

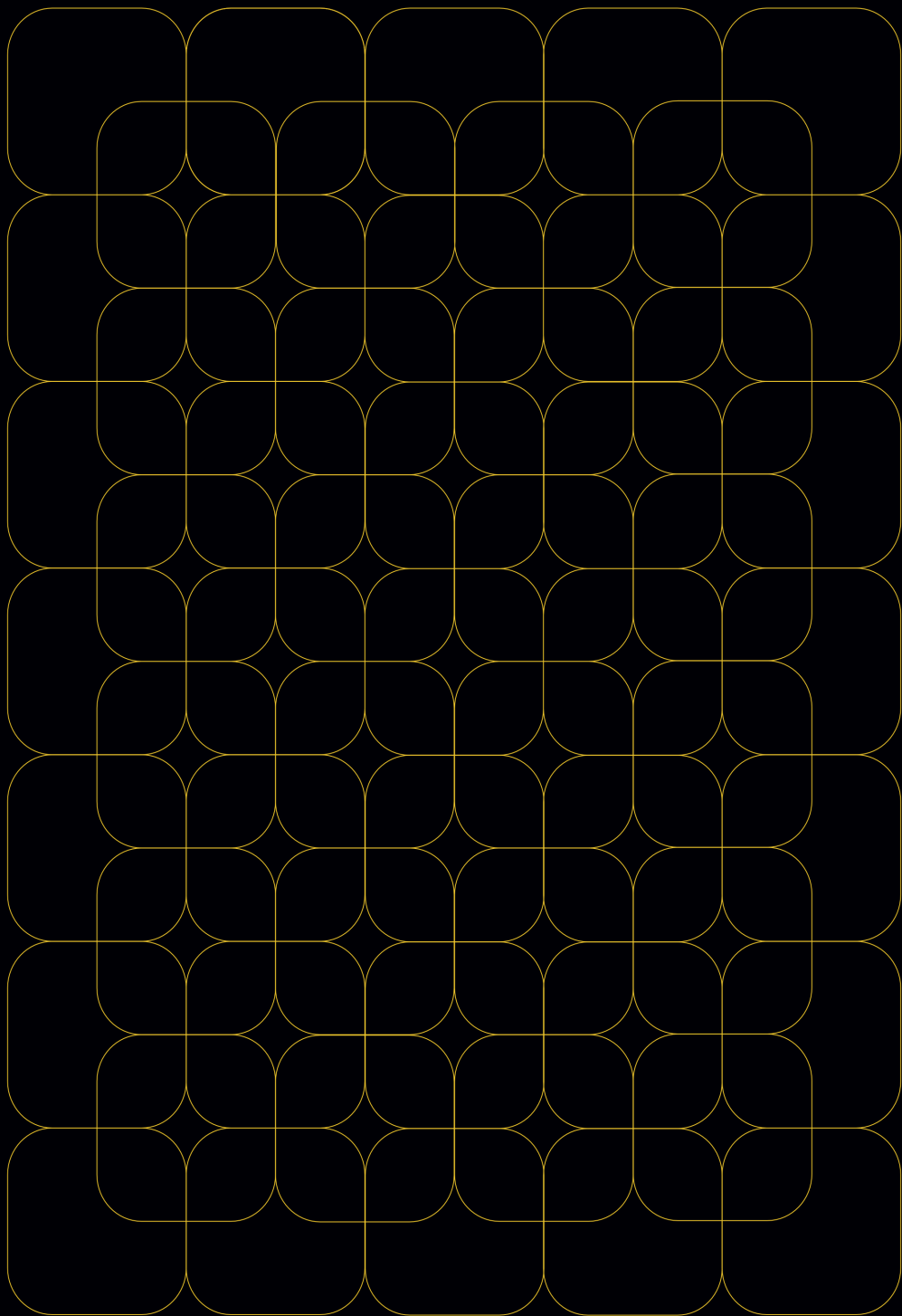
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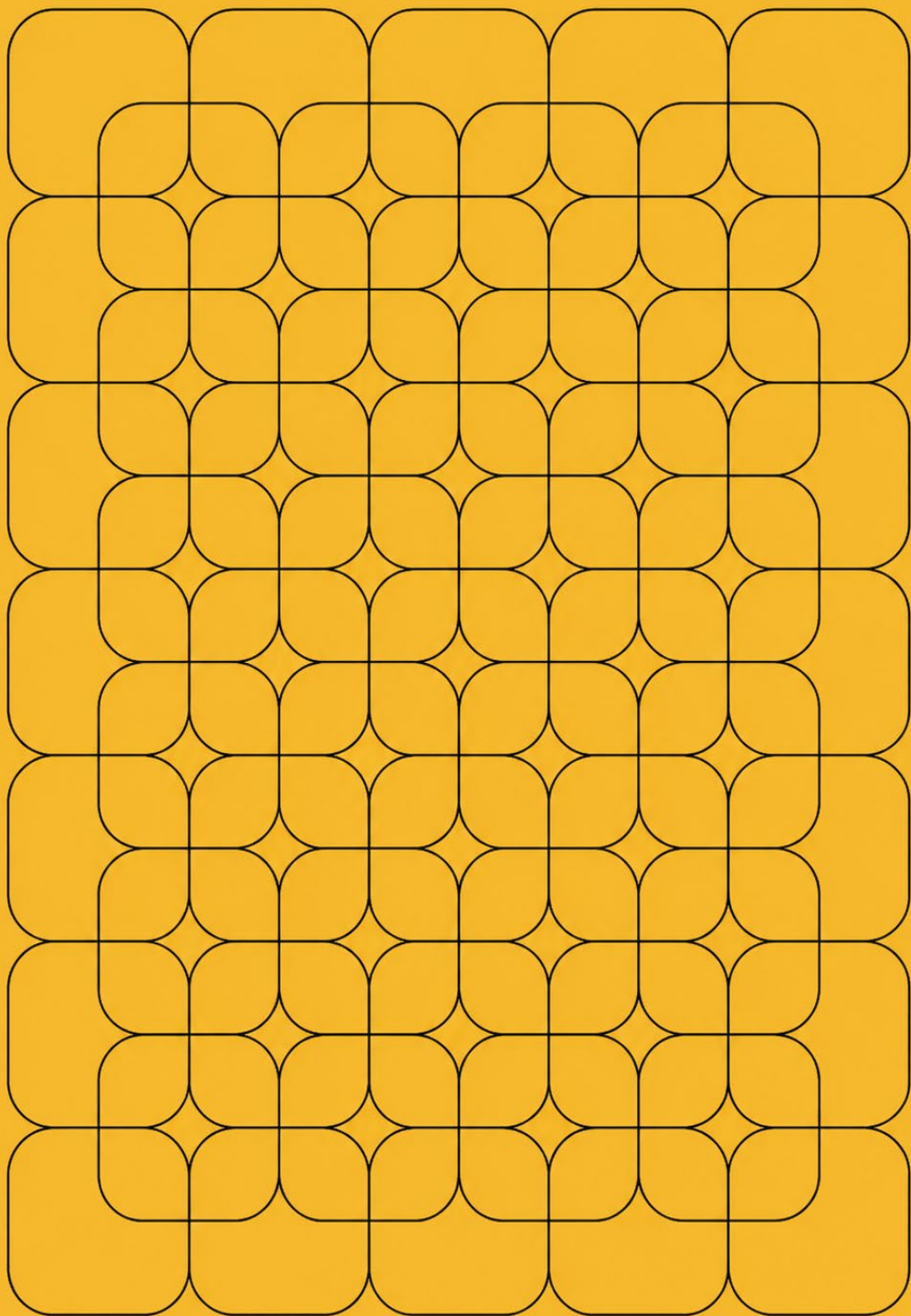


the
Journal
of
New Jersey Poets



Issue 63





JOURNAL OF NEW JERSEY POETS

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2026

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JOURNAL OF NEW JERSEY POETS

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**ERIK
ROTH**

I WRITE TO SALVAGE AN AFTERLIFE

for a mattock in my grandfather's garage. Home-made planter boxes reeking of earth, composted dirt burying carrot, radish, parsnip, beet seeds. Dank strips of recycled bedsheets cut for tying

long tomato vines to splintered wood scraps. Geranium stems overwintered under dim bulbs. Hints of pine straw mulch in a shredder's chute, a dying conifer sawed into logs lest it cost him

a roof. That spring crashed so fast: his cancer diagnosis. Radiation doses. Plans for grinding the stump, destroyed. April brings rain flooding the void, as I work it the way he would have

with the adze, my pen in hand. The tool I use for grubbing up my bloodline, mining roots.

A POET'S THOUGHTS ON THE THAUMATURGY OF AI CHATBOTS

*I do not live happily or comfortably
With the cleverness of our times.*

– Mary Oliver, *With Thanks to the Field Sparrow Whose Voice is So Delicate and Humble*

Simon Peter battled a dry spell
on the Sea of Galilee. Me?

Not a drought, writer's block.
My mind knot: Silicon Valley,

my self-worth wound tightly
in its stock. *O God, is my job*

*at risk to a bot? My lot tied
to a prompt's shallow water?*

*Personalize Shongum Lake
in the style of Mary Oliver.*

In one breath - no longer -
a quasi-Oliverian response

populates the text box, her
voice, my boyhood beach

breached by thieves, rogue
“tech-bro” networking teams

making a splash, their language
models' miraculous drafts

of hijacked stanzas, a query's
underhanded cast supplanting

divine craft. In the weeds
of dictional patience, revision,

syntactical maintenance,
I abandon instant gratification,

angle for my words. My pen,
like the shaft of an oar rowing

deeper, stirs a parable
of me and my dad fishing

for keepers amid lily pads,
where he taught me to release

my catch of diminutive bass,
chapter, verse inked for dinks,

easy victims - an illegal take -
like a haul of data scraped

by unregulated hacks, radicals
reinventing Jesus, reeling in

protected species, boatloads
of private property pirated

by greed, companies profiting
off apostasy, violating

copyright law, gospel forsaken
by the brains behind a machine.

A ROCKY STRETCH

You hate my silence's
daunting climb.
My thoughts retracing

blame, finding fault
lines. My palm
repelling yours,

reopening creases,
folds exposing
an unspoken quake.

Retreating quickly
from the ledge,
ceasing talks,

words cling
to my lips, fear
falling

into the abyss
of attrition. You
ask if I'm happy

like this, hanging on
by the split skin
of my fingertips?

Can I risk
letting go? You
want to know what

I have to lose
by going mute? I say
nothing.

**DAVID M.
HARRIS**

PERCOLATION

Cold water waits at the bottom,
anticipates its journey, forced
upward by its own pressure to succeed
only to be deflected back down, into
the grounds, seeping through
and into what is on the edge of coffee,
weak but growing in its expectations,
repeating its cycle of heat, pressure,
the voyage to and through the reeking brown,
experience and stress teaching it
how to become its best and truest self,
strong and bitter.

**BARBARA
KRASNER**

AUGUST 1913

After *The Seamstress* by Helene Schjerfbeck (Finland) 1905

I imagine Great-Grandmother Pesia sitting
in her rocker, sewing put away, as she ponders
and pines your leaving her for America.

Even though her other children remain at home—
Naftala Hersh, Srul, and Chaim Leib,
Rivka, Ruchel, and Chana—

she will miss you, her first, the most.
She taught you how to stitch a seam,
a compromise, a dream.

You took your dream to the train station,
rumbled to Rotterdam, steamed to New York,
never to see each other again.

She rocks in her chair to comfort herself
in the knowledge that your father's brother
will pick you up and take you to his home.

That you will spend Rosh Hashonah
with *mispocha*. *Mispocha* you'd never known,
but family all the same.

Even as she takes down her hair
and slips between the sheets,
she will wonder where you are and what you're doing.

She will continue to rock
until you both find solid ground.

SELF-PORTRAIT OF MY SISTER

When I paint my sister, I paint myself. She shows up in my Ancestry DNA results as “self.” I wear a pink hat and collar while she wears blue. Our portraits hang over our twin beds, reminding us of our twinned destinies. Her gloved hands, always ready to scratch at my vulnerabilities, entice them out of hiding.

Turn away, sister
Crook your fingers somewhere else
My brush paints you true

ASCENT

Some mornings, the trees forget to stop climbing,
their bark sprouting golden rungs to enlightenment.
Their growth spurts stain red.
They cannot help themselves—
these bodies persist
through their own fire.

Their trails flare orange.
One misstep and the world
foregoes its light.

BIRD-CHILD

I am a bird-child, unfurling delicate wings,
uncertain how they work. I want to fly
above the street, join new friends on the wires,
feel the collective energy of murmuration.

Even if out there alone, I create my own momentum,
propel myself without pushing or prodding through nor-easters.
This bird-child can go wherever she wants,
alone or together. This bird-child clings to herself.

Because the parents push out the bird-child
early, make me find our own way. Learn
from my mistakes. Hungry? Find
your own food. Thirsty? Find the water.

I am a bird-child, swooping through air
Like a trapeze artist, a dopey grin on my face.
I can fly! I can fly!
Look, Ma, I can fly!

But now I am a motherless bird-child.
Fatherless, too. I peck at seeds
trying to find them again
but come up ravenous.

HILDRETH YORK

SOMETHING WILL BREAK

something will break
and when it does it will be painful
like a bad fall on a bumpy ski slope
when you yell for help
and no one answers
or an avalanche sliding
too fast for terror

something will break
and when it does
will there be a Noah
to save all creatures,
or a leader who will send us
to the safety of another planet
where a cracked bone heals in an hour

something will break
when it happens
not as bad as the Titanic
or a failed trip to Mars
but when a truck crashed
into my car on an icy road
my brain bled for a month
losing all memory except the song
I didn't know I knew swirling around
in my head for months

something will break
or erupt like the vast magma beds
beneath the sulfurous lakes of Yellowstone
and several states will fall into the hole
when it happens we will all want to leave
as fast as we can, but all the buses,
trains, and airplanes will be full
and the spaceships will be crowded with
famous movie stars and rich people

when it happens I won't care or worry
because the endless song
I didn't know I knew will finally vanish

THE HONEYMOON AMETHYSTS

He bought amethysts for her on their honeymoon,
probably in Quebec--maybe Niagara Falls.
Ten months after the honeymoon I was born,

too soon, too fast. They had no life before
I came along. Suddenly they were poor;
he had wanted to be an artist, she, a writer.

The Great Depression ate their bank account;
he joined the struggling business of his father.
They moved, in shame, into her parents' home.

Finally, things improved; business boomed.
They had another child and bought a house,
talked divorce but reconciled. He died.

She lived resolutely on, in failing health
for several years. One night her heart just stopped--
no family at her side, no hands to hold.

We did what daughters do: cleaned up the mess,
smiled at small remembrances of "yes,"
even recalled her angry "no" with humor.

The amethysts, as it turned out, were glass.

BLUE AND OTHER COLORS

I asked my sister for her earliest color memories
so I could tell her mine:
the dark green of a backyard canvas pool,
one foot deep, on a metal frame,
resting on the concrete of a city yard,
not even a real yard, but a driveway
bending around the house to the garage;

and after that, a blanket on the beach,
tan flannel plaid (wet when a wave surprised us),
and my brown sweater trimmed with yellow stitching.
And we both laughed about the scratchy sofa,
midnight blue against the mustard wall
in the sixth or seventh house we rented.

She remembered our mother's gown,
a slippery dress of rayon--maybe silk--
cut on the bias for a slender woman
proud of her flat hips and athlete's arms,
a strange color, bittersweet,
named for summer berries,
neither red nor pink nor orange-brown
but somewhere in them all.

What does it matter? She was buried in
a dark blue suit, appropriate for death,
and it lay flat against her flattened body,
bunched behind her by the undertaker
because she was so thin.
I would rather think of canvas swimming pools
and bittersweet and even her snappish ways
with me, the sullen, stubborn daughter.

**MICHAEL T.
YOUNG**

SIGNS OF DECAY

I think it started with a molar extraction,
a tooth cracked below the gumline,
irreparable.

After the dentist took what looked
like a silver shoehorn and pushed it out,
it left behind what felt like a sinkhole,

an absence so large I thought I would fall in.
But I became used to what was missing,
even as the losses grew.

My vision started to blur, my stomach refused
the milk and ice cream it once relished.
I started forgetting things like the definition

of certain words or where I parked the car.
Slow depletions, missing pieces,
like a puzzle from a thrift store

that can't be completed, and what's left undone
is the picture of who I am,
even the beauty of my wife and I building together

a way of moving through this fractured world.
So, I find myself clinging to fragments—
shells from a day at the beach, a wedding ring,

a faded memory of standing on a Venetian bridge
at night, small moments that stick to me
like burrs, sometimes get under the skin

and pulse, like the memory of a toothache
from a tooth that's no longer there,
pains that are just enough to wake us up

to the small wonders that are disappearing.

NEW YEAR'S EVE

Crouched under the sink with wrench and flashlight
after removing the stash of cleaners and sponges,
rags and poisons, I think how much like an attic
or basement this space under the sink is, a place
for backups or certain darkneses held in store
for vatic emergencies. Now they're scattered
on the kitchen floor as I stretch to reach the loose nut
anchored at the faucet base, past a hose, a pipe
that I knock, locking the jaw over the nut, swiveling
the tool in small arcs that tighten the goose neck above.
The work we do under floors, behind walls to keep
the wonder of the everyday running every day, or brief
splendors that restore a moment when it's worn
down to the threadbare, like the flocks of pigeons,
how they corkscrewed above the avenue this morning,
tight arcs remaking the air into the message of their flight.

COMES A TIME

When what I have to give
isn't a word or even a look
but my absence, the space
I leave behind, the wake
of my retreat into myself,
a hollow where others
may gather and dream.
This sleep is the sleep
of mourners, those who
can endure only the color
of loss, the way darkness
drapes the furniture
of a room at night. I nuzzle
its creases and folds, and
find time there to reimagine
all the injured meanings.
And when the first goldfinch
sings outside the window,
and the early light burns
at the curtains' edges,
its promise outlines
what I spend the day
trying to understand.

NAKED FEET

My body wakes, dragging the mind to its surface.
Waters ripple, floating knowledge of my wife
breathing beside me in the dark.

I voice it quietly to myself under the covers,
feeling distance open between body
and words, a distance flowing

with something that makes sunsets linger
in memory, holding my wife's hand
at the edge of the world, and sparrows

weaving through the pines there, stitching
the scent of sap through columns of bark.
Consider how even the right words

can shift paths around a lake, because
like heat shimmer, language makes things dance.
Dizzied by the sway of it all, we reach

for other vocabularies, rooted things—
buttonbush, white oaks, mountains where words
sluice down from clouds in a drift of miles

and forgetfulness. Shaken by such running cadences,
leaves cluster into the shape of summer days
when we were only as tall as the shore reeds,

a perspective that made everything seem large
and important. We listened intently to the water
as it threaded the land, we leaned into its rush,

but failed to realize it held it all together.
Instead, we stuck our naked feet in
feeling its chill bite our heels until we laughed.

**LAURA
KAROLEN
KOCH**

LIVING ROOM KINGDOM

When is the last time I played with trains
Assembling a life that fit together—
Exactly and magically together
In a living room kingdom?
When was the last time I could piece together a life for you?

There were no clocks then and no faces
Other than yours.
Bright and laughing, always.
I looked through the little tunnel to
See your eye, wide and alight.
I knew that eye so well that
The tunnel's dimness did not matter.

Words and stories floated around us like steam,
As though every wooden train was really chugging.

The steam smelled like spring, the type
We smelled with our noses pressing the bark
Inhaling until we felt the edges of our lungs.

Sometimes I worked to tell those stories,
Dug through the bedrock of myself
But also things came to me,
Fell on me, gifted from a sacred source,
And the gifts came for me to give to you.
Over and over again, the trains moving,
The coal shoveled in the firebox
One little engine even glowed.
The fuel was endless.

The gifts that I can give you now are
The ones I don't want to give,
More time on your own,
bigger rooms,
trust,
And not words now, but quiet.

The world is reaching for you
The earth softening, calling for your footprints
Coral fans wave
Mountains pose,
The sun ever-glinting off their peaks

I know those mountaintops are arrows
Pointing to all the x's on your treasure maps,
The ones you drew in crayon
Back in the time when your silky head
Rested on a little, lion pillow
And every story began
“Once upon a time but not too long ago”

BUNGALOWS

There was more sky back then
Before the big houses
It rippled over gabled roofs,
Like a sheet fresh on a clothesline
Clean and flapping.

A brace of bungalows
West of the Glimmerglass
East of the Atlantic
Once breathed together
Moored but moving
Near and familiar as boats
In their slips.

Squat and strong,
Arrayed for the weather,
A flock of seagulls
They were white and gray,
Born for this place
No house outdid the other.

Lamps' afterglow dimmed the day's sun
Evening light drifted over tanned or reddened skin
Light as sandpipers' feet, making no footprints.
The house asked you to play cards
And sit on the deck as
Citronella candles danced
In their red, netted cups.

In some kitchens, a pink wooden whale hung
Above the sideboard— the first thing
Grandkids raced to see after the car
Arrived with a crunch on a pebbled driveway,
In some kitchens Grandpa and Grandma waited
In a window ready to open
The old cabinet, filled with m&ms.

Walls of Knotty pine,
Echoes of the pinelands here first,
Lined bedrooms like ship's berths
Fisherman carved with chiseled,
Red cheeks sailed end tables,
Eyes fierce but protective

Surf poles slumbered on high racks
Ready to rise before dawn,
Grips crusted with memory and scale.

Old dresser drawers exhaled
cherry-laced scents of ancestors.
Pincushions, bobbers, and claw crackers
Built our lives awake in the salt-heavy air.

Weathered and dated,
Rare and precious,
Bungalows are treasure boxes.
Slide off the twine of summer,
Open the roof and remember.

BEING A KID IN SUMMER

The shadows, when I noticed them,
Were only lilac shapes swirled with
Dandelions of sunlight in a kaleidoscope.

The whole summer sounded like flip flops
And smelled like green, baking
Until night dropped in gauzy veils.

Sometimes we would lie in the driveway
At dusk, limbs heavy with contentment,
And feel the ease of paleness slide across the sky.

Bats would come, and moths, too,
Their feathery antennae—dreamlike.
We might be roused by an offering of
Ice-cream cones.

The whisper of cool, smooth sugar
the only worthy thought beyond
That pale sky and the inhalation of dusky air.

EGRET VIBRATIONS

Complacency of feathers
White shape fractures
The glass but only
Until ripples contract
Polishing, polishing
water into
Oneness.

Always it will be
Polished from glimmers
To clarity, and it is no wonder
Ancients found answers
In obsidian mirrors,
Found the future
In black luster.

And when they weren't searching
Their fingers skimmed smoothness
Knowing comfort deep down
From Earth's core to the sky
To our own hands, eyes,
Souls.

Disruption and a knitting together,
A gathering over and
Over

Balanced as a horizon.

HALF-GHOST

The slowing footsteps of your
Worn black shoes, slip-ons now,
Makes me think of the lightness
To come. How one day you
Will float away. Your old body so
Heavy, so slow, slower
Almost by the week, fills me
With lead, fills me with your
Whole weight and the weight
Of the loss I will bear when your
Tweed blazer is worn
By the wind

Fading and fading, slower and slower
Heavier and heavier my
Heart as your ghostly lightness
Looms like the weight of our planet where
Our shadows stretch like trees, and I am
Aware that part of you has left now, is
Leaving today, so I reach out
To your shoulder, your
Tweed, light, light as lamb's wool and
Try to be happy in the now,
In and out with my breath, light,
Light as air.

NAT

BOTTIGHEIMER

CODE ORANGE: AIR UNHEALTHY FOR SENSITIVE GROUPS

Biking through the capital city in a mid-afternoon haze that's as filamented as water that's poached eggs, I feel emotion condensing on every surface. I pull my sopping tank top, dark, from my chest; it sags back. The Delaware, desperate for rain, trickles over the rocky falls, but still presses the highways that girdle its shores apart. Samson shoving pillars aside. Birds traverse the volume above the river as if in another climate. Sun glares off their backs. Each set of wings a mirage. Everywhere tires grind to powder without cease. Their dust steeps, thickens the air. If I could somehow rise and coalesce, into a shelter or a shawl. If I could keep us from the heat. Protect us all.

SWOLLEN GHAZAL BASED ON A SYNONYM FOR SEA-LEVEL RISE

It used to be only hurricanes flooded barrier island streets,
now any king tide the bay may burble up through the storm drains
to make the main drag an aquarium. This is *enstasy*.

Move along, there's nothing here to see, except, perhaps, opportunity –
we're creating new beachfront property, thanks to *enstasy*.

Inaction vis-a-vis the swelling sea might be due to our distractibility, but just as
likely
it's innumeracy, an incapacity to see the implications of a steady accumulation
of millimeters. Either way, we're doing too little about *enstasy*.

In models, the climate changes gradually. But plates have quaked
and glaciers slip and it's easy to imagine an ocean whipped into a frenzy by an ice
shelf ripping from its boreal bed...that's a more radical vision of *enstasy*.

I wish I could foresee what will come to pass – there IS a history that's sure
to be – but with or without us we'll have to see. I'm pretty sure eventually
the story will be one of human superfluity, and a new understanding of
enstasy.

MURMURING TO MYSELF IN THE STREAM

You'd think I know what I want, but I don't, swim aimless
in the water lipping each bit of tumbling matter to see
if it's sustenance. You'd think I know what I think,

but I don't, doubt every holding position in the flow,
mistrust my experience and understanding, wonder
what is so true I can bank on it. A pond of love and kindness,

a pool in which to play using all God's gifts to a fish, flash and twist,
balance in a curl of current, laughter at the passage of warm and cool
eddies over the aurora of my skin. Will I ever learn what it takes

to feel free in the rush? for the very water to comprise my soul, bone and flesh?

**CELINA
THOMAS**

2026

I don't write resolutions
Because I lose resolve
The second my pen meets paper

This morning
A woman told me
That if you tell people your goals and ambitions
Your brain thinks you've already achieved them

So if I don't let my pen tell the paper
My resolutions
Then maybe things will resolve on their own

WFH

22 open tabs
Two screens
A dim white glow
And a dull ache
Behind oversized
Outdated lenses

Three meetings
One no-show
Flag message
Follow-up

A cold, stale cup of morning coffee
Will find its way to the kitchen drain
The sour essence as it spills over
Last night's unwashed dishes

**MEGAN
GILBERT**

NJ Poets Prize Honorable Mention

THE WORLD AND OTHER MIRACLES

I wanted to hear the world dancing,

to touch the threads of the sky,
and watch the sun wash the oceans

gold, and not when my daughter asks me where I've been,
who I am, had nothing to say

except it was good, it was good, it was.
I will point out the edges
of the world, ask her to touch its hem,
and heal.

When I land in another sunlit country,
it is as a woman with new bones,

who has learned to loose the earth
from herself. When I cross the street,

I do not hope to see a ghost,
might only see a woman

who looks like me, bending over
to smell flowers. As the wheels lift,

the earth itself falls away from me,
the earth I gripped with my mother

falls through my fingers, is loosed
from my bones, so that before I was buried,

now I find myself in another country.

TEACH ME TO SING ANY SONG

NJ Poets Prize Honorable Mention

Jinja, Uganda

-“Therefore the land mourns, And everyone who lives in it languishes”

In a village, a car pressed a street boy
into the dirt.

They laid him in the road
and laughed.

It took hours of begging to get them
to cover his body.

What can you say to me
to make me forget?

The bones of his fingers still grip the Earth,
strum the harp of its back,
opened beneath rainy season to metal-glint bone.
His mouth still remembers the taste of mangoes,
so he doesn't have to remember the taste of his blood.
His smile could still tell the Nile what it means to run
dry, to ask for nothing. His eyes could still
shame the doves.

What song could you sing
for me to lose the rhythm
of this one?

The world never thought it would be like this.
The sky never agreed to take the souls of boys,
to spread this burden
like a handful of dirt
thrown across the sky.

II.
This is the dying that for the living never ends.

Song: green backed soldiers dragging
a woman by her wet hair into the tree line,
a husband whose arms are sewn to his hips,
now his hands grasp the red earth,
legs run along the sky.

Mothers flung to the river
to sing with water through their lungs
the words for pain only water can remember
and still stay clear.

What can you say to me
to stop my singing
their song?

Lilies scrape the surface of the water,
their songs are rising,
but who can translate
the Luganda of movement?

III.

What is there to say to men
who cracked their sides wide?
What is there to say to them
who shot many men?
Who can deny them their final laughter?

One woman leans close to my ear, her lips bow
over her teeth; everything in her has surrendered.

The clouds gather, waiting to smear the tan streets crimson,
to stripe the black earth red.

She says "No joke here. Only a boy,"
a boy wetting the heels of a crowd
with his blood.

Teach me to sing any song
that could make the trees forget
their mangoes, and the crowd to stop
their laughter.

No death could make the river stop breaking
with laughter over the rocks

just like no life could keep me from singing.

--In memory of Kabbuto

LIKE YOU, SOMETIMES I WONDER

Like you, sometimes I wonder
how much of myself I can give—
my body folding over another body like petals,
my life settling into another life like sand.

This I have learned if nothing else.

Give
like the river that waters the plain
with no thought of ending itself.

Even though everyone
who has ever wanted me has
had me. Even though
I had been protecting my body,
forgot that there are worse things that can be
broken my mind
my poetry
even.

Give
with this one belief. You deserve a river,
when all I can give you is a poem,
waiting for God
to turn it to wine,

into loaves
and
fish,
so there it will be
a poem
that could almost take the place
of loaves
and
fish.

POEM

Miraj-Sangli Red Light District, India

For a while, I thought I'd write you a poem,
so there it would be, a poem

that could never take the place of body,
bury the earth in your eyes.

Night caught in your teeth,
you laugh your grief
a moment only.

Your sister breathes mango.
So much light then that I am afraid,
afraid of you, sliding in and out
through your slate blue mouth.

There's not a day that goes by that I don't
think of how little I know, how insignificant
my memory of awakened birds or June or a day
as long as you are no longer
in it.

I never knew until now
why I have no mantra.

The dawn hasn't yet stitched the horizon to the now,
and I am thinking of you.

I wish I could write you a poem
but each time you open your mouth to speak,
a whole sun rises, greater still
than the birds of you that sing,
or the tigers that yawn your name
or poetry even—that is my mantra.

--For Umesh, Still Age Ten

**SUSANNA
RICH**

HOW THE POEM WAITS

As a galvanized bucket
in a basement corner,
bubble-bottomed, dented,
handle missing,

too holey for bailing
floods, full of bent nails,
bolts without screws,
blooming rust.

Stir, with a screwdriver,
the tarnished pennies,
bobby pins with frozen prongs,
a mouse that couldn't
scale back up the bucket's walls,
curled into its death.

Musty with age,
moldering with desire,
what needs to be
shaken, spilled.

**JOHN
O'BRIEN**

CRASHING AND

I found a rhombus of a shell,
on September sand,
among an uncaring herd of gulls,
laying along their beach,
where waves performed again,
the green of the sea unearthed,
the metal shudders of a boardwalk were still,
a steady breeze pushed my hair backward.

I felt the soft edge of the shell
in my left hand, digging into the sand
to make a trench,
finding the give too great.

My sneakers are cut up,
their days have been numbered,
my socks scratch at my ankles.

I don't have time for this world.
But getting these clothes wet feels like too much.
Leaving my wallet behind? My phone?
What if I just swam out there?

What world might I come upon?
One of resistance.
Of a man pulling me back?
My screaming, my rippling eyes,
salt in every wound,
sitting in a point pleasant police station

A grandmother with white hair,
sunburnt skin clung to iron bones,
glaring at the dripping-bearded boy
who sits in a towel in a blue plastic chair
with green legs.

She wonders how long I'll be.

I feel the shell in my hands,
I return to the curvature of the earth.

There are no words left to be spoken,
no speeches left unheard,
no listeners eager for a speaker,
there is only the deafening noise,
the rapid decline,
the gasp for anything more than this push,
wondering if we will be the rocks among the waves,
or the scavenging birds on the shore,
some of them looking on,
others picking at their feathers,
reaching for a familiar itch.

There are silences now.
Chasms of remarkable depth.

**JONATHAN
GREENHAUSE**

NEVERENDING

To be or not to breathe, that is the quest to raise them in a bulletproof reality, to shield them physically by our bodies if assailed by a hail of bullets. Surrounded by a cycle of violets, trembling oaks release a downfall of acorns, mournful memories stirred among their roots. Speaking of rootlessness, now that our War on Terror has pretended to end, we're safe. Faraway, sleepless prisoners at Guantanamo applaud. Our future's stuck in the process of getting past loss, equal parts forgetfulness & ignorance, bound to what's passed, how peace in the Middle East still hasn't erupted; & whose fault is it? This question's a trick: No one deserves to die because of who we're born to. In this hypothetical situation, I run out of hypotheses. I walk into a brick wall 'til I'm only a chalk outline. When the neverending war ends, we decide to celebrate, right before starting a new one.

PRIMORDIAL

The toppled shopping carts dotting the railroad tracks
died for your sins, transubstantiated

into mangled plastic, into rust-spotted
metal matrices torn asunder from their gridded siblings

at the supermarket checkout line. You loaded them
with ripe avocados & boneless chicken thighs,

discount toilet paper & salted pork,
rolled them to banged-up cars over split pavement,

ditched them in the littered corner of a parking space;
& now, their wrecked frames

are a weed-strewn labyrinth where garter snakes wriggle,
pigeons scavenging through charred remains

of fried chicken, as itinerant souls
stake burlap tents & set up soiled cardboard boxes.

No one's immune to this repositioning of habitats
as our Earth implodes, ejecting its plumes of rare metals

alchemizing with turtle bones & egret feathers,
with willows' silvered cotton bursts

blighted at the touch. I guide my dog backwards,
observe how carts reassemble,

tents struck down, the tremble of a freight train
retreating, capitulating into the quiet

of an unfastening of railroad ties. The corridor widens,
fuses into a meadow graced by deer grazing

on flowering plants, by bison mowing prairie grass
transformed into pre-colonial America

before the serendipitous advent of a land bridge
frozen into migrant possibility. Time

regresses into swamplands & ammonites, into a lack
of multicellular organisms, my dog & I

loosened of our presence, everything we once were
incinerated in a flash of Paleozoic light.

INSIDE, OUT

The smiling photographer captures my dumb face
expressing the drunken joy of love's reciprocity,
of serendipitously discovering at the perfect time
their stand-up comic sister; meanwhile, looming
gigantically behind us in her suspect dormancy is
the carved-out vacancy of Ms. Mt. St. Helens with
her lingering warning to listen to what's hidden.
In no time, the Polaroid's glossy square slides
from its slot, a ghostly print formed from this
recently-lived past; &, as the fine portrait lightens,
I spot – for the first time, slightly to my left –
Raquel's plastic vampire teeth, a Groucho Marx
mustache, & her eyelids grotesquely inside-out...
Once, our separate lives were a ransacked peak
devoid of life; but time fills in the gaps, & love is
that beauty of feeling you're finally in on the joke.

**JOE
WEIL**

Winner of the 2026 NJ Poets Prize

HAPPY POEM IN RECOLLECTION (FOR FELIX SANTIAGO, WHEREVER HE MAY BE)

My Junker Eurosport quit on routes 1 and 9
at rush hour, during a heat wave
in 1994.

People did more than honk.

They called me names in 24 languages.

Finally, the tower came.

He owed his life to schleppers like me:

guys who drive cars with holes

in them where holes are not supposed to be.

When he went to hook it up,

the front end gave a bit.

I was laughing. I was in the middle

of 24 languages, in 98 degrees, laughing.

He flat bedded it to my mechanic,

a Puerto Rican guy named Felix

who played the Accordion Weekends

in a Polish Polka Band.

Felix shook his head, smiled,

kicked imaginary dirt,

like he was waiting for a relief pitcher.

He said: "you're the smartest

dumb ass white boy,

I ever met"

and I said: "How many smart dumb ass

white boys do you know?"

And he smiled and said: "One."

It was done two days later-- whatever done

means with a car like that.

The air conditioner wasn't working.

But I told him to skip the small stuff.

I took it up to 70 in the heat,

loved the breeze on my already

balding and sweaty head.

My tape deck had Dylan's Blood on the tracks,

with Haydn up next. There was one star shining over

a woman on the Chivas Regal billboard sign.

I swear she winked, so I winked back:

me, "the smartest dumb ass white boy
ever met" and Felix, closing up shop,
staring at his autographed
Bobby Vinton and Celia Cruz posters,
both of us alive in a world full of Junkers
only our laughter, and maybe a good Polka
keeping our universe from falling apart.

BLACK STONE ON WHITE BY CAESAR VALLEJO

Translated by Joe Weil

I will die on a Thursday in Paris rain
On that day, yes, that Thursday I still recall.
In Paris, I'll die, without any strain
Perhaps some wet Thursday in the fall.

A Thursday as today is a Thursday,
Yet my bones betray me as I scrawl
My "self" alone, myself a path unmet
Like never before, myself a wet black stone

Caesar Vallejo has died , blow after blow
They threw—white stone, though he did nothing wrong,
They clubbed him hard and added a rope
To swing the black rock; my witness is this song

and all the Thursdays, a single white arm bone
and rain, this rain, this solitude—this road.

**HAPPY POEM NUMBER 7 IN WHICH MY OLD
FRIEND JOE SALERNO COMES BACK FROM THE
DEAD TO VISIT ME**

He's still wearing that baseball cap,
and has a pen in his flannel shirt pocket.

We're heading some place on route 80,
counting the dead deer along the way.

We come to a bear, and he has me stop.
Silent, we observe the corpse.

He sings a song in bear
(you can do that when you're dead).

We drag the carcass where no 18 wheeler
will turn it into mush.

He sings to the crows and to
the Turkey Vultures.

They obey their natures.
Woe, those turkey vultures are some

kind of ugly. Joe laughs and says
What if I told you everything

burns with love -- like the seraphim?
Everything is on fire. Even you Joe

with your losses. What if I told you
We never see the truth while we're alive

Because if we did, we'd be stunned out
of our grudges, we'd leave our

grief behind like skins we shed-- we'd
stand transfigured in the sun.

What if I told you this?
And I laugh and say: "You just did."

And he hugs me and disappears.
How is this a happy poem?

I remember him. I do not forget.
The elephants and I have a lot in common.

Thirty years, and I can still see him
cleaning his glasses, slowly.

We are all burning. The bear lies under
Ursa major. The trucks go by.

It is a soft rain falling on route 80.
I love the sound of tires in the rain.

Steam rises from the road. The bear
sleeps in the cave of my life.

When I wake up, I will speak bear, too.
And as Joe said, I will burn like the seraphim
leaving only this happiness for a wound.

HAPPY POEM NUMBER 8 (CO-STARRING ST CATHERINE OF SIENNA)

Start being brave about everything
Bring love like a left hook to the streets.
Have more cajones than a mafia crew
Be who God meant you to be
and set the world on fire.
Did you think goodness wasn't fierce?
It wears black and wields the sharpest blade.
What are you waiting for?
Joy is the knife you carry between your teeth
Swim across that river
and cut fear's lying throat.

HAPPY POEM FEATURING THOMAS AQUINAS

Winner of the 2026 NJ Poets Prize

Grace is nothing else but
A certain beginning of glory within us
as when the sun's light fingers
a slat of the bedroom blinds
and bends to touch a shoulder
still warm with sleep,
and a dog's nose, the carpet blue, slightly
worn from years of being stepped on.
It walks down the stairs
and enters the kitchen ahead of us.
touching the copper sauce pans,
and the avocado salad bowl, left over
from the 70's.
The things we love tell us
who we are--
the bric-a-brac suffused with the touch
of someone who has gone,
an old rosary held together
by a series of bread ties--
When I have truly looked
none
are of this world,
but speak to some spirit in this house
what has been broken and mended
a hundred times,
a grace that moves through me
beyond what is "important"
The opening of the eye lids
to another day

**RACHEL
PARSONS**

FLOWING WATERS MIRROR THE MOON

Flowing waters mirror the moon.
Above, a small body hovers for one moment,
Suspended,
And falls,
Shattering the moon into waning crescents.

Tiny legs scramble on the surface
Until they find tension,
Balancing and threatening to sink.
One body would be enough,
But body
Upon body
Upon body
Are piled on her back.
Eight legs support a hundred more—
Innocence clinging to a mother.

Damp feet slowly sink.
Some loosen their futile grasps on the doomed buoy
And are carried away toward oblivion.
Others linger on, exhausted,
Till all warmth below fades away.

They are left displaced and drifting,
But still together,
Perhaps to ultimately emerge from the ever flowing waters.

THE AMERICAN REDSTART

I take careful steps through the woods,
My head turned upward.
The slightest rustle in the leaves catches my eye.
Was it just a breeze or—?
There it is again!
Flitting back and forth!
I raise my binoculars for a closer focus on
A small, feathered body,
Charcoal with a dappled sunset on its wings.
It proudly displays its tailfeathers,
Orange splayed out into a fan.
And then, it's gone again,
Off to another branch, another treetop.
I commit each detail to memory
And pull out the regional guidebook,
Flipping through pages until I find the identification.
My heart swells.
A new creature to me.
I am alone with this new epiphany,
A brief taste of man's original dominion,
How Adam must have felt with each new discovery,
Bearing the responsibility to name each one.
And now I know a name too.
The American redstart.

**DARA
LAINE**

THANK-YOU CARDS

I bought thank-you cards—
peonies, bluebirds—
meant to write:
Thank you for trying.
Thank you for fighting
like you knew him.
I think about you still.

They sit in a drawer,
edges curling inward,
carrying what I couldn't say.

**LAURIE
BYRO**

MOURNING DOVE TRIPTYCH

Ah! As the heart grows older

It will come to such sights colder. Thomas Hardy

His curled fist of thorns
untangled the wind's intentions
but when I find him, frozen, fists in prayer

on the roadside, his rain swelled body
masqueraded as a discarded Christmas ornament,
it hurt to toss him further into a cradle-grave of moss.

I hoped a hungry family of foxes would make
some use of him being stunned to death like that.
He was perfect like a dog's new toy.

I touched his feathers sticky wet with frost.
Whose life was I grieving, Margaret?
Poor old thing.

He was roped into being a sign of hope,
But he wore the same jacket as an owl, would rather
be anonymous like clouds, some unnoticed being.
Not fame that odd suitor, but wise old age.

A wife to fuss and peck with. He tumbled
through a blistery argument with God, how
the clouds are barren with the loss of this one.

Stars will snap and whip their ice skate blades all
Winter. He has seven or eight more times before
he becomes human. This tumbling to the rush of ground

only aches momentarily. Hardly a dot on the
end of a sentence, a tired wave on the shore, no need
for grief or another thought, the pushing out
of an egg, a wet verb, birthing the same as darkness.
The next and the next will be something more
permanent to loss, a thousand-year-old
Sycamore given its color, a thousand grey mornings assaulted
by rain but then honey-sun. These barren clouds remain

as houses and skulls, their smoky fists
a summons to the rest of his flock.

LAZARUS RECEIVES A VISIT FROM HIS SISTER MARY

We put Mary to work in the garden,
had her bury her fingers in the black earth
of Cyprus. Often, we heard her weep.
The foolishness of loving a man,
promised to God.

Her tears baptized white and scarlet petals.
We sent her to the market to sell
vegetables we had grown. She carried
her wicker basket against her tiny frame.
She struggled under the bounty of peppers,
and figs.

When he asked her if she loved him,
they both knew what he meant. After
the murder that darkened the skies on the hill,
she threw herself at the cross like a mad thing.

She made me burn her hair. I used a straight
knife, sharpened against a rock and cut it
with care. Her head on a table, I worried
it was her throat she wanted me to slit.
Her eyes were fevered with a strange grief
that is not of spiritual passion. It was then,
I understood why she had broken
into her moneybox, squandered perfume
to wash his feet.

But her hair, her beauty gone. All traces
of the act that made her sweet to us, lying
on the floor ready to be swept away.

It was yellow like a field of sun orchids.
It was a gold coin, waiting to be spent.

THE SISTER OF LAZARUS LEAVES CYPRUS

When I wake, it is in a forest, different
from the Island where we live. I plant
a fig tree to remind me of home.
At the end of my longing is a door

to release me to sorrow. All journeys
begin with a false footstep.
Overhead, branches shift, creaking
in the wind. I am alone for the first time

from the center of my life. Fearful birds
dart, shadow-mice skitter into deeper forest.
Whatever is left of his starry voice,
let me hear it before it is taken by the night.

I loved a man who was born twice to a passion
I cannot stir with my hands.
Let me lie under these trees that glow
with eyes that conceal moonlight. Let me pray

for a distance that lets me stop counting
figs on a tree not accustomed to change.

CROWS

When I turn sixty, crows follow me and drop from the sky like umbrellas.
They need no adornment with their sooty mascara wings. They startle me,
in their black gowns of unrepentant beauty. They cock their gun-metal heads
as they assess me in my dull pale skin. At sixty-four, after years of treating
them to a banquet of bread, they begin to romance me. I find gifts
they have left, an elastic for my hair, a shiny piece of foil. One Jesus freak,
the King of Crows, sacrifices his egg. I knew by then, their preferences,
cutting off pieces of fat from my steak. Old salami, baked beans became
barter for their regard as they watch my comings and goings. When
they don't show, an oddity, I pray for their safe return. At seventy, I surrender
to them, they have summoned me for so long, regaled me as Queen. I become Crow-Crone,
wear their black-pearl feathers in my hair. I no longer resist the lure
of them, although for a time I wished a sly vixen or handsome toad
had adopted me, became my familiar. Lately the leader extends a Hansel and Gretel
bone-claw attempting to cast a spell. Inevitably they gather and carry me off.
I wake in the deep forest, my hair now their nest, their dark feathers harvest rain.

**HOWARD
PROSNITZ**

CAPTION

Fishman pulls from the mind's pool
a tall fish standing on a tail fin
holding a fishing pole in a side fin;
a man's angry head protruding from a creel
slung round the middle of the slick fish
who reels in the day's catch
unmindful of the raging head
while the moon (not in the picture)
moves the tide in.

**DANIEL
GENE
BARLEKAMP**

A NEW JERSEY SKYLINE

When my mother-in-law
finds a box of photos from my childhood,
she says they could have come
from an earlier era.

Here we have the multi-families
on Paulison Avenue,
their gray-green-pink paint faded in a way
that says it was never really fresh,
here the dark paneling
of basements and Italian restaurants,
here the dirty snow piled at the curbs
where Joey Dee and the Shirelles
sang their first songs.

I drive around this New England town—
new to me, even after ten years—
and force the neighborhoods
to feel like home.

They're nice, but not familiar;
picturesque, but not the place
where you pull up to visit Grandma
on Thanksgiving afternoon
when the rest of the street is quiet,
the smell of sausage
lingering in the air.

That's foolish, I know.
People visit their grandmas everywhere,
or don't,
and missing something
isn't the same as wanting it back.

But on frigid February mornings,
I stare past the steeple in the center of the square
and find warmth in asphalt shingles,
in TV antennas,
in the Eggos and Folgers
of an earlier era
somewhere down 95.

GLOVERSVILLE IN THE SNOW

The ghosts have no one to haunt
as they peer through moth-eaten curtains
at the traffic passing on the Thruway,
ignored by people
with other places to be.

Blessed Sacrament Church groans under the weight
of a leaden sky,
praying for long-gone parishioners
to plow the parking lot.

The remains of the glovers, those venerable elders,
lie in wait in a roadside graveyard
while the rusted bones of a truss bridge
hold back the advancing clouds.

**TINA
KELLEY**

FIELD GUIDE TO NORTH AMERICAN WORDS

The best, introduced by friends, inspire delight—
Jim the pilot dreams of piercing the *aeropause*,
the height ordinary aircraft cannot reach above.

Focus on words with medicinal powers to enhance
joy, that polish a gem, that percolate. Place *sillage*
on your tongue, sigh “si-ahhhzh,” the degree
to which a perfume’s fragrance lingers.

Our ancestors packed elegant picnics
in single words: *ambisinister*, awkward, left-handed
in both hands; *dealate*, to rob or divest of wings.

And how did Sanskrit forebears come to agreement?
Pointing, insisting, the bossiest one winning the battle:
“Rock is *adri*, *kha* is sky, I tell you, remember that
tomorrow, and tell your whole family. Spread the word.”
But wait, don’t you need words when inventing words?

Eons later, we’ve somehow created *theurgist*, a magician
who persuades a supernatural being to act. The best words,
good for both metamorphing and metaphoring,
are believed to boost the immune system.

Consider *legato*: slow, flowing, of the adjective family,
shaped like a cookie jar, solitary singer, its call
similar to a mourning dove’s, but lower.

Marvel at *anbedonia*, the absence of happiness,
found on the roots of dying trees, smelling of rotten
filbert nuts, known to flush the remains of its parents.

Nulliparity—childlessness—a rather stocky noun
with Latinate plumage and drooping habit, extraneous.

Propitiate, along with *hegemony* and *pejorative*,
are categorized in the family “learned after college.”
Habitat includes windowless classrooms, library stacks,
letters from Edwardian women. Look them up yourself.

Collect as well the streak-breasted and small, surviving
on dew, growing in vacant lots and sidewalk cracks, *ruderal*.

Ammil, in Devon, is the fine film of silver ice
that coats leaves when freeze follows thaw, a brief
talisman I held as a child, not again till now.

Ponder why the commonest noun in seven tongues
is *time*, which in Bosnian, Tagalog, and Latvian,
plus all the romance languages, also means weather.

All we have, all we talk about. As vocabularies shrink,
narrowing thought, each new entry on my Life List delights.

One perfect word hibernates in dark, mossy nooks on leeward
mountainsides. It alone means glad ache after long laughter,
the shivering exhale, the middle name of my unborn grandson.

GOLDEN SHOVEL FOR MARTY

Four days at the cabin, and I feel like my rude teenage son who sometimes -- no, always -- lets me walk first so the spiderwebs plaster my eyes, not his. Death taps you first, girl. Is accelerating, taking strength and sight and swallowing, is

silencing your words. Life is formal poetry, we're always constrained by invisible fences anyway, why not embrace it? you said, kept faith in an afterlife, especially when your dead parents danced around you as giant swallows, especially when

your phone switched to your dead dad's area code on his *yahrzeit*. And when we saw you were a clue in the *New York Times* crossword, it was a crumb Mom left, on her birthday, you said. Now five months after your death, the exact second I

say your name I see a hummingbird in the plain green bush ahead. What's it mean? A gift of certainty beyond coincidence? That there's more. That we should laugh.

TAMMY SMITH

NJ Poets Prize Honorable Mention

MUSICAL ANHEDONIA

My therapist tells me he doesn't care about music, seldom listens to it. He's the only person I've met to admit this. Imagine him not snapping his fingers to the iconic songs wedding bands play at bar mitzvahs and sweet sixteens—I worry he won't relate to me. Freud was so unmoved by music he analyzed his inability to derive pleasure from it—*un malaise de musique*. Was this neural disconnect the reason Dora's treatment failed? I spent decades in and out of psychiatric hospitals, replaying my favorite songs in my head while tied down in restraints wet with my own waste in the quiet room. I wouldn't have survived without Susan calling me on the hospital payphone like we were still in our teens committed to learning the lyrics of "Making Love Out of Nothing at All," and the rest of *Air Supply's Greatest Hits*, to memory. Every week we'd create another mixtape without knowing some future music therapist at Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital would ask me about it while strumming "This Land Is Your Land." Woody Guthrie was held there too, according to his records, wounded and scratched by frequency. Was he waiting for his music to save him? So attached to my bright yellow Sony Walkman, Susan complained she lost track of all the places I went sporting those splash-proof headphones. I keep worrying my therapist won't hear everything I say. I hope he remembers to keep good notes.

TRIGGER POINTS

NJ Poets Prize Honorable Mention

Blistered and raw,
this thumb sticks out
like a flimsy promise
under pressure.
Its taut tendons
are prone to injury
from repetitive movements
and overextension.
I shove it inside
my mouth like a piece of
candy—something sweet
lodged in my cheek,
resting against my fuzzy,
thick tongue. The tip
is the best part to suck;
its sour, sweaty smell
keeps me company
for hours behind bars.
A feast at the bottom
of this crib where my mother
left me. I play peekaboo
with her shadow till it drifts
so far the walls forget
her shape. I curl up
into myself, waiting for
the hunger to ebb,
but the salt on my skin
tastes like grit and grief.
Pity this thumb—I pray
it won't break, or worse,
fall off if it's no longer
attached to my lips—
long before I discovered
it's a digit, and not
just my favorite finger.
I can count on this thumb
to prevail after it loses

every wrestle. I trust it
will stand up for me
when my father sneers
and points out every
scar I carved
into my wrist. *No one*
will ever love you,
he predicts, but
my thumb can't
reject me. It hails rides
from dangerous men.

**GEORGE
MURRAY**

THE GREAT DIVIDE

The cell number to which my credit card
Is linked has been disconnected these
Ten years. Evaporated like desert
Moisture. Yet it remains, a wry comment
Entered on the every-day page.

Page 27,070 as it happens.

Let the pages fall from the book one by
One, into the wastebasket of the earth,
Or scatter in the wind like ash from the
Fire now extinguished in which we
Prepared ourselves, prepared you, to
Go lightly up and then settle again.

The credit card company has sent me
Many texts to that number, searching for
Me, as I have searched for the right phrase
Wanting to link me to what has wafted by
Like an indefinable fragrance. "That number
Cannot be texted," I say. It is no more."
"We cannot confirm your identity" is the
Response. Nor can I. A string of participles
Joined by dramatic commas argues that
What has passed is nonetheless, or some
Similar construction, based on connectives
That link to nothing---emotion without anchor.

I should have changed the account details the day
After you perished, explained to all that my
Identity had been cauterized and the necrotic
Tissue burned away, that I was now the default
Primary account holder, the responsible party,
Disconnected from that which has fallen into
The earth, but still in possession of that which clung
To me, the residual dust that contains everything,
Its faint aroma, that of a certain kind
Of fire. I should have registered my new
Number, my new status and brushed away
The charred remains of the lost universe.

Now, for the purposes of clarity, I will howl
Like a finer, simpler animal bereft
Of participles and adverbs, unavailable
At any number, of whom nothing is expected,
Whose cry is distant and attenuated,
Who finds himself on the mountainside
At last and services his hunger with
Focus and commitment but without
Complaint or question. My eyes will open as
The light dims and I will canter lopsidedly
Onward, inaccessible and without
Access, sinking my feet in memorial soil.

**PAUL
RABINOWITZ**

A POEM IN THE MIDDLE

Risk

I was asked to write a poem that fits on a page
one that lightly taps the reader on the shoulder
placed in the middle between a true love story
about finding a partner in the midst of grieving
and a speculative fiction work with gory details
about predation and the harsh ecosystem of the wild
my work doesn't need to knock anyone off their seat
it can be a simple segue from one piece to the other
maybe set in a desert following a hungry coyote
to emphasize how perceptive this sentient animal is
their capacity to feel emotions similar to humans
following its actions as it scampers over sandstone
a full moon floats between land and the celestial
casting shadows like a bridge to segue the night
the coyote stares at an incorrectly installed fence
leaning over and near total collapse raises one leg
and freezes as it sniffs the night air evaluates risk
learned through experiences and past interactions

Calculation

we both observe Ms Gottfried drying her hair
an east coast transplant who arrived last week
in the middle of the night during a dust storm
but unlike the intuitive mammal I'm overthinking
stuck on a twilight vision between coyote and dog
indistinguishable features when seen from a distance
at this hour when my body's chemistry accepts risk
I'll type through the night and cross over into morning
when the light breaks through illuminating new lines
as the coyote lowers his raised paw onto the earth
stealthily crosses the broken fence into the dark yard

Reward

opening the door Ms Gottfried lets out her mini-poodle
Foofoo sniffs the backyard landing a perfect spot
calculating reward the coyote lifts his paw and freezes
waits for the door to close as Ms Gottfried withdraws
tightens her clawed hair clip sips a gin and tonic
waits for Foofoo to finish and press its nose to glass
a bridge to ease the loneliness of Ms Gottfried
she'll stroke its coiffed fur to bond with the animal
reduce her anxiety as she figures a way through
a sense of belonging in this wild place when suddenly
she feels a tap on her shoulder opens the clawed clip
her wild hair falls around the frowning face of a coyote
she guides him to her lap wipes his bloodstained mouth
strokes its bowed head blue-eyes gently closing

MEGHA SOOD

TASTE OF HOME

I ransacked my memories only to come empty-handed. The immigrant in me, for this traveler, the search never ends.

I looked everywhere for something good and golden, which I tried to drag across borders, tightly stuffed within folds of my *attar-perfumed* clothes

carrying smell of home in my suitcases. Crossing invisible lines with me, almost familiar fragrance, something that no longer stayed yet never left.

Like a musk deer always in search, I looked for it everywhere except inside me. The burden of responsibility tugged along with my hyphenated identity.

I kept dangling between the two, akin to limbo, trying to stay true to either of them, only to get lost in translation every time.

I open my mouth, and my tongue turns and twists to fit the cookie-cutter rules of this new world.

Like a dandelion, I am swayed by the winds, doused by the fragrance of opportunities, and by something good and golden.

The sky welcomes everyone with its blue kindness. With hands laced with henna and turmeric-tainted fingers, I try to carve my own identity.

I dig my teeth deeper into the fresh, juicy pulp of Mangoes each summer trying to masticate the similarities in their pith.

Every mouthful of yellow nectar I gulp ends in disappointment, leaving a metallic taste of longing inside me.

It churns into a shade of loneliness each time, every time. The dissimilarities overpower the experience, and I've been left longing for more.

What exactly is the taste of home? Who could tell?

I stopped at every place that bears a resemblance to home only to move to the next one.

They say I'm a pessimist; still looking for love more than I deserve. Still looking for a home when there is none.

EPICENTER

No matter where I start,
my poems curl back
to the same moment of me
a survivor of childhood
of motherhood, of sisterhood,
reliving part of the last conversation
I had with my mother
a clipped sentence that broke my soul
a tainted moment in time
marked with the penury of silence
when my mother stopped talking,
stopped talking under the pretext
of favoring one daughter over another
repenting for her sins of leaving her alone
of caring for someone
who never cared for anyone
But now that matters the most
cause we are all paying for our sins
under the pretext of old age and motherhood
my mother conveniently stripped away all her relationships
a family of three daughters and a son
their families that once filled up my father's home
seeping laughter and joy in every nook and corner
now left aloof, alone, and abandoned
left asunder under the dearth of grief
an unnamed sadness,
and no matter where I start
all my poems lean toward this silence
under the weight of abandonment
living with the trauma of a relationship
called *Motherhood*.

FORGIVENESS

The endless repetition of the prayers has undone me.
I have cut open myself endlessly to see where I belong.

*What is the color of my land? My home, the womb to my desires.
How does the soil smell after the first rains?*

Every time I reached out and scooped a handful of feathers,
I returned empty-handed. An act of redemption—

turns out to be nothing but a vengeful response. A burning that never gives warmth.
I scratch the wounds to see how God belongs to the pain.

To see how loneliness speaks to me in a new language. The solitude that seeps into my soul
cuts like a prayer but still acts like a tourniquet

that stops me from bleeding to death. I want to know how harsh the cries of a wailing mother,
running through the charred streets of her war-torn town,

as she strings together the pain of her loved ones slaughtered on the streets.
What pitch can cause resonance in pain?

I want to know how deep the pain should be sanded from my soul
for me to carry the forgiveness in my proffered hands.

**MARRYAM
NAQVI**

WALK/REMEDY

the broken stone lays alone
like a fallen molar
out of the mouth of a chirping bird
the underbelly of the cloud is set on fire
like a child, i suckle the honey from words
whose cat is this? grazing in no man's land
sighs and sounds, familiar yet foreign
scratches in between the whispers of a child
praying for rain, searching for shelter,
to be fostered by the leaves of the forest
a vaulted arch, branches like hands interlaced
the evening breeze never disappoints in may
on my silent retreat or sacred pilgrimage
the fireflies' glow salves my pain
i touch the leaves for a blessing
i walk on roots to steady my step
i will go as far as my feet take me
not one foot further, not one step less
i whisper secrets to the psithurism
holding tight to the Hand that shapes me
tonight i will let my legs decide
how tired this earth will make me

HONEYDEW

all of my life has been
a walk around the prickly bush in june
on a sidewalk too narrow for more than myself.
all of my heart has tasted
the honeydew sap plucked by passing love
lodged in my throat, like important words
sometimes coming up, juggled by my tongue.
i still crush them like apple seeds
tasting earth and cedar trees
spitting them back into the mouth
of summer's hungry setting sun

**LORNA
JEAN
SILVER**

PREY

Shoulders shirked,
Nature's ugly children
stack the treetops
like troubled youths
stack city stoops
in summer.

On some secret cue,
one after the other
they rise and hang in the air
like smoke signals,
then swoop down to earth—
show-offs
skating concrete steps
and railings—
each upping the next
in the art of descent.

When they settle,
they instantly become
old men
stooped forward
and pacing,
their hands
clasped
behind their backs.

Each leans in briefly
to inspect her,
then creeps backward,
like a parishioner pushing off
the Communion rail,
or like snow on a creek bank
in a thaw.

They are waiting
for their full complement,
for a quorum,
before they begin.

Her high-heeled hoofs
are crossed across
the road's white line,
and her languid, endless neck
cranes backward
like a lassoed calf's
or like that of
a flirtatious woman
laughing
and reaching
over her shoulder
for a kiss.
She is lipsticked with flies,
and her eyes—
smooth as pool balls—
are still stupid with fear
and disbelief
as to what has come
of what had begun
with all the hope-heavy
uprush
of a schoolgirl
jumping in
for double Dutch.

She is the center
of their attention.
She is the cause
of their stir,
their fidgets,
their fussings,
their millings about.

A quorum having been reached,
they gather in.
They surround her
like pallbearers.
They posture
like priests saying grace
at a picnic—
and then they begin.

They vie for
her more delicate
parts.
They are grown men
down to their vests—
smoking cigars
and playing
musical chairs.

They feast
well past dusk,
crazed—
like kids
playing
hide-and-seek
into the
summer night.
Their long
shadows
bob and drop
like oil derrick pumps
'til there is
nothing to see
but movement.

No sheet shrouds her.
No one's closed her eyes.
No effort will be taken
to spare her the indecency
of this second death,
in which she will grow
thin as a fossil,
then thin as transparent,
and then disappear
in front of all who pass by.

They might as well
just eat her alive.

CHUCK TRIPPI

IN A TAVERN OF THE TACITURN

They come to hate complexity, old men.
So much law-talk. Nothing gets done, he says.
Just give them a fair trial and get them hung.
They have come to abide in their curses—
temperance, reserve, this glum dignity
as ghostly the cohort will nod and agree.
In a cold knowing of the rheumy-eyed,
where old men gather, merriment is despised.
And as for his nightly only-the-one,
icy and sweet, red as the barmaid's hair—
let her place it there quietly and go.
Let him glare, Rodin's *Thinker* at his drink
while on the meniscus rise and fall
as in a San Diego or Freeport
at a far perimeter of the clock,
Sunny Daze, Big Boy, still tied to the dock.

**MAUREEN
EGAN
RIGGI**

EVE

I'm sorry, Father, I have failed the test.
The garden is in full bloom, and I couldn't help myself.
The serpent was kind, offered me a spot in the shade,
and there in the steaming air beside the lake: *Man*.
The word formed in my mind, unsummoned.
Woman, I mouthed, naming myself.
He touched his side where a wound was stitching.
I held a bone, its curve the line between innocence
and knowledge. I placed it inside myself.
Suddenly hungry, I reached for him as if to pick an apple,
and when we met, clumsily pushed our mouths together,
something pulsed through me like a forbidden chord,
the notes all mixed up in a devil's chorus.
And when his hand rose up my spine, lifting me like prayer,
I sighed into his collarbone, and the blossoms above us fruited
as I opened for him, split from the core.

SUNSET

I feel the lingering rays of sun drip
down between branches, and wonder
if this is the kind of sunset that kissed
your cheeks in all the places I couldn't reach
with the warmth I couldn't give.

CONTRIBUTORS

DANIEL GENE BARLEKAMP is the author of poetry, fiction, and audio drama for adults and young readers. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Paterson Literary Review*, *Pictura Journal*, *Seventh Quarry*, and elsewhere and has been translated into Chinese by *Poetry Hall*. He is on the staff of *Molecule: A Tiny Lit Mag*. Originally from Clifton, New Jersey, Daniel now lives with his wife and son in Massachusetts, where he practices immigration law. Visit him at <https://dgbarlekamp.com/> and @dgbarlekamp.bsky.social.

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LURIE BYRO has been facilitating "Circle of Voices" poetry discussion in NJ libraries for 28 years. She has garnered more awards (InterBoard Poetry Community) than any other poet and named "Poet of the Decade", 2000-2010. Her books include *The Bloomsberries and Other Curiosities* by Kelsay Books and *La Dogaressa & Other Poems* (Cowboy Buddha Press). Her 2021 collection *Hopeless Romance* was published by Cholla Needles Arts and Literary Library, followed by *Zeus's Wives & Other Goddesses* (Dancing Girl Press) and *New & Selected*, both in 2023. She is currently Poet in Residence at the Albert Wisner Public Library where "Circle of Voices" continues to meet. She is proud that her artist husband, Michael Byro, has created all the paintings that grace the covers of her books. She is always thrilled when included in the *Journal of New Jersey Poets*, and her precious Aunt (last of her dad's siblings, just turned 90) "Toots" Fekete, (a Maryland crabber, aka "Sea Hag") always eagerly awaits a copy. She will generously share some of the crabs she pulls but ONLY if they promise to check out her niece's poetry.

MEGAN GILBERT is a wandering poet originally from Sussex County, New Jersey, now living between Cape Town, South Africa, and somewhere on the road. Her work is shaped by her experiences as a survivor of violence and living with PTSD,

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DAVID M. HARRIS had never lived more than fifty miles from New York City until 2003. Since then, he has moved to Tennessee, acquired a daughter and a classic MG, and gotten serious about poetry. His work has appeared in *Pirene's Fountain* (and in *First Water: Best of Pirene's Fountain* anthology), *Gargoyle*, *The Labletter*, *The Pedestal*, and other places. His first collection of poetry, *The Review Mirror*, was published by Unsolicited Press in 2013. He is also the author of *Democracy and Other Problems*, an essay collection; *Bill, the Galactic Hero: the Final Incoherent Adventure* (a novel with Harry Harrison); numerous magazine articles; several published short stories; and two produced screenplays. He is on Facebook as david.m.harris1. He is a graduate of Paramus High School and Rutgers College.

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BARBARA KRASNER is a New Jersey-based poet of ten collections, including *Poems of the Winter Palace* (Bottlecap Press, 2025), *The Night Watch* (Kelsay Books, 2025), *Insomnia: Poems after Lee Krasner* (Dancing Girl Press, 2026), and the forthcoming *The Wanderers* (Shanti Arts, 2026), and *Memory Collector* (Kelsay Books, 2027). She is co-editor of *Kelsey Review*, the literary magazine of Mercer County Community College.

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JOHN O'BRIEN is a local of Nutley and Montclair who counts the clouds that rest on treetops. He has taught writing at Montclair State University and William Paterson University. He was awarded the Frank G. and Nicole McGuire Scholarship in 2020 and the Benediktsson Award for Poetry in 2021. His poem "Chaos Carpet" was published in 2019 by the *White Wall Review*. His poems "North Jersey" and "Jupiter's Raindrops" were published in 2021 by the *Metaworker Literary*

Magazine. He received his BA and MA in English at Montclair State University. He is doing okay.

RACHEL PARSONS is an editor with over a decade of experience ranging from corporate filings to creative manuscripts. In her 9 to 5, she refines complex mergers and acquisitions documents for filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission, but her passion is helping writers bring their poetry, short stories, and novels to life. A lifelong storyteller, Rachel now uses her writing and editing as a creative form of discipleship, pointing others to God's kingdom and his glory.

HOWARD PROSNITZ is a teacher and journalist who was born in Newark and lives in Bergen County. His poems have appeared in *JNJP*, *Mudfish*, *Barrow Street*, *Main Street Rag*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, and *Shot Glass Journal*. He is a three-time winner of the First Amendment Award of the New Jersey Press Association.

PAUL RABINOWITZ is a writer living in New Jersey, a photographer and founder of ARTS By The People. He is the author of 6 books including his forthcoming novel *Confluence* with Guernica Editions. His works appear in *The Sun Magazine*, *New World Writing*, *Burningword*, *Evening Street Press*, *The Montreal Review* and elsewhere. Rabinowitz was a featured artist in *Nailed Magazine* in 2020, *Mud Season Review* in 2022, *Apricity Press* in 2023, *Rappahannock Review* in 2024 and *The Woven Tale Press* in 2025. Rabinowitz's poems and fiction are the inspiration for 8 award-winning experimental films, including Best Experimental Short at Cannes, Venice Shorts Film Festival, Oregon Short Film Festival and The Paris Film Festival.

SUSANNA RICH is the author of 5 poetry collections, most recently *Beware the House*. As founding producer of Wild Nights Productions, LLC, she tours her performances of *ashes, ashes: A Poet Responds to the Holocaust*, *SHOUT! Poetry for Suffrage*, and her amusical, *Shakespeare's *itches: The Women v. Will*. With over a thousand publication and performance credits, Susanna was nominated for two Emmy Awards for her work in poetry and received the Presidential Excellence Award for Distinguished Teaching at Kean University.

MAUREEN EGAN RIGGI's poems have appeared in the *Kelsey Review*, *US1 Worksheets*, *Journal of New Jersey Poets*, *Thimble Literary Magazine*, and *North of Oxford*. She has received two Pushcart Prize nominations, and her latest manuscript, *Ordinary Women*, explores well-known mythological figures as modern women. Maureen received a BA in Literature and Creative Writing from Stockton University and currently works at Princeton University. She shares her New Jersey home with her husband, son, and two cats. When she is not writing she can be found singing, cooking, embroidering, or crafting.

ERIK ROTH holds a BA in English from Colgate University and an EDM in English education from Rutgers. He is the recipient of the *Journal of New Jersey Poets* 2025 New Jersey Poets Prize. His poems and non-fiction appear or are forthcoming in *The American Journal of Nursing*, *the Under Review*, *Months to Years*, *Creation Magazine*, *Discretionary Love*, *Modern Haiku*, and *Educational Viewpoints*. He lives in Bergen County, New Jersey.

LORNA JEAN SILVER earned an MA in English at Middlebury's Bread Loaf School of English, where she concentrated on the analysis and craft of poetry. Always a Jersey Girl, she lives in Lawrence Township, where she raised her four children and worked for many years as a corporate and textbook writer and editor. Her novella, *Notes on Hunger*, won publication by the University of Utah Press in 1987, but she did not return to creative writing until 2013.

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America, *Mom Egg Review*, The Feminist Press (CUNY), *Ms. Magazine*, New York Public Library, *Pen Magazine*, PBS, and WNYC Studio. Her poems and the co-edited anthology *The Medusa Project* were sent to the moon in 2025 in collaboration with NASA. Find more about her at <https://linktr.ee/meghasood>

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MICHAEL T. YOUNG's fourth collection, *Mountain Climbing a River*, was published by Broadstone Books in January 2026. 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. 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 *I-70*, *The Journal of New Jersey Poets*, *One Art*, and *Vox Populi*.

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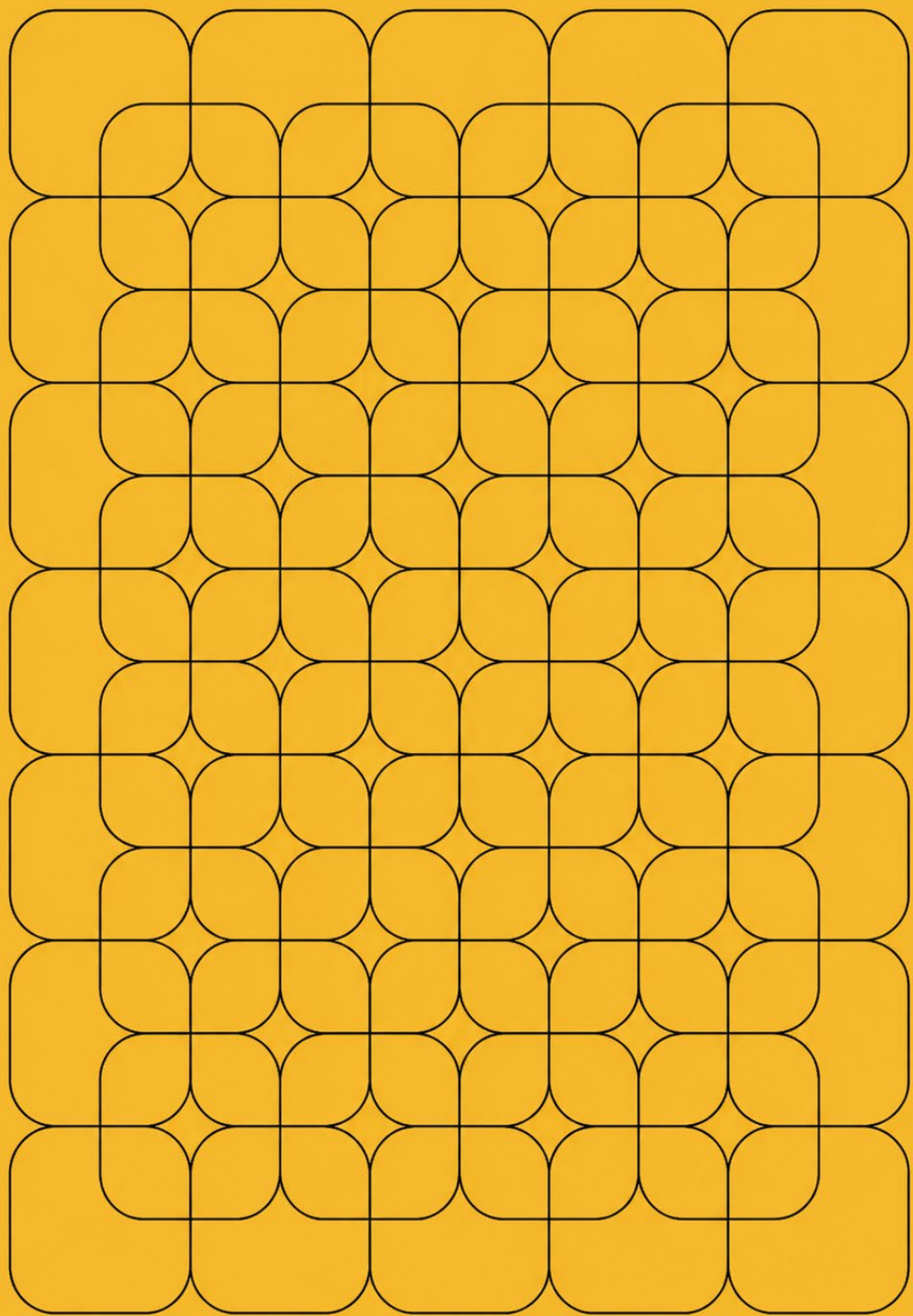
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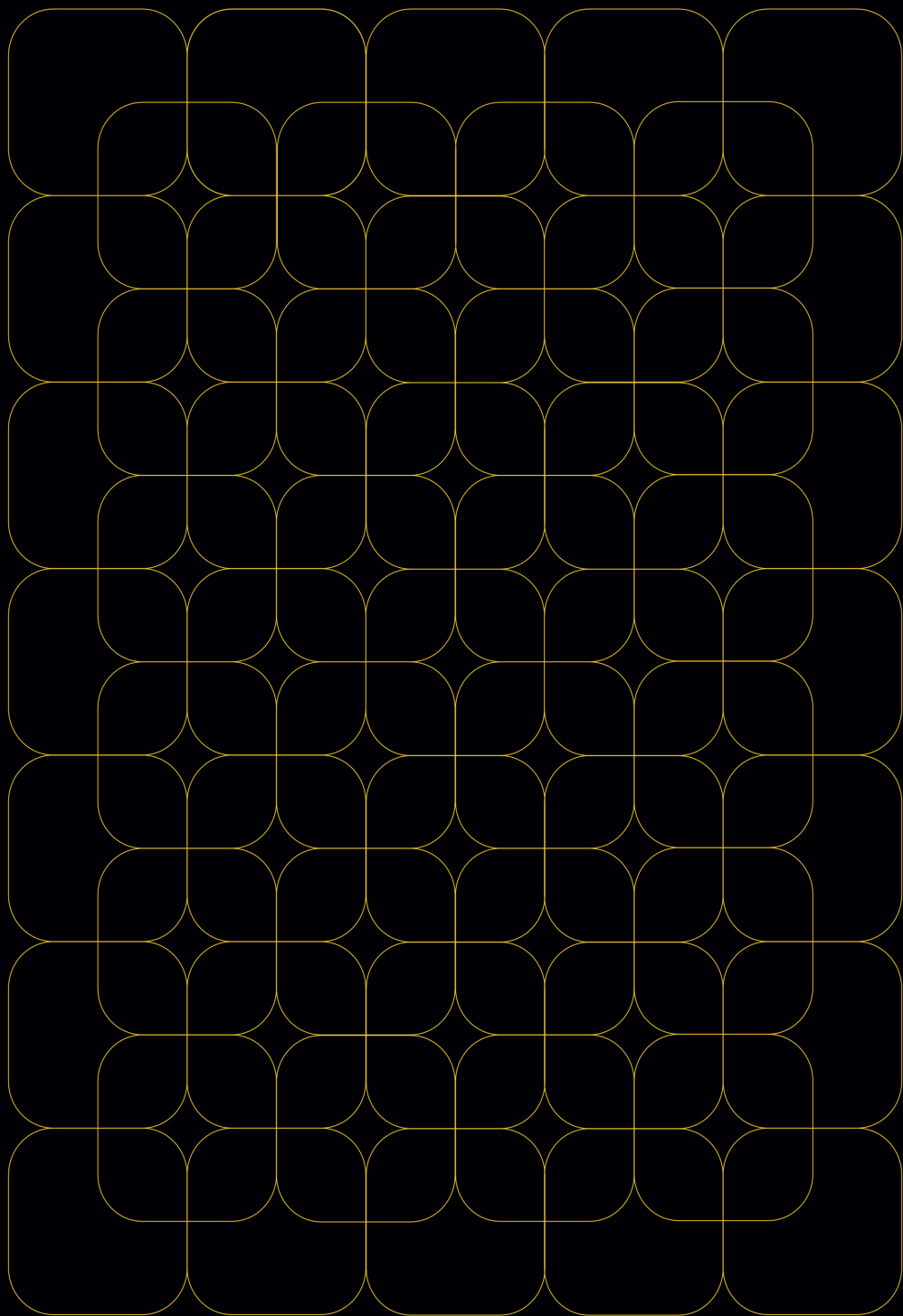
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