



The Lives of the Heart

Jane Hirshfield

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A new volume of poems by the award-winning author of *October Palace*.

The Lives of the Heart Details

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From Reader Review The Lives of the Heart for online ebook

Christine says

Loved this book so much. She set the bar high for me and I compare a lot of poetry I've read since to the feelings and imagery that reading this collection evoked in me.

The author writes beautifully about the heart as the centre of as well as a metaphor for everything else in life.

Thomas Brusio says

Beautiful. Ingenious.

Lia says

I have loved all of Hirshfield's translations, but this is my favorite of her original works (so far). Her poems are all so rich in emotion, whether the topic be seemingly banal (Leaf, Lake and Maple, The Bearded Woman) or deeply personal (Manners/Rwanda, Salt Heart, Talc).

Nicole says

Mule Heart

On the days when the rest
have failed you,
let this much be yours -
flies, dust, an unnameable odor,
the waiting baskets:
one for the lemons and passion,
the other for all you have lost.
Both empty,
it will come to your shoulder,
breathe slowly against your bare arm.
If you offer it hay, it will eat.
Offered nothing,
it will stand as long as you ask.
The little bells of the bridle will hang
beside you quietly,
in the heat and the tree's thick shade.
Do not let its sparse mane deceive you,
or the way the left ear swivels into dream.
This too is a gift of the gods,

calm and complete.

Jeffrey says

One of the few books of poetry I read from cover to cover and that I return to several times a year. Hirshfield was brave to tackle such tried subject as "the heart." But she meets the match with a quiet strength and brilliant perception.

Robert Whaley says

I may not be an astute critic of this book. I have only started to read poetry in any kind of intentional manner. But what the hell. This lady amazes me. I love her work
I'm reading her essays on poetry now and I have to tell you they are fantastic.

mimosa maoist says

Really liked the poems in part two, which seemed to de-familiarize common sights; part three was kinda Buddhist.

Sweetnothing says

her poems are different for me in that she uses very concrete images that transcend

Sarah Byrd says

she makes innate objects into deep objects participating in life.

Jennn says

I wasn't much of a fan of "October Palace", but I like to give everyone a second chance. It worked well for Jerome Rothenberg, after all. So, I thought I'd give "The Lives of the Heart" a chance and the title poem was, unusually, the poem to kick off the book. It wasn't new ground, but Hirshfield kept it fresh and interesting as she explained the heart in many different degrees: "can be skinned for garnets", "[l:]eave the strange kiss of their bodies/in Burgess Shale," "[l:]ie dormant until they are opened by ice,/by drought. Go blind in the service of lace." It was loose and free-flowing; I felt connected to it right away. I was excited because I thought the rest of the book would follow the same pattern and feeling. Unfortunately, the title poem was (I felt) the strongest poem and soon the book fell into a lull.

It's easy to read, and I can see why people like it, but it was too tame for me, too carefully laid out ("Beloved, what can be, what was,/will be taken from us./Sorry. I knew no better" and, "He pauses, lowers his head to/a stone and some leaves./Night deepens, the rain falls harder./He lifts his head and goes on.") . Everything was too quiet, every word had a place and it was kept neat and tidy, like a great-grandmother's house that was too delicate to play or spin around in. The poems struck me as very passive and slow: "the old horse waits in his pasture./He knows the field for exactly what it is:/his limitless mare, his beloved" (this was taken from "Not Moving Even One Step", but I did like the last line: "How silently the heart pivots on its hinge").

In other poems, there's a murkiness, like something moving around muddy water, but never quite getting close to you ("Secretive Heart": "Heart falters, stops/before a Chine cauldron/still good for boiling water"). Sometimes I felt like there was so much emphasis on her meditations that she lost the reader ("The audience applauds./The mime stops holding his breath./Outside the theater, rain begins to fall.")

Nature was a constant theme and I admit that I'm not the biggest fan of nature poems; I prefer poems that deal with human nature. So, I can see why I didn't connect that well with a lot of her poems. However, like I've stated, many of her poems are just very quiet, like they've been hushed. I'd love to see more punch.

"Mule Heart" was an odd spin, but I found myself liking it: "Do not let its sparse mane deceive you,/or the way the left ear swivels in dream." "Not-Yet" started off too ordinary, "Morning of buttered toast; of coffee, sweetened, with milk", but I enjoyed it in the end. "The Gift" was good, but more suited to Stacey (horse love and all). I liked "Late Prayer": "a single nail, single ruby-/all the heavens and hells./They rattle in the heart and make one sound."

The worst line (that made me cringe) was from "Mele in Gabbia": "I eat them/in this good place-/the pastry warm,/a little bit chewy,/the linen/impeccably white-/and consider." It felt like it came right out of a poetry exercise in high school. With as many credits as Hirshfield has (she's been in some major magazines), I expected something better.

But I don't want to seem like the book was an abomination, it wasn't. It just didn't move me. I warmed up to her a little in part 2 and 3, but never felt a deep connection. My favourites would be the title poem, "The Clock", and "Lying".

Bottom-line: Not my thing. Too quiet.

Extras:

Persimmons: spotted on page 50

Abigail Clark says

This was the first time I had read anything by Jane Hirshfield and I loved her work. The collection varied stylistically, but they were all full of vivid imagery that let me reflect on my own personal experiences and the subtle "tea scent of jasmine."

Kay Davis says

Jane Hirshfield is one of the best contemporary poets in the genre of Buddhist writing. In *The Lives of the Heart*, Hirshfield encourages living simply, productively, and creatively in the present.

Hirshfield's poems are "simple complexities," exploring common Buddhist themes such as interconnectedness, enlightenment, and impermanence.

In "Respite," Hirshfield communes with the natural world around her: "Day after quiet day passes. I speak to no one besides the dog. To her, I murmur much I would not otherwise say."

In "Changing Everything," Hirshfield describes encountering barriers on the path to enlightenment as walking along a trail and removing branches: "Willfully with a cold heart, I took a stick, lifted it to the opposite side."

In "Standing Deer," Hirshfield describes the memory of a life fulfilled and the irresistible urge to continue grasping: "As the house of a person in age sometimes grows cluttered with what is too loved or too heavy to part with the heart may grow cluttered. And still the house will be emptied, and still the heart."

Think of this collection as a beginning to reading Hirshfield. Next, try "After."

Nina says

I love this book and am currently re-reading my autographed copy. These poems are gorgeous--I love Hirshfield's imaginings of heart. My favorite poem, which I have memorized and am currently reciting to myself, is Da Capo. "Begin again the story of your life." I need to hear these words over and over. Their cadence is comforting and strong.

Marguerite says

The first dozen poems are interesting, but at some remove. After 20-some pages, Jane Hirshfield gets my attention and mostly keeps it. A title like *The Lives of the Heart* should offer a variety of opportunities for engagement, and this collection does. The heart in nature, the aging heart, the thoughtful heart and grieving heart all get a turn. Hirshfield's word-craft is considerable. This one merits a place on my small shelf of poetry to read over and over.

"As the thoughts of a person
in age sometimes grow sparer,
like a great cleanness comes into a room,
the soul may grow sparer;
one sparrow song carves it completely.
And still the room is full,
and still the heart."

"There is more and more I tell no one,
strangers nor loves.
This slips into the heart
without hurry, as if it had never been.

And yet, among the trees, something has changed.

Something looks back from the trees,
and knows me for who I am."

"I want the way
this water sees without eyes,
hears without ears,
shivers without will or fear
at the gentlest touch.
I want the way it lets
all of it pass
without judgment or comment.

...

O heart, if you
will not, cannot, give me the lake,
then give me the song."

David Schaafsma says

Jane Hirshfield is coming to my village in a couple weeks so I thought I would read some of her work, on the suggestion of my friend and poet Jenn. This is my first experience of her work, and I thought it was bold to take on this subject (of love) and try to make something new of it. I very much liked the poems; she brings a Buddhist sensibility to language and image. She reads and reflects the reading in her poems of Chinese poetry.

The Heart's Counting Knows Only One

In Sung China,
two monks friends for sixty years
watched the geese pass.
Where are they going?
one tested the other, who couldn't say.

That moment's silence continues.

No one will study their friendship
in the koan-books of insight.
No one will remember their names.

I think of them sometimes,

standing, perplexed by sadness,
goose-down sewn into their quilted autumn robes.

Almost swallowed by the vastness of the mountains,
but not yet.

As the barely audible
geese are not yet swallowed;
as even we, my love, will not entirely be lost.

Or this one:
Changing Everything
I was walking again
in the woods,
a yellow light
was sifting all I saw.

Willfully,
with a cold heart,
I took a stick,
lifted it to the opposite side
of the path.

There, I said to myself,
that's done now.
Brushing one hand against the other,
to clean them
of the tiny fragments of bark.

Her rendition of the varieties of love in this volume is not the reflection of a young person but of one with experience of heartache and complexity as much as passion.

Here's some other lines/images I liked:

"How silently the heart pivots on its hinge."

"To sit there among the petals, altering nothing."

"The rains come, the deer slip back into the mountains like hungry, rose-colored smoke."

Of a mare she sees: "The way the left ear swivels into dream."

This is the poetry of small observations, of subtle gestures, and "do not-doing," as Lao Tsu urged us.

"More and more wanting to learn how to leave things be."

I can't wait to hear her read and meet her!
