

POEMS IN THE TIME OF QUARANTINE

Vol. 1 March 2020

These poems were offered by **Maria Popova** in her weekly e-newsletter ***Brainpickings***

This link will give you context and links to read more about the poems, the poets and to hear someone read these poems aloud: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2020/03/15/today-another-universe-jane-hirshfield-ledger-jasmine/>

JASMINE	2
TODAY, ANOTHER UNIVERSE	3
SINGULARITY	4
A BRAVE AND STARTLING TRUTH	5
IMMORTALITY	7
IN PASSING	8
THE EVERLASTING SELF	8
COLD SOLACE	9
THE MUSHROOM HUNTERS	10
WHEN I AM AMONG THE TREES	12
YOU CAN'T HAVE IT ALL	13
THEORIES OF EVERYTHING	15
ZERO CIRCLE	16

JASMINE

BY JANE HIRSHFIELD

Almost the twenty-first century” —
how quickly the thought will grow dated,
even quaint.

Our hopes, our future,
will pass like the hopes and futures of others.

And all our anxieties and terrors,
nights of sleeplessness,
griefs,
will appear then as they truly are —

Stumbling, delirious bees in the tea scent of jasmine.

TODAY, ANOTHER UNIVERSE

BY JANE HIRSHFIELD

The arborist has determined:
senescence beetles canker
quickenened by drought
 but in any case
not prunable not treatable not to be propped.

And so.

The branch from which the sharp-shinned hawks and their mate-cries.

The trunk where the ant.

The red squirrels' eighty-foot playground.

The bark cambium pine-sap cluster of needles.

The Japanese patterns the ink-net.

The dapple on certain fish.

Today, for some, a universe will vanish.
First noisily,
then just another silence.

The silence of *after*, once the theater has emptied.

Of bewilderment after the glacier,
the species, the star.

Something else, in the scale of quickening things,
will replace it,

this hole of light in the light, the puzzled birds swerving around it.

Do you sometimes want to wake up to the singularity
we once were?

so compact nobody
needed a bed, or food or money —

nobody hiding in the school bathroom
or home alone

pulling open the drawer
where the pills are kept.

*For every atom belonging to me as good
Belongs to you. Remember?*

There was no *Nature*. No
them. No tests

to determine if the elephant
grieves her calf or if

the coral reef feels pain. Trashed
oceans don't speak English or Farsi or French;

would that we could wake up to what we were
— when we *were* ocean and before that

to when sky was earth, and animal was energy, and rock was
liquid and stars were space and space was not

at all — nothing

before we came to believe humans were so important
before this awful loneliness.

Can molecules recall it?
what once was? before anything happened?

No I, no We, no one. No was
No verb no noun
only a tiny tiny dot brimming with

is is is is is

All everything home

A BRAVE AND STARTLING TRUTH

BY MAYA ANGELOU

We, this people, on a small and lonely planet
Traveling through casual space
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns
To a destination where all signs tell us
It is possible and imperative that we learn
A brave and startling truth

And when we come to it
To the day of peacemaking
When we release our fingers
From fists of hostility
And allow the pure air to cool our palms

When we come to it
When the curtain falls on the minstrel show of hate
And faces sooted with scorn are scrubbed clean
When battlefields and coliseum
No longer rake our unique and particular sons and daughters
Up with the bruised and bloody grass
To lie in identical plots in foreign soil

When the rapacious storming of the churches
The screaming racket in the temples have ceased
When the pennants are waving gaily
When the banners of the world tremble
Stoutly in the good, clean breeze

When we come to it
When we let the rifles fall from our shoulders
And children dress their dolls in flags of truce
When land mines of death have been removed
And the aged can walk into evenings of peace
When religious ritual is not perfumed
By the incense of burning flesh
And childhood dreams are not kicked awake
By nightmares of abuse

When we come to it
Then we will confess that not the Pyramids
With their stones set in mysterious perfection
Nor the Gardens of Babylon
Hanging as eternal beauty
In our collective memory
Not the Grand Canyon
Kindled into delicious color
By Western sunsets

Nor the Danube, flowing its blue soul into Europe
Not the sacred peak of Mount Fuji
Stretching to the Rising Sun
Neither Father Amazon nor Mother Mississippi who, without favor,
Nurture all creatures in the depths and on the shores
These are not the only wonders of the world

When we come to it
We, this people, on this minuscule and kithless globe
Who reach daily for the bomb, the blade and the dagger
Yet who petition in the dark for tokens of peace
We, this people on this mote of matter
In whose mouths abide cankerous words
Which challenge our very existence
Yet out of those same mouths
Come songs of such exquisite sweetness
That the heart falters in its labor
And the body is quieted into awe

We, this people, on this small and drifting planet
Whose hands can strike with such abandon
That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness
That the haughty neck is happy to bow
And the proud back is glad to bend
Out of such chaos, of such contradiction
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines

When we come to it
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear

When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.

IMMORTALITY

BY LISEL MUELLER

In Sleeping Beauty's castle
the clock strikes one hundred years
and the girl in the tower returns to the world.
So do the servants in the kitchen,
who don't even rub their eyes.
The cook's right hand, lifted
an exact century ago,
completes its downward arc
to the kitchen boy's left ear;
the boy's tensed vocal cords
finally let go
the trapped, enduring whimper,
and the fly, arrested mid-plunge
above the strawberry pie,
fulfills its abiding mission
and dives into the sweet, red glaze.

As a child I had a book
with a picture of that scene.
I was too young to notice
how fear persists, and how
the anger that causes fear persists,
that its trajectory can't be changed
or broken, only interrupted.
My attention was on the fly;
that this slight body
with its transparent wings
and lifespan of one human day
still craved its particular share
of sweetness, a century later.

IN PASSING

BY LISEL MUELLER

How swiftly the strained honey
of afternoon light
flows into darkness

and the closed bud shrugs off
its special mystery
in order to break into blossom:

as if what exists, exists
so that it can be lost
and become precious.

THE EVERLASTING SELF

BY TRACY K. SMITH

Comes in from a downpour
Shaking water in every direction —
A collaborative condition:
Gathered, shed, spread, then
Forgotten, reabsorbed. Like love
From a lifetime ago, and mud
A dog has tracked across the floor.

COLD SOLACE

BY ANNA BELLE KAUFMAN

When my mother died,
one of her honey cakes remained in the freezer.
I couldn't bear to see it vanish,
so it waited, pardoned,
in its ice cave behind the metal trays
for two more years.

On my forty-first birthday
I chipped it out,
a rectangular resurrection,
hefted the dead weight in my palm.

Before it thawed,
I sawed, with serrated knife,
the thinnest of slices —
Jewish Eucharist.

The amber squares
with their translucent panes of walnuts
tasted — even toasted — of freezer,
of frost,
a raisined delicacy delivered up
from a deli in the underworld.

I yearned to recall life, not death —
the still body in her pink nightgown on the bed,
how I lay in the shallow cradle of the scattered sheets
after they took it away,
inhaling her scent one last time.

I close my eyes, savor a wafer of
sacred cake on my tongue and
try to taste my mother, to discern
the message she baked in these loaves
when she was too ill to eat them:

I love you.
It will end.
Leave something of sweetness
and substance
in the mouth of the world.

THE MUSHROOM HUNTERS

BY NEIL GAIMAN

Science, as you know, my little one, is the study
of the nature and behaviour of the universe.
It's based on observation, on experiment, and measurement,
and the formulation of laws to describe the facts revealed.

In the old times, they say, the men came already fitted with brains
designed to follow flesh-beasts at a run,
to hurdle blindly into the unknown,
and then to find their way back home when lost
with a slain antelope to carry between them.
Or, on bad hunting days, nothing.

The women, who did not need to run down prey,
had brains that spotted landmarks and made paths between them
left at the thorn bush and across the scree
and look down in the bole of the half-fallen tree,
because sometimes there are mushrooms.

Before the flint club, or flint butcher's tools,
The first tool of all was a sling for the baby
to keep our hands free
and something to put the berries and the mushrooms in,
the roots and the good leaves, the seeds and the crawlers.
Then a flint pestle to smash, to crush, to grind or break.

And sometimes men chased the beasts
into the deep woods,
and never came back.

Some mushrooms will kill you,
while some will show you gods
and some will feed the hunger in our bellies. Identify.
Others will kill us if we eat them raw,
and kill us again if we cook them once,
but if we boil them up in spring water, and pour the water away,
and then boil them once more, and pour the water away,
only then can we eat them safely. Observe.

Observe childbirth, measure the swell of bellies and the shape of breasts,
and through experience discover how to bring babies safely into the world.

Observe everything.

And the mushroom hunters walk the ways they walk
and watch the world, and see what they observe.
And some of them would thrive and lick their lips,
While others clutched their stomachs and expired.
So laws are made and handed down on what is safe. Formulate.

The tools we make to build our lives:
our clothes, our food, our path home...
all these things we base on observation,
on experiment, on measurement, on truth.

And science, you remember, is the study
of the nature and behaviour of the universe,
based on observation, experiment, and measurement,
and the formulation of laws to describe these facts.

The race continues. An early scientist
drew beasts upon the walls of caves
to show her children, now all fat on mushrooms
and on berries, what would be safe to hunt.

The men go running on after beasts.

The scientists walk more slowly, over to the brow of the hill
and down to the water's edge and past the place where the red clay runs.
They are carrying their babies in the slings they made,
freeing their hands to pick the mushrooms.

WHEN I AM AMONG THE TREES

BY MARY OLIVER

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.
I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.
Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.
And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."

But you can have the fig tree and its fat leaves like clown hands
gloved with green. You can have the touch of a single eleven-year-old finger
on your cheek, waking you at one a.m. to say the hamster is back.

You can have the purr of the cat and the soulful look
of the black dog, the look that says, If I could I would bite
every sorrow until it fled, and when it is August,
you can have it August and abundantly so. You can have love,
though often it will be mysterious, like the white foam
that bubbles up at the top of the bean pot over the red kidneys
until you realize foam's twin is blood.

You can have the skin at the center between a man's legs,
so solid, so doll-like. You can have the life of the mind,
glowing occasionally in priestly vestments, never admitting pettiness,
never stooping to bribe the sullen guard who'll tell you
all roads narrow at the border.

You can speak a foreign language, sometimes,
and it can mean something. You can visit the marker on the grave
where your father wept openly. You can't bring back the dead,
but you can have the words *forgive* and *forget* hold hands
as if they meant to spend a lifetime together. And you can be grateful
for makeup, the way it kisses your face, half spice, half amnesia, grateful
for Mozart, his many notes racing one another towards joy, for towels
sucking up the drops on your clean skin, and for deeper thirsts,
for passion fruit, for saliva. You can have the dream,
the dream of Egypt, the horses of Egypt and you riding in the hot sand.
You can have your grandfather sitting on the side of your bed,
at least for a while, you can have clouds and letters, the leaping
of distances, and Indian food with yellow sauce like sunrise.

You can't count on grace to pick you out of a crowd
but here is your friend to teach you how to high jump,
how to throw yourself over the bar, backwards,
until you learn about love, about sweet surrender,

and here are periwinkles, buses that kneel, farms in the mind
as real as Africa. And when adulthood fails you,
you can still summon the memory of the black swan on the pond
of your childhood, the rye bread with peanut butter and bananas
your grandmother gave you while the rest of the family slept.
There is the voice you can still summon at will, like your mother's,
it will always whisper, you can't have it all,
but there is this.

THEORIES OF EVERYTHING

BY REBECCA ELSON

(WHEN THE LECTURER'S SHIRT MATCHES THE PAINTING ON THE WALL)

He stands there speaking without love
Of theories where, in the democracy
Of this universe, or that,
There could be legislators
Who ordain trajectories for falling bodies,
Where all things must be dreamed with indifference,
And purpose is a momentary silhouette
Backlit by a blue anthropic flash,
A storm on the horizon.
But even the painting on the wall behind,
Itself an accident of shattered symmetries,
Is only half eclipsed by his transparencies
Of hierarchy and order,
And the history of thought.
And what he cannot see is this:
Himself projected next to his projections
Where the colours from the painting
Have spilled onto his shirt,
Their motion stilled into a rigorous
Design of lines and light.

ZERO CIRCLE

BY RUMI (VERSION BY COLEMAN BARKS)

Be helpless, dumbfounded,
Unable to say yes or no.
Then a stretcher will come from grace
to gather us up.

We are too dull-eyed to see that beauty.
If we say we can, we're lying.
If we say No, we don't see it,
That No will behead us
And shut tight our window onto spirit.

So let us rather not be sure of anything,
Beside ourselves, and only that, so
Miraculous beings come running to help.
Crazed, lying in a zero circle, mute,
We shall be saying finally,
With tremendous eloquence, Lead us.
When we have totally surrendered to that beauty,
We shall be a mighty kindness.

The ancient Greeks were flummoxed by the empty space represented by the zero. This uncertainty led to philosophical and religious arguments about the existence of zero and its use as a number. Once simply considered a placeholder, or to accentuate a void with no absolute value, the concept of using zero as a number was developed in India around the 9th century AD.

It wasn't until the 12th century via the Arabic numeric system and the work of the Persian scientist al-Khwarizmi that the number zero was introduced to the Western world through Latin translations of the al-Khwarizmi's book titled, appropriately, [Arithmetic](#).

Zero circle – where the radius of the circle = 0 (one point)

Housden: the zero is both everything and nothing