



At **HOME** *with*
POEMS

April 26 - May 2, 2021

Poem Packet

Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Program

I DON'T WANT TO BE UNDERSTOOD
by Joshua Jennifer Espinoza

i don't want to be understood
i want to live in the air
with all my sisters
floating free around me
like dandelion seeds
no blood
no language
no speaking
no border between body
and subjectivity
just feeling
pure feeling
leaking out from her skin
while she twirls her hair in her fingers
and blows kisses to the sun
she will fall in love
with the way the star will expand
and eat us
she will not fear death
because she does it every day
when she leaves her house
to walk in front of men
who beg for the tangible
who want to know her
more than she knows herself
and she laughs
remembering how
coming to understand her body
was like reconceptualizing water
how moving through their spaces
was all about displacement
how she became one with me
when she realized
we'd been touching beneath the soil
all along

A QUESTION TO ASK ONCE THE HONEYMOON IS OVER

by Jessica Jacobs

Big around as my bike helmet and high as my ankle, the box turtle was halfway from my side of the road to the other. The warm sun felt delicious; my legs, strong, and it was almost to the center line. I hadn't been passed by a car for miles. Figuring if it was still there, I'd pick it up on the way back, I cycled past.

Years before,
the woman across the street was shaped like that turtle,
or more like a toadstool, really, squat bell
of a body atop the thin stalks of her legs, milky and bare
beneath her frayed black housedress. It hurt her to move—clear
even from my second-story window—so she brought
her trash out in increments, in small, bursting
grocery bags. She tossed each out the door onto the porch, then
nudged them, one step to the next, before easing—carefully,
painfully—herself down, a step at a time. Then she toed them,
finally, slowly, slowly into a crumpled heap at the curb. I left
my window to help; then took her trash out every week after.

That story—
I hadn't yet
told it to my wife, had I?

But there was the turnaround
quicker than expected and I spun
to find a beat-down bus trailed by all the fuming cars
that hadn't passed me.

Steadying my handlebars against the wind,
I rode back hard, dodging around crushed
squirrels and tire-splayed birds.

The turtle
was just where I'd left it, but with the top of its shell
torn away. The dead turtle,
a raw red bowl, its blood slashing the twinned yellow lines
into an unequal sign,

as in $a \neq b$, as in thinking about doing the right thing
is not the same as doing it. As in, how many times
did I watch that old woman shuffle bags down the stairs
(*really, how many?*) before I went from watching
to helping? As in, with my wife beside me

I am the woman who does not hesitate
to lay down her bike and give a small life
safe passage. As in, I biked slowly
home, told no one. As in:

Will she love me
less when she learns
I am not equal
to the person I am when she is watching?

FOR TIM—NEWARK, DE
by Andrés Cerpa

Somewhere in summer my friends are burning through cane and cold beers in a 'twas heaven prayer card.

Between now and there I don't say much more than, *How's the weather?* to the rain.

It turns to snow.

Winter is the knife I carry but never use & we're dying but dying slow & that's life.

You scared?

I'm no longer sure my friends can save me.

But once I dreamt that death was a struggle for the last words you don't find, then you wake
& everyone's there playing Wiffle ball again.

In the house we shared there was static & the trains shook the windows as they left.

I want to shake like that again.

The grass is always greener & the dead think so too, but they learn to let go.

I haven't.

My jacket's been stitched in dear Lord & late birdsong; in black branches & ice.

And my youth, I hold it, like a stovetop holds a blue flame, or how a child holds
a revolver: guilty, thrilled in a black corner of the attic.

This is the brutal joy of moving closer to sleep.

Your head on the bar while we dance.

I'm walking through snow now, banished, not saying much & hoping I can become
like you: stripped of every decadence: light as the light on the floorboards.

MACHETE: UNDONE
by Jasminne Mendez

I understand
 decay
gangrene wounds
that never seal
a shine that won't
 return
sunlight cut
between the leaves
 of a palm tree

I know the ache
 of decay
pulsing
 itching
sunburned poppies
 that flower
into black dahlias
 when you want
 the blood
to flow but it won't
when you want
 the steel to cut
but it bends
 grapes that fail
to ferment into wine
Decay is more
 than loss
everyone knows
dust
decay is to lose
 more than once
Watch the pieces
wither & fall
 one leaf
one limb
 one salted blade
at a time
wings of a butterfly
dried up after
a summer sun

Decay

like rust

leaves everything

undone

TAP OUT

by Edgar Kunz

We were vicious. Swollen cheekbones, bruised jaws. Forearms chafed raw and weeping. The Boston Crab. The Texas Cloverleaf. The Cross-Face Chicken Wing. One time, Ant wrenched my shoulder so hard I couldn't lift my arm for a week. Another time, Mike's brother Daryl tried a front-flip slam off the back steps, landed face-first in the dirt. Wrist-bone shot clear through the skin and gleaming. Mike's dad worked second shift at Pratt, so if we were loud he'd holler out the bedroom window, but there was nothing he could do to punish us we weren't already doing to each other. And we knew it. Like that time Daryl showed us his pistol, a .22 he lifted from a friend's house. We passed it around, weighing it in our palms. It was heavier than it looked, but it felt good. He put the barrel in his mouth and when we jumped up he laughed and laughed *Priceless!* he said red-faced and gasping. *You pussies almost wet your pants!* We learned new moves, new ways to shock the body into miracles of pain. The Figure-Four Lock. The Vise Grip. Every muscle trembling. The Tarantula. The Camel Clutch. Mouth pressed against their ear, hissing *Tap out dickhead you're not getting out of this you're mine kid tap out and it'll stop.* The Sharpshooter. The Hammerlock. That sour-hot breath in your ear and knowing you won't give in, you won't give him the satisfaction, even when it hurts more than anything, more than your dad's belt blistering your backside, more than the night when Daryl put that gun in his mouth and the sound of it woke the whole block, so much you grit your teeth against the pain, sharp kneecap bearing down on your chest, elbow torqued past its limit, and you swear you could bust out of yourself and look down at your body, helpless and small and trembling, press your mouth to your own ear and whisper *Not you. Not you.*

STILL LIFE WITH SMALL OBJECTS OF PERFECT CHOKING SIZE
by Keetje Kuipers

Nothing so obvious as a gumball,
a coin. Instead, the cap

to the chapstick, or, somehow,
the moon: Lips parted, tongue

still, the tiny blackness
of her mouth's small pit

just large enough to slip
that lunar white marble inside—

blind cat's eye, milky stone.
Why does she want to take

herself from me? Somewhere
in the past I'm a girl

doing a cartwheel for the last time—
feet in the air, spin of a body

propelling itself upside down,
the whole world turning while

I turn. No one knows
it's the last time, not even I do.

Don't be so eager, I want to say
to us. In the August singularity,

the world tilts on its axis,
and our days slide into darkness—

one thing beginning, another ending,
everything undone from within.

THE GODDESS OF SCARS
by Teri Ellen Cross Davis

I mark you with melanin.
A cross-hatch of collagen—
better the scar than the loss
of limb, better the clean line,
raised itch, than the festering
wound beckoning death.
My apostles: my keloids,
my atropic, my contractures,
my hypertrophic response—
each a love I bear to the
mammal of you, the ruptured
vessel, the broken-in dermis.
Consider my evolution a
song to survival. Consider
cells my priests, their work
a ladder of prayer, each
stitch an epistle. I grieve
to see you separate from
your self. My atonement
is a bridge to build you back
together—while you can never
be born again, you can recover.
Each time I sign you, witness
the parable of action and
consequence. I do not think
you show enough reverence.
You were never meant
to be a smooth canvas
but a texture, a testament.
I bless you with a story
and each and every time
you live to tell the tale.

SLEEPING ON ADDERALL
by Camonghne Felix

Here's a board and a bold move and a siphon of power and I'm not sleeping but I am overwhelmed with my own stiff bones with the rigidity of being strong always handling always beyond my years def dying faster than everyone else.

Here's a reason to wear some white kind of dance with it be the yolk of things and float and here's strong again, the irrevocable contract, here's what comes with all the cool yellow scaffolding my mornings here's the rain and I can either dance in it or walk like everyone else it's the thread veined right through me perspective only a shared tool.

It's fine I've got to stop writing love poems anyway it's not conducive to the project stick to the project there are oceans and oceans and I am just one querulous petulant fish glittering and considering the upstream*.

*In any event, I digress.

NOCTURNE WITH A GENERAL AT HIS STUDY
by Oliver de la Paz

Deer have nibbled the leaves of the eggplants
causing a fury among the servants who scribble about
like herd animals crossing a frozen lake.

The false calm of the general is a premonition—
his gold-plated revolver, the silence
at the end of a parenthesis. In the kitchen, a live bass

slaps its tail in a slowly widening allegro.
Large mirrors in the study gather in
the growing unease. The general coughs.

The head chef holds a cleaver to the throat
of the prettiest servant. Cream
has separated into two layers and the stars

have long been overhead. Meanwhile,
the dead sleep in the deep furrow
at the edge of the city with the understanding

of night's temperament. Still,
there is no protest. The fish will be steamed
and the pretty servant will wear a slight scar above

her clavicle. There will be no murders tonight
and the kitchen will gleam respectably out of danger.

In the morning, the general will command
his servants to build a fence and urinate around
the perimeter of the garden. Such is the nature
of easy resolutions. Such is the inscrutability of power.

THE WEAVER
by Monica Sok

She threaded the loom
with one strand of her long silver hair,
which might have kept growing until she was done,
which might have fallen out
but I would come in and
sit beside her on the cushion, without her noticing,
and she would continue.

Every day I saw this old woman
weaving at her loom, rivers and lakes
underneath her hair.

The bottom full of silt.

I could see it if I reached with a comb
and that was when she'd look at me.

Under her hair

she kept her oldest son,
who was out for a morning swim
with swallows swooping down to touch
the water. It made her happy
as she worked on silk dresses
and her hair never ran out.

Sometimes, when she was tired,
she'd tie it up
and let all the tired animals around her house
drink from her head.

JOY

by Seema Reza

does not want to be
written. It does not need me.
It is the orange light of knowing
each pretty moment is only
almost. Once, a man grabbed my arm
in a gesture of love & I shook for an hour
in the aftershock.

SO MUCH

by Lateef H. McLeod

I hear their painful cries jut up from cracks on the street.
The block is a scorching frying pan,
frying my brothers on the pavement.
Our bodies are etched on the concrete,
blood drenched as permanent ink.
Chalk should not outline our deathbed
or a body bag be our first casket.

Bullets lurch out of guns,
slice the air, and
pierce the thin borders of our black skin.
Eat away at our muscle and bones,
borough through sinews and blood vessels,
until it reaches and stops our hearts.

It is not just the gang member on the corner
whose aim we have to dodge,
but also police on the beat
whose itchy trigger fingers
leave us with our brain matter
splattered on the concrete.

Now we have to watch out for
the neighborhood watchmen.
The wanna-be-cops who think
we are foreign to our own neighborhood.
Trayvon had a hoodie on to protect him from the rain,
but it didn't protect him
from the bullet from Zimmerman's gun.
Old George just couldn't help
being a deadly Don Quixote,
and shoot at every black boy,
claiming he was a harden criminal.

My coco skin is not a target for your gun.
It is the sacred encasing of God's masterpiece
that gives warmth and joy to every loved one it touches.
No bullet will destroy what God has made immortal.
We will all rise again one day to walk under the sun.

BESAYDOO

by Yalie Kamara

While sipping coffee in my mother's Toyota, we hear the birdcall of two teenage boys in the parking lot: *Aiight*, one says, *Besaydoo*, the other returns, as they reach for each other. Their cupped handshake pops like the first, fat, firecrackers of summer,

their fingers shimmy as if they're solving a Rubik's cube just beyond our sight. Moments later, their Schwinn's head in opposite directions. My mother turns to me, revealing the milky, John-Waters-mustache-thin foam on her upper lip, *Wetin dem bin say?*

Besaydoo? Nar English? she asks, tickled by this tangle of new language. *Alright. Be safe dude*, I pull apart each syllable like string cheese for her. *Oh yah, dem nar real padi*, she smiles, surprisingly broken by the tenderness expressed by what half my family might call

thugs. *Besaydoo. Besaydoo. Besaydoo*, we chirp in the car, then nightly into our phones after I leave California. *Besaydoo*, she says as she softly muffles the rattling of my bones in newfound sobriety. *Besaydoo*, I say years later, her response made raspy by an oxygen

treatment at the ER. *Besaydoo*, we whisper to each other across the country. Like some word from deep in a somewhere too newborn-pure for the outdoors, but we saw those two boys do it, in broad daylight, under a decadent, ruinous, sun. *Besaydoo*.

Besaydoo, we say, *Besaydoo*, and split one more for the road. For all this struggle. Tumble. Drown. *Besaydoo*, we say. To get on the good foot. We get off of the phone, tight like the bulbous air of two palms that have just kissed.

BLUEBIRDS RENTING THE SQUASH STUDIO

by Kai Coggin

A storm approaches
dark energy
bursting
rumbling toward,
I sit outside
in my bathrobe and wait
for the bluebirds
to return to their new house,
rent-controlled
luxury squash studio
with modern slant roof
built from a hollowed out gourd
by my love's sweet hands,
gently tied to a bend in a branch of a young ash tree.

I wait with my camera,
zoomed all the way in and hushed,
the blue pair flies from dogwood
to maple to oak and back again
circling around their
private getaway
sensing they are being watched,
I send peace,
thunder rolls.

Mother bluebird
expects children soon,
it is unclear if the eggs have already been laid
but one can sense the excitement in the air,
bright blue constant father
brings fresh worms insects,
another pine needle for warmth, another,
mother's head constantly
cuckoos out of the hole
as if to add to the grocery list while daddy runs out the door.

The chipmunk
gave them a baby shower last week,
there was cake, I heard,
sprinkled with plump spiders and seeds,
the butterflies served as decoration

fluttering their brightly colored wings,
Spring
is a time for watching everything
open up again,
the buds, the flowers - my eyes, heart.

And I write this poem
as I wait
to get the perfect photo,
the drizzle thickens,
I wonder what it sounds like
on a roof of dried squash
thup thup thup thup
the rain falls harder
everything green around us
starts to glow against the darkening earth.

My wife tells me to come inside
she says that I'm making them nervous,
that the babies might be getting cold.
We make a vantage point from the kitchen window,
remove the screen

perch

out of sight.

Bright blue father
finds the waiting branch
fluffs his wet feathers
poses for a photo
and tucks inside with mother bluebird.
Thunder rolls,
the rain falls in sheets,
all is quiet,
all is warm,
all is safe.

There's a fire burning in the fireplace,
the dogs are snoring softly,
all is quiet,
all is warm,
all is safe.

SOME OF THE MEN WE LOVE ARE TERRORISTS*

by Aurielle Marie Lucier

*some begged, some climbed the side of my body looking for a window,
some said they were on their way and did not come.*

– Warsan Shire

& honestly, i have no solutions— our world a mad swarm of bees. forgive me my own devotion, the handsome clench. my first love masters a sinister arithmetic; his patrilineage swelling like a heavy god between his legs. i'm well-conditioned, my hands already working for the good of this sly new lord. blessed are the meek. at one point, i was a brief globe of possibility & then my father got to me. have i the option to love him, my mother's delicate monster, & not write this poem? of course not. it is a woman's mouth, after all, bleeding nuance into the Ferguson pavement. the relevance, this; her bruises born of a husband's impatience, muddled by police batons. i imagine it less & less possible, then— black as i am, woman in the small places it count, to be in love & not articulating war. my body no one's patriot, nor my blood, artillery. i wound my own hands.

i'm afraid

of what's true: there is no one left to rescue, yet i love each my father's mirrors. in the name of salvation, the saying goes, *some of the men, we love*. and yes, i glory his mouth. which of *the men we love, are terrorists?* the first time my lover coiled his fist to quarry me from my bone, i knew there must be a church in my father's name, filled with womxn like me &

i pay my tithe.

BRUTE STRENGTH

by Emily Skaja

Soldier for a lost cause, brute, mute woman
written out of my own story, I've been trying
to cast a searchlight over swamp-woods & parasitic ash
back to my beginning, that girlhood—
kite-wisp clouded by gun salutes & blackbirds
tearing out from under the hickories
all those fine August mornings so temporary
so gold-ringed by heat-haze & where is that witch girl
unafraid of anything, flea-spangled little yard rat, runt
of no litter, queen, girl who wouldn't let a boy hit her,
girl refusing to be *it* in tag, pulling that fox hide
heavy around her like a flag? Let me look at her.
Tell her on my honor, I will set the wedding dress on fire
when I'm good & ready or she can bury me in it.

ELEGY FOR THE BIRTHRIGHT

by George Abraham

Church of the Holy Sepulchre, 2017

from my parents, i inherited
my grandfather's gold cross—
country of cold metal—godless
in the land where God was man, once—

my grandfather's gold cross
gifted me security clearance; entry
into the land where God was man, once—
& the men are still machine-gun Gods

who gifted me security clearance; entry
to land not country enough to be home,
where the men are machine-gun God
-worshippers; at their expense, I inherited a new

land, not country enough to be
invisible, which turned my ancestors into God
-worshippers &, at their expense, I inherited a new God
whom I love like my country, & yet the closest i feel to Him

is in invisibility, to which my ancestors turned
when they inherited a new home, or Godless sanctuary
whom they loved like a country & yet the closest i felt
to my country was when touching my God's empty tomb—

who, in inheritance, left behind a Godless sanctuary
to echo the prayers He used to write for
my country, when in touch with God's empty;
permutations of familiar words, brief molar shadows

echoing in this sanctuary where He once wrote them,
& perhaps the prayer is in this dance of lip & limb,
permutations of familiar words, brief molar shadows,
as if my bones were chanting: *i was holy once—*

& perhaps that is the prayer; the dance of limb
i inherited from my parents, whose ancestors'
bones were chanting: *i was holy once—*
in this Godless country; *i was always holy—*

OBEAH WOMAN IN BEN-DOWN MARKET
by Yashika Graham

Tell the god truth,
you believed when
she told you
the yam would float
and the spoon stick
immovable.

Is she plant it,
she know the coarse renta-temperament
composed beneath its dirtbark.

And you know better,
but you buy, like she
knew you would.

Her voice a trail de la lengua
clasps fortifications
about your neck
in a ben-down ceremony
of how to set the pace for Sunday rising
to soak the gungu for ease of living.

She tells you how this will end,
that you will cook the yam,
drink the soup to barrier a body
gainst hard life
and return next week.

“Tek a blackie mango fi yuh change.”
You choose,
refusing her eyes,
for fear she might pull you,
guilted into other failing fruit.

ON LYRIC NARRATIVE

by John Murillo

The applejack caps of aging players dusted
with February's first, the fur and faux-leather collars
yanked up around their ears—I see one among them,
my father, philosophizing in the bleak light
of a street lamp, shoulders hunched, shifting his weight
from one foot to the other, begging
a smoke from the gold-toothed gunrunner.
And there, in the middle of the mend, a blazing oilcan
around which they'll croon to the cruel stars,
disinterested moon. And soon, the gunrunner reaches
for a cigarette, a lighter. My father leans into
the man's cupped hands and his whole face glows.
A six-inch switchblade catches in the shadow
just behind and to the left of my father and here,
here is where I force myself awake. Were my father alive,
I'd call the house and warn him: Watch your back.
Trust no one. And how well do you know
the gunrunner? But it's twenty-seven winters
since we laid him down. Besides, he never was one
to put much stock in visions. Voodoo, he'd say.
You want to help me, help me hit the numbers, he'd say.
My philosophy professors would have called him
an empiricist. He believed in what he laid his hands on.
My mother. A cigarette. A crumpled dollar bill.

An applejack cap pulled low against the wind.
My wife almost wakes. I pull her close, then drift.
If everyone in a dream, as I read once, represents
the dreamer, what was my father trying to tell me?
When am I the gunrunner? When am I the wind?
When the snow, the moon, or the switchblade's glint?

SAY LOVE SAY GOD
by Zeina Hashem Beck

I liked the idea of an impossible love.

I was told a love so different can't
make children with souls
worth praying for. But those stories
in the Bible and the Qur'an,
love, we knew what they meant.
When you said sin, love, you did not
mean my legs, or the way
you were already inside me.
When you said sin, you meant
how one forgets. Do you remember
how we slept naked? You were there.

I believed love is immortal, irrational,
and sometimes, tired. The sun, it seems, worships only
the bodies of the young. When I say old,
I mean how far we've traveled, love, how we go
back. When I walk new cities, I always
think of you, love. I tell you, Look—
lives upon lives upon lives.
Sometimes heaven is when I'm away from you, love.
Sometimes heaven is only the two of us. I know you
understand. Only petty loves want to be worshipped.

I liked the idea of an impossible god.
I was told a god so different can't
make children with souls
worth praying for. But those stories
in the Bible and the Qur'an,
god, we knew what they meant.
When you said sin, god, you did not
mean my legs, or the way
you were already inside me.
When you said sin, you meant
how one forgets. Do you remember
how we slept naked? You were there.

I believed god is immortal, irrational,
and sometimes, tired. The sun, it seems, worships only
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I mean how far we've traveled, god, how we go
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Sometimes heaven is when I'm away from you, god.
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