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An investigation into incarnation, transience, and our intimate connection with all existence, by one of the preeminent poets of her generation

After Details

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Ken says

My first sustained meeting with Jane Hirschfield, and I've a feeling we'll sit for coffee again, given her knack for subtle metaphor and fascination with, oh, dogs and mortality and personification. I felt it was stronger BEFORE than *After*, but maybe it was me. The beginning of the book I read at 4 a.m., when any book is stronger; the latter at night, when poetic energy begins to drain.

A series of poems here have the word "Assay" in the title. I had to look it up. It means, as a noun, an analysis, and can function similarly as a verb demonstrating the act of analysis. Poetry-oh-so-wise, then, these works are simply contemplations on a subject. For example, we have "Hope: An Assay," "Sky: An Assay," "Articulation: An Assay," "Translucence: An Assay," "Tears: An Assay," and "Poe: An Assay."

As you can see, the subject matter is eclectic, sometimes a concrete object (e.g. "Termites: An Assay"), sometimes an abstraction (e.g. "Possibility: An Assay"), and sometimes a word (e.g. "'And': An Assay"). Make no mistake, though only a third of the titles assayed their way down the book's aisle, every poem here is an essay. One vowel different and Montaigne would have been proud.

An example of Jane's style:

Pocket of Fog

*In the yard next door,
a pocket of fog like a small herd of bison
swallows azaleas, koi pond, the red-and-gold koi.*

To be undivided must mean not knowing you are.

*The fog grazes here, then there,
all morning browsing the shallows,
leaving no footprint between my fate and the mountain's.*

The poems here bend domestic and the surrounding world of nature. JH is not political or out to solve the problems of the world. Instead, she tries to capture and bottle small samples of it. As I tour poets I should know, some I check off and move on (too many poets, too little time), and some I say, "We'll definitely meet again" to.

Jane Hirshfield rates the latter.

Arlitia Jones says

Because I needed something radiant and genuine in my world today. Because I needed to see things from the unexpected and un-valued perspective. Because I needed to be reminded that we can grieve and survive it. Because I needed to renew the hope that humans can someday lift themselves higher in the cosmology of existence and faith. Because I needed to read good poems. This book.

Spencer says

Yes!!!!!!

Adrian Stumpp says

Hirshfield's poems are a difficult thing to describe. They do not have an immediate payoff. You don't read her poems, savoring every line, reading them aloud, rereading to yourself, line by exquisite line. You don't close the volume and feel fed. You don't close your eyes, heart racing, and think, "Yes. Brilliant." (dramatization. I never do this anyway, even when I should.) These poems are much slipperier than that. They haunt you. They stick in your head for days so that you look up at work trying to remember a line but can't. You rush home to re-read the poem, realizing it didn't say anything like what you thought it said. And that is the moment, as pretentious as it sounds, you "get" it.

Jeff says

A very **strong** 4.5 stars. I've never read her before and will certainly read more.

Favorite poems

"Translucence: An Assay"

"Study of Melon & Insect"

"I Imagine Myself in Time"

"Late Self-Portrait by Rembrandt"

"Articulation: An Assay"

Favorite lines [quote (pg;line; "title")]

...words are not the end of thought, they are where it begins

("After Long Silence")

Spider,

do not worry.

I keep house casually.

("Poe: An Assay")

And so we say "today," "tomorrow."

But from yesterday, like us, you have vanished.

("To: An Assay")

I have seen you carry a fate to its end as softly as a retriever
carries the quail.

("To Judgment: An Assay")

Irremediable rock of refusal, this world thick with bird song,

tender with starfish and apples.
("The Destination")

...the great dog of confusion guarding my heart
("The Promise")

One Sand Grain Among the Others in Winter Wind
(title of the poem)

inconceivable before
("Red Scarf")

The Dead Do Not Want Us Dead
(title of the poem)

Your story was this: you were happy, then you were sad
("It Was Like This: You Were Happy")

Ruth says

When a questionable artist shows up at the work place gallery, I remind myself that art is art, and if someone is creating it, there it is.

So, I am happy there are poets writing poems. At first, I found Ms. Hirshfield's "assays" and old school poems overly intellectual. {Mentions of Aeschylus, and Orpheus, for example, which probably means I should have paid more attention in college.}

And dogs, pets, people with their dogs. I am in the wrong mood, clearly. Poets, write on, do not listen to me.

S

The difficulty of this book is the spareness of it and the narrow range of mood which allows me entry. Meaning: if you are not in a quiet enough frame of mind, if there is not a certain restless seeking to your mood, it is difficult to enter the space these poems conjure. At worst, it can seem like too much "inside baseball" here, as if the poet has simply excluded too much to allow the poems to be accessible without significant gloss. And this is unlike some of the poet's earlier work where the poems' imagery stands on its own, resonating in a timeless manner. These poems find a different connection, eschewing the visual imagery for imagery of the soul and mind at work making meaning of the world. More difficult to enter, inhabit? Yes. But once inside these rooms, the world opens up and a weight is lifted, by virtue of recognition of these soul-moments previously unspoken.

Shawn Sorensen says

Few poetry titles are as companionable as this one. When I need to write, to journal, to have an important talk with someone or to relax on my own, it's always good to have Hirshfield around. These are poems as spare in their style as they are capacious in meaning and compassion.

A theme Hirshfield particularly does well - and which buttresses her mindful, meditative aura - is that all of us are doing the best we can, yet can always take a step back, look at ourselves, and do better. If it happens, it happens. It's better to listen to your crazy friend than try to change him/her, for example. If they change, it's from their own words leading to their own actions, an empowering trajectory. And that crazy person might be you.

Meanwhile, impermanence and suffering are always with us.

From the short poem "The Dead Do Not Want Us Dead":

The dead do not want us dead;
such petty errors are left for the living.
Nor do they want our mourning.
No gift to them - not rage, not weeping.
Return one of them, any one of them, to the earth,
and look: such foolish skipping,
such telling of bad jokes, such feasting!
Even a cucumber, even a single anise seed: feasting.

The ending of the poem speaks volumes about Hirshfield's style - the vast potential of a cucumber to do big and small things, to symbolize so much in our minds.

What slightly detracts from Hirshfield's work is its sameness. There isn't quite a large enough venue of details or variety of styles, so the overall quality of the work can feel a little too didactic. And it doesn't help that she uses the same metaphors of many other poets - the stream, the mountain, the horse. Too many metaphors takes away the vivacity that is day-to-day living.

I will keep Hirshfield on my NOOK and read it whenever I don't have a good acquaintance around. These simple lines draw you in, connect all of us through our timeless concerns and reveal something different

every reading.

Nicola says

A book I will have to return to because of its largeness in themes, in ideas, in perception, in deceptively simple descriptions. I was particularly drawn to the many "assays" and the resonance of this word: trying to determine the presence, absence, or quantity of one or more components. This puts me in mind of negative capability as well as how grief, one haunted "after," feels and splits open. I was also impressed by the intimacy of the Buddhism here; this clear, precise thinker/seer is embedded in the sensual world; this speaker knows pain and pleasure:

Your story was this: you were happy, then you were sad,
you slept, you awakened.
Sometimes you ate roasted chestnuts, sometimes persimmons.

(from "It Was Like This: You Were Happy")

Caroline says

Recently I went to the Royal Festival Hall, London to hear Jane Hirshfield read on the last stop of her tour of the UK. I've been dipping into her poetry for the last year or so but this was the first time I've fully engaged with her work. The only way to describe her is luminous. She read standing in front of a huge window with view of the London Eye and Houses of Parliament behind her and as the evening progressed storm clouds crossed the sky behind her although the sun continued to shine in that peculiar lemon yellow way it has when there is rain elsewhere.

She read a variety of poems, some early, some unpublished and many from her two collections *After* and *Come Thief*. For the purposes of this review I'm going to concentrate on 'After' - her collection published in 2006 and haunted by death. She explained she was only aware of how haunted the collection was when it came to putting all the poems together.

One of the less sombre poems - *Vilnius* - was inspired by her friendship with Czesław Miłosz.

*For a long time
I keep the notebooks out on the table.
In the morning, drinking coffee, I see the spines
St Petersburg, Vilnius, Vienna.*

In the poem the poet does not get to visit Vilnius but in real life after reading this poem at a festival elsewhere in Europe Hirshfield was invited to go by one of the Lithuania Writers organisations.

After is not a collection to be rushed through. These are poems which you should linger over - *Late Self-portrait* by Rembrandt, *Global Warning*, *One Sand grain among the others* in *Winter Wind*, and my favourite *The Bell Zygumt*

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryar...>

As one would kiss the ring of a cardinal, or the rim
of that cold iron bell, whose speech can mean "Great joy,"
or--equally--"The city is burning. Come."

April says

I don't go in for poetry. Really. While experiencing something of it's (possible) transcendence in college (with Pushkin mainly - hey, I was a Russian major - don't forget), since then, my occasional attempts to enjoy poetry were unsuccessful. And then...

I met the author of this book through a friend in San Francisco, and liked her so much, I immediately went out and grabbed her latest book. I was reading this book shortly after the loss of my beloved canine companion (Malkie), and her poem "Red Scarf" captured just how I felt. The moments when the grief began to lose it's edge, suddenly broken by coming across some physical reminder of my lost friend in the course of my day.

It made me feel less alone in my loss. Read Jane Hirschfeld - even if it makes you weep.

Robert Beveridge says

Jane Hirshfield, *After* (Harper Collins, 2006)

Jane Hirshfield's *Given Sugar, Given Salt*, which I read in January, is on my list of the best books I read in 2008. While *After* didn't have quite the effect on me her previous book did, this one is still capable of packing the wallop that makes Jane Hirshfield's poems so well worth your time;

"As Issa changed, writing after the death of his daughter,

This world of dew
is a world of dew.
And yet.

How much of you
was left uninvited into those lines.
That silence your shadow, bringing his grieving to me."
("To Speech")

There's a reason Issa resonates with Hirshfield, and this poem does a lot to illustrate what it is about Hirshfield's writing that makes it so intriguing and so powerful at the same time (it's that negative capability thing Keats went on about, it is). The language is plain, but there is a great deal running beneath it; much of the best poetry is thus, and Hirshfield does it with flair. Very good stuff, this. ****

Sharon Bautista says

Perhaps it's because I just read Annie Dillard on the Galápagos, but this collection seems to be primarily about grief manifested in animals (albeit more domestic--dogs, mules) and inanimate objects. It's not anthropomorphic exactly, but it's about emotion projected, not so it can be avoided but rather so it can be understood.

Martin Waterhouse says

This is a beautiful collection of poems that I just can't seem to stop turning to. I'll open it at random, start reading, and inevitably find myself moved (*Envy: An Assay*) or amused (*Termites: An Assay*). The highlight, for me, is the Haiku-esque *Seventeen Pebbles* (I just realised the connection there ...) which is a perfect sub-collection of writings. So overall, this is a book that's going to stay with me for a very long time.

Kasey Jueds says

She's one of my two or three most favorite contemporary poets, and it's always so hard to choose which of her books I love best: this one, and *The Lives of the Heart*, and *Given Sugar, Given Salt*, and *The October Palace*... I guess, really, all of them. I love the largeness of her concerns--intimacy, impermanence--the beauty and strangeness of her voice, her compassion and her deep wisdom. Her Buddhist practice is definitely present in her work, but it doesn't intrude.
