.

WANDA S. PRAISNER

MAY AGAIN

But headlong joy is ever on the wing. Milton

It's May again, son—remember? Your birth—spring beauty and white violets in meadows, lily of the valley to welcome you.

High in rain-laden cedars a cardinal stakes its territory and catbird recently returned, jabbers on.

Sun turns droplets to stars, silver sequins, and I can see the dogwood under your window armored in ice—how together

we watched a winter sun ignite your crystal tree—you both long gone. Grief, a juggernaut that comes

circling above like a redtail, its rasping scream, *keeeeer* down-slurred and prolonged since the September day you died.

ELAINE KOPLOW

A BLACKER SHAPE AMIDST THE BROWN

Humming our way along the road, mid-hill the woods beside us begin to move. The trees are still but for a shape—a blacker shape amidst the brown. Large and burly—a four-pawed presence in our midst. He has some business with the rocks and leaves, shuffling along, snuffling the ground with paws and snout, alert for berries, nuts, and crumbs.

He eyes us evenly. We regard him cautiously. Our worlds intersect in the quiet of morning, the sun angling softly through the trees—tall oaks and maples, ash and spruce. He has some knowledge of the woods I lack—an intimacy with trees and soil, where I am still part-stranger. Some day

I will be one with the earth when my ashes rest here—mix and mingle with the wind and soil, warm to the sun, and endure the rain and snow. But for now, we are still-framed, each in our own world, before we each move on.

ANIKA BUKKAPATNAM

AN ITCH

Crescent moons lining palms Were not enough now I rake nails over legs Reedy psalms and olive sow

Are not insects like I'd thought so They'd move more prickly Digging fabric, I find Made surprisingly thickly

Caught near my knee Yes, right there And my arm Move your finger

The pearled bullet Snagged my nail Peeled, And I linger

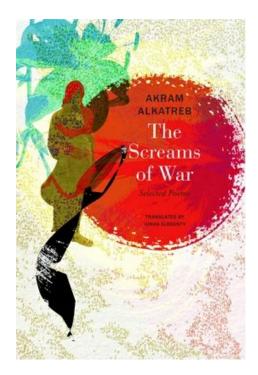
Whatever it is, It is quenched I cannot stop Scratch it off

An onion, a page Below, I heal now There are beads Beads I hear now

Dulcet clinks, Motley glass How they glow, Free of ire

And I scratch Show them all Irritation Transpired. There are beads Rippled, flowing, iridescent in the dark There are beads.

THE SCREAMS OF WAR BY AKRAM ALKATREB A REVIEW BY SARA LIM



Akram Alkatreb's The Screams of War is a poignant and harrowing collection of poems that delves into the human cost of war, reflecting on the Syrian conflict. Translated by Jonas Elbousty, the work captures themes of trauma, exile, and the erosion of innocence amidst violence. Alkatreb's verses juxtapose the mundane with the catastrophic, portraying war as an omnipresent force that invades daily life and memory. His imagery is vivid yet haunting, like "murmurs engraved on stones," evoking both permanence and fragility. The poems explore alienation and loss, often addressing Syria as a beloved entity whose suffering mirrors that of its people. Works like "The Statues of Midday" and "Do You Know How Much We Love You?" blend personal grief with collective despair, creating a tapestry of longing for a past that feels irretrievable. Alkatreb's language is lyrical yet unflinching, making this collection both a

testament to resilience and a stark reminder of war's devastation. This collection is a must-read for those interested in contemporary Middle Eastern poetry and the emotional landscapes shaped by conflict.

In the tapestry of contemporary Syrian literature, Akram Alkatreb's The Screams of War emerges as a tour de force, a collection of verses that plunges into the depths of human suffering and resilience in the crucible of conflict. This magnum opus, translated with exquisite sensitivity by Jonas Elbousty, stands as a testament to the indomitable spirit of a people besieged by the ravages of war, offering a window into the soul of a nation torn asunder by the tumultuous events that have engulfed Syria since 2011. Alkatreb's poetic prowess manifests in his ability to transmute the ineffable horrors of war into a symphony of words, each line resonating with the echoes of shattered lives and dreams deferred. His verses serve as a conduit for the collective anguish of a people, channeling their pain, their hopes, and their memories into a narrative that is at once deeply personal and universally resonant. At the heart of Alkatreb's work lies an exploration of memory's enduring power, particularly in the context of conflict. The poet employs a lexicon rich in metaphor and symbolism to convey the indelible nature of traumatic experiences. His evocative phrase "murmurs engraved on stones" serves as a powerful allegory for the permanence of war's psychological scars. This imagery suggests that the memories of conflict are not mere ephemeral whispers but rather immutable inscriptions upon the bedrock of one's being, as enduring as engravings etched into unvielding stone.

The theme of trauma evolves throughout Akram Alkatreb's *The Screams of War*, reflecting the shifting emotional and psychological landscapes of individuals and communities affected by war. This evolution is marked by several key stages: the immediate impact of war, the internalization and reflection one feels, and, ultimately, the search for meaning one is thrust. Early in the collection, trauma is depicted as raw and overwhelming, with vivid

imagery capturing the chaos and destruction of conflict. The poems focus on the visceral pain of loss, fear, and dislocation. As the collection progresses, the focus shifts to the internalization of trauma. The poems explore how individuals carry the weight of their experiences, often through fragmented memories and haunting imagery that evoke a sense of disorientation. Midway through the collection, trauma is intertwined with themes of exile. The pain of being uprooted from one's homeland becomes a central motif, emphasizing the psychological toll of displacement and the longing for a lost home. Toward the end, there is a subtle movement toward processing and finding meaning in suffering. While the scars remain, the poetry begins to explore resilience and the possibility of rebuilding identity amidst destruction. This progression mirrors how trauma evolves from an immediate emotional response to a deeper, reflective process that shapes identity and memory over time. Alkatreb's work captures this journey with profound sensitivity.

The concept of "scars of sleep" further reinforces this theme, illustrating how the subconscious mind becomes a repository for the burdens of war, carrying them even into the realm of slumber. This vivid imagery conveys the insidious nature of trauma, suggesting that the psychological toll of conflict persists long after the cessation of hostilities, haunting survivors in their most vulnerable moments. Alkatreb intertwines personal grief with collective despair, reflecting how war leaves individuals and communities grappling with irreversible scars. The poems often depict the emotional residue of witnessing destruction and losing loved ones. Trauma is expressed through fragmented narratives and disjointed imagery, mirroring the disrupted lives of those affected by conflict. This technique evokes a sense of disorientation that parallels the experience of survivors. The trauma of displacement is central, as Alkatreb portrays exile as a wound that deepens over time. His verses convey a longing for home while grappling with the impossibility of return. The title itself reflects the duality of trauma—both the internalized silence of suffering and the uncontainable

screams of pain that demand acknowledgment. Alkatreb's poetic gaze also turns to the twin specters of alienation and isolation, particularly within the context of exile. In "The Statues of Midday," he crafts a tableau of profound disconnection:

"My friends are the brothers of darkness, statues of midday, nothing left from their features beside the smell of the hand extended to the waiter behind the coffee shop's window."

This powerful imagery paints a portrait of individuals frozen in time, their identities eroded by the harsh realities of war and displacement. The "brothers of darkness" evoke a sense of deep-seated isolation, while the "statues of midday" symbolize a state of suspended animation, caught between the world they once knew and the uncertain future that lies ahead.

Yet, amidst this landscape of desolation, Alkatreb finds moments of tender resilience in the enduring human desire for connection. In "Do You Know How Much We Love You?" he writes:

"We are your sons, and we are leaving the world.

Do you know how much we love you

and that you are about to die?"

This poignant passage speaks to the complex tapestry of emotions that characterize human relationships in times of crisis. It highlights the fragility of these connections in the face of imminent destruction while simultaneously emphasizing the profound depth of feeling that persists even in the most challenging circumstances.

Alkatreb's mastery of imagery is on full display throughout the collection, with each line a carefully crafted sensory experience that sears itself into the reader's consciousness. His ability to create powerful visual and tactile impressions through language is evident in lines such as "A harsh hand, frozen from the cold, / flaunting, / or blinking like a tearful

eye." This imagery not only conveys the physical realities of conflict but also serves as a metaphor for the emotional toll of war, the frozen hand symbolizing both the literal cold and the numbing effect of prolonged exposure to violence and suffering.

The structure of *The Screams of War* mirrors the disjointed nature of a traumatic experience, employing a fragmented narrative style that presents the poems as a series of vivid snapshots rather than a linear story. This approach creates a sense of disorientation that draws the reader into the chaotic world of conflict, mirroring the way trauma can disrupt the continuity of lived experience. Throughout the collection, Alkatreb demonstrates a remarkable ability to juxtapose images of beauty with the harsh realities of war, creating a tension that is both unsettling and profoundly moving. In "The History of Emotion," he writes:

"I left all of Damascus at your door.

The moon will not rise on the roofs, for the children of my neighborhood are laying grapes under the August sun, then they take you to their dreams."

This juxtaposition of idyllic imagery with the underlying context of conflict serves to highlight the loss of innocence and the disruption of everyday life caused by war. The image of children laying grapes under the August sun evokes a sense of normalcy and beauty that stands in stark contrast to the implied violence and upheaval that has forced the speaker to leave Damascus behind.

Alkatreb's work is not merely a chronicle of suffering but also a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. His verses speak to the enduring power of love, memory, and connection in the face of unimaginable adversity. Through his exploration of themes such as the weight of memory, the alienation of exile, and the fragility of human connections, Alkatreb crafts a narrative that is at once deeply rooted in the specific context of the Syrian

conflict and universally resonant in its exploration of the human condition. *The Screams of War* stands as a powerful reminder of the human cost of conflict, serving as both an elegy and a rallying cry. It is a work that demands to be read, not only for its literary merit but also for its importance as a document of our times. Through his masterful use of language, vivid imagery, and profound exploration of the human psyche, Akram Alkatreb has created a work of enduring significance, one that will continue to resonate long after the guns have fallen silent.

In the landscape of contemporary war poetry, Alkatreb's voice emerges as one of singular power and clarity. His verses serve as a bridge across the chasm of conflict, reaching out with a desperate longing for connection even as the world crumbles around them. "The Screams of War" is not merely a collection of poems; it is a testament to the power of art to bear witness, to heal, and to preserve the essence of our humanity in the face of unspeakable horror.

As we grapple with the ongoing conflicts that continue to shape our world, works like The Screams of War serve as crucial reminders of the human faces behind the headlines. They challenge us to confront the realities of war and its aftermath, to bear witness to the suffering of others, and to find within ourselves the capacity for empathy, understanding, and ultimately, hope. In the final analysis, Akram Alkatreb's The Screams of War stands as a monumental achievement in the canon of war poetry. It is a work that demands to be read, studied, and internalized, not only for its literary merit but for its profound insights into the human condition in times of crisis. Through his unflinching gaze and his masterful command of language, Alkatreb has created a work that will endure as a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring power of art to illuminate even the darkest corners of human experience.

FARAJ BARYAKDAR of Syria is a journalist and award-winning poet. In 1987 he was arrested on suspicion of belonging to the Party for Communist Action. He was held incommunicado for nearly seven years and tortured. In 1993 he was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. He was granted amnesty fourteen months shy of completing his sentence. Bayrakdar now lives in Sweden. He has won many awards, including the 1998 Hellman-Hammett Award, the 1999 International PEN Award, and the 2004 Free Word Award from NOVIB.

AICHA BELHAJ is an awarding winning Moroccan poet, writer, and artist. She holds a Ph.D. in political science. In addition to her creative pursuits, she works as a journalist. Her weekly column appears in al-Arabi al-Yawm. Belhaj published four poetry collections. Her art has been featured in numerous exhibits.

MARK BOULANGER is doing their best to live "The Art Life." They are active in the quote-unquote screamo scene, where they play in bands such as Massa Nera, Our Wits, and Respire.

ANIKA BUKKAPATNAM is an enjoyer of words and connoisseur of wit. She is the winner of the 2024 U.S. Creative Writing Award for Poetry and has been featured in a countless number of anthologies. Her work draws heavily from the Asian American narrative and abstract representations of nuanced experience.

LAURIE BYRO was named "Poet of the Decade" in January 2011 by the IBPC competition for her 2000-2010 work. In 2021, she stopped competing after 60 awards. She was named the "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 7 full length books published, two chapbooks, most recently: *Zeus's Wives & Other Goddesses* (Dancing Girl Press) 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. Her poetry insists upon the continuing importance of fantasy, mystery and "the other" in our lives. Laurie facilitates "Circle of Voices" at libraries in New Jersey for over 25 years; currently at The Albert Wisner Public Library and Poet in Residence at Pacem in Terris, Warwick, NY.

MATT CARIELLO will publish two collections of poetry in 2025: Self Portrait in the Dark (Finishing Line Press) and Colloquy on Mad Tom (Bordighera Press). These follow The Empty Field, Talk, and A Boat That Can Carry Two. He's had stories, poems, haiku, and reviews published in Bennington Review, Voices in Italian Americana, Poet Lore, Evening Street Review, Modern Haiku, Indiana Review, The Ekphrastic Review, Modern Poetry Quarterly Review, Typehouse, Sheila-Na-Gig, The Journal, On the Seawall, and others. He's currently a senior lecturer in the English department at the Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. https://www.matthewmcariello.com/

JESSICA DE KONINCK is the author of *Cutting Room* (Terrapin Books) and *Repairs* (Finishing Line Press). Jessica's poems have been featured on the Writer's Almanac and Verse Daily. She has poems forthcoming in *Image*, *Lips*, *Epiphany* and Tofu Ink Arts Press. A graduate of Brandeis University and the Stonecoast M.F.A. program, Jessica was a winner of the 2023 Stephen A. DiBiase Poetry Award. http://www.jessicadekoninck.com.

MAUREEN EGAN RIGGI writes about motherhood, loss, and self-identity. Recent poems have appeared in the *Kelsey* Review, US 1 Worksheets, and Thimble Literary Magazine. Maureen received a Pushcart Prize nomination from the Kelsey Review for her poem, "Casting the Stone", in 2024. She lives in Central New Jersey with her husband, son, and two cats. Maureen studied literature and poetry at Stockton University back when it was The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey (IYKYK), and currently works at Princeton University. When rare moments of me-time arise, she can be found singing, embroidering, baking, or making jewelry.

JONAS ELBOUSTY holds an MPhil and PhD from Columbia University. He is a writer, literary critic and

translator, and an academic. He teaches in the department of Near Eastern Studies at Yale. He is currently the Director of Undergraduate Studies at the Council on Middle East Studies at the Yale MacMillan Center. In addition to his nine published books, his publications have appeared in Michigan Quarterly Review, ArabLit Quarterly, Asheville Poetry Review, Banipal, Prospectus, Sekka, Live Encounters, Journal of New Jersey Poets, Journal of African Studies, Comparative Literature, and World Literature Today, amongst others. He is the editor of the Routledge Book Series on Cultural Production in the Middle East and North Africa and the Editor-in-Chief of Aswat, Journal of Maghreb Studies. His forthcoming books are Faces by Georgetown University Press and Voices from the Arab Gulf Countries: Exploring Contemporary Arab Novels from Routledge Press.

AARON FISCHER's poems have appeared in the *American Journal of Poetry, Nervous Ghost, Five Points, Hudson Review*, and elsewhere. He won the 2020 Prime Number Magazine poetry contest, 2023 Connecticut poetry prize, 2023 *Naugatuck River Review* poetry prize, and the Maria W. Faust sonnet contest. *My Shabby Afterlife* was published in 2022.

LOIS MARIE HARROD's The Bed the Size of a Small Country will be published by Kelsay in 2025. Her l8th collection Spat appeared in 2021, and her Woman was published by Blue Lyra in February 2020. Nightmares of the Minor Poet appeared in June 2016 from Five Oaks; her chapbook And She Took the Heart appeared in January 2016; Fragments from the Biography of Nemesis (Cherry Grove Press) and the chapbook How Marlene Mae Longs for Truth (Dancing Girl Press) appeared in 2013. A Dodge poet, life-long educator and writer, she is published in literary journals and online ezines from American Poetry Review to Tar River to Zone 3. Links to her online work at www.loismarieharrod.org.

WAYNE DAVID HUBBARD is an award-winning poet, a Pushcart Prize nominee, and author of *Death Throes of the Broken Clockwork Universe*. He is the Treasurer of the Poetry Society of Virginia with poetry featured in various literary journals. Born and raised near Newark, New Jersey, he lives in the Shenandoah Valley and works in air traffic control. waynedavidhubbard.com

ABRIANA JETTÉ is a recipient of the finalist fellowship in Prose and Poetry from the New Jersey State Council for the Arts. Her work has appeared in *Best New Poets, Teachers & Writers Magazine, PLUME, Tampa Review, Poetry New Zealand*, and has received support by the Sewanee Writers Conference where she was a Tennessee Williams Scholar. She has belonged to the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley and the Southampton Writers Conference, among others.

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 Cimarron Review, Southwest Review, Prairie Schooner, and The Best American Poetry 2009, among other publications. She received 2023 and 2025 Finalist awards from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

ROGAN KELLY is the author of the chapbook *Demolition in* the Tropics (Seven Kitchens Press, 2019). He is the editor of The Night Heron Barks and Ran Off With the Star Bassoon. He tends a small vegetable garden in New Jersey.

ELAINE KOPLOW, retired English teacher and union organizer, is Director of the Sussex County Writers' Roundtable and Associate Editor of *The Stillwater Review*. A three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, her poems appear in several anthologies and in numerous literary journals including *Spillway*, *Edison Literary Review*, *Adanna*, *Exit 13* Magazine, *Tiferet*, *Journal of New Jersey Poets*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Lips*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, and elsewhere. She is the author of three poetry collections: *Sketch Pad*, *The Way the Light Comes Through*, and *Alone with the Leaves*.

SARA LIM is a newly turned sixteen-year-old, an age in which one may uncover their poetic soul, a taste for the dramatic, and absolutely no time to pursue any of it. Sara is no different. With a familial legacy of deep connection to literature coursing through her veins, she has been a lifelong consumer of the arts, reader, writer, cinephile, and lover of all things grotesque and macabre. Most recently, she has had the honor of working on

the 62nd issue of *The Journal of New Jersey Poets*, for which she provided her writing and her design, an opportunity that she is deeply grateful for. She hopes that the artistic motifs of her conceptual design {the iridescent beauty of flowers and the growth, development, and flourishing that they represent, a motif inspired by the very first issue of the Journal published in 1976} will inspire and reinforce the central goal of the journal: to highlight, share, and celebrate the work, ethos, and artistic vision of local poets. *Grandescunt aucta labore* – "With hard work, all things increase and grow."

DEBRA OSINSKY is retired from her position directing the MPH and writing programs in the Department of Health Policy and Management at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. She continues to work there part-time and lives in Central New Jersey. Her poems have appeared in the *Paterson Literary Review* and *US 1 Worksheets*.

ROBERT J. PARILLO was born in Passaic and has lived in New Jersey for most of his life. He studied literature at the University of New Orleans and spent 25 years in the publishing industry, primarily in newspapers, across editorial, production, and circulation roles. After being laid off, he has returned to poetry with renewed focus. He currently lives in Union, New Jersey. This is his first published work.

WANDA S. PRAISNER, a resident poet for the state and the recipient of fellowships from the NJ State Council on the Arts, the Dodge Foundation, the Provincetown Fine Arts Center, and VCCA, has received 26 Pushcart Prize nominations, the Princemere Prize, Egan Award, Kudzu Prize, First Prize in Poetry at the College of NJ Writers' Conference, and the 2017 New Jersey Poets Prize. She's appeared in *Atlanta Review, Lullwater Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. Her 6th book is *To Illuminate the Way*.

SUSANNA RICH was twice nominated for an Emmy-Award for her poetry. She is a Fulbright Fellow in Creative Writing, a passionate feminist, environmentalist, gardener, and ikebana artist. As founding producer of Wild Nights Productions, LLC, she tours her musical, Shakespeare's *itches: The Women v. Will. Susanna is author of five poetry collections, most recently

Beware the House and SHOUT! Poetry for Suffrage. Visit her at www.wildnightsproductions.com and becauseicanteach.blogspot.com.

ROBIN ROSEN CHANG is a 2023 New Jersey Council on the Arts poetry fellow and the author of the full-length collection, *The Curator's Notes* (Terrapin Books). Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Alaska Quarterly Review, Michigan Quarterly Review, New Ohio Review, Paterson Literary* Review, and Plume, and have been featured on Verse Daily. She was an honorable mention for the Spoon River Review's 2019 Editor's Prize and the winner of the Oregon Poetry Association's Fall 2018 Poet's Choice Award. She is the cofounder and co-director of the new Fields Poetry Reading Series and teaches writing at Montclair State University.

BRYAN ROTH is a writer, poet, literary editor, manuscript consultant, and teacher. His poetry and prose have been published internationally; his poems have appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *The Flying Island*, *Fringe*, *Paradigm*, *Southern Indiana Review*, and other publications. He is originally from Irvington, New Jersey, and comes from a family that has lived in Northern New Jersey for well over a hundred years. He now lives in Northern Colorado, where he is the founder and executive director of the Colorado Poets Association.

ERIK ROTH holds a BA in English from Colgate University and an EdM in English education from Rutgers. His poems have most recently appeared in *Creation Magazine*, *Discretionary Love*, *Modern Haiku*, and *Journal of New Jersey Poets*. He lives in Bergen County, New Jersey.

CHUCK TRIPI is a retired airline pilot and executive living in Pompton Plains, New Jersey. His poetry appears in collections and in literary journals, *Boston Review, Louisiana Literature, Poet Lore,* and *Quiddity* among them. With his late wife, Barbara, he was founder of the Paulinskill Poetry Project, a community resource and boutique press, publisher of regional anthologies and first-time books.

PAM THIER has been writing poems since childhood. At the age of eight, she received her first rejection letter from

Random House Publishing Company. Pam has enjoyed a career in the field of Parks, Recreation and Conservation for 40 years. Retired now from the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, she lives with her spouse Deborah in the village of Rosemont, and has begun writing in earnest. Her work has appeared in the Arts and Cultural Council of Bucks County, the Provincetown Library, and *The Sun Magazine*. She often finds her inspiration and ideas in the many metaphorical systems that link the natural world with the human condition. She enjoys woods wandering, birding, song writing on guitar, and traveling; particularly to the Pacific Northwest, and Cape Cod, as well as the beaches of New Jersey (in winter). She reads on a regular basis across the river with the New Hope Beat Poets.

H. WILLIAMS is a lifelong Central Jersey resident, hobbyist writer, acrylic keychain collector, former poet, occasional quilter, and cheater at card games. Lifelong dreams include home ownership, acquisition of a treadle sewing machine, and managing to retire without maintaining a single social media account. If found, return to library.

MICHAEL T. YOUNG's fourth collection, Mountain Climbing a River, will be published by Broadstone Media in late 2025. His 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. His poetry has been featured on Verse Daily and The Writer's Almanac, as well as numerous journals including 1-70, Mid-Atlantic Review, Schuylkill Valley Journal, and Vox Populi.

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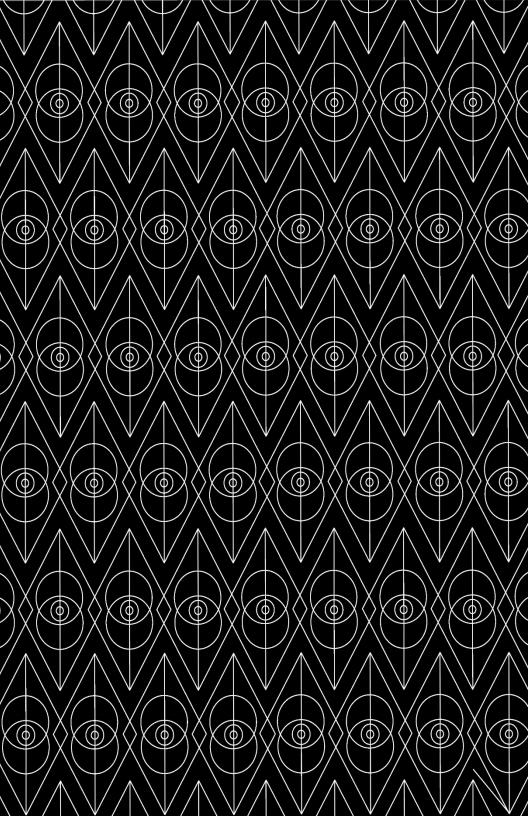
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