

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

March 6, 2017

A weekly poetry resource  
from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



excerpt from *My Life Was the Size of My Life*

My life was the size of my life.  
Its rooms were room-sized,  
its soul was the size of a soul.  
...

There were times my life and I made jokes together.  
There were times we made bread.  
Once, I grew moody and distant.  
I told my life I would like some time,  
I would like to try seeing others.  
In a week, my empty suitcase and I returned.  
I was hungry, then, and my life,  
my life, too, was hungry, we could not keep  
our hands off our clothes on  
our tongues from

Jane Hirshfield<sup>1</sup>

## Reflections

Some of us may have, at some point, wanted to break up with our own lives. At least I have certainly wished as much: *I need some space! I want something different! Let's see other people!*

Here, the abstract Life is personified. That is, it becomes a thing with human attributes; specifically, this life has hands and a tongue, experiences hunger, and is able to embrace. The beauty of figurative language—the point of which is to make knowable something abstract—is something we're all familiar with (even if you didn't know the name). We are always assigning concrete imagery to abstract thought; it's how we get “Love is a Battlefield,” “Happiness is a Warm Gun,” “My love is like a red, red rose,” “the Lord is my rock,” “the lamb of God”—and we speak in metaphor all the time (white as snow, good as gold, right as rain, hot as hell, life's a beach.) We are *built* for poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> “My Life Was the Size of My Life” by Jane Hirshfield from *The Beauty*, Knopf Doubleday.

In this case, abstract life becomes a human being. Life is a lover. And I delight in making meaning from that. At times our life may feel separate from us, unknowable as another person, something we could divorce, or grow apart and away from. Perhaps this is what we mean when we say we are “out of touch” with ourselves. At other times, our life may feel more intimate, more passionate. This is a poem about a human’s self-examination, an accounting.

If you are at all like me, what you’re really drawn to is the ending, as the speaker comes back with her empty suitcase (interesting that it’s empty—was there ever anything in there?) to embrace her life like a lost lover. It’s a seductive moment. The human and the human life hungry for one another, having returned “we could not keep / our hands off our clothes on our tongues from.”

You might notice there is no punctuation and there are those gaps of white space; the effect is a sort of urgency, a breathlessness, a tension between what is there and what is *not* there, the coming together in this physical, primal embrace. And because there is no period to end this poem, the conclusion is not a conclusion at all. One can make the case that if there is no period, there is no end, and the poem goes on infinitely. In a poem about embracing life, could there be a more hopeful gesture? The poet Heather McHugh would say this is an example of the perfect ending: “one that feels inevitable while at the same time opening up into a universe of potential.”

### ✧ About the poet

Jane Hirshfield is the author of a book of essays concerning the “mind of poetry” and her several collections presenting and co-translating the work of poets from the past have become classics in their fields. She is the author of eight collections of poetry, including *The Beauty* (Knopf, 2015); *Come, Thief, After* (shortlisted for England’s T.S. Eliot Prize and named a “best book of 2006” by the Washington Post, the San Francisco Chronicle, and the London Financial Times); *Given Sugar, Given Salt* (finalist for the 2001 National Book Critics Circle Award), and others. She will read from her work at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church on Thursday, March 23 at 7 p.m. A reception and book signing will follow. Please join us.



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