

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

March 13, 2017

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



excerpt from *My Skeleton*

...

Angular wristbone's arthritis,
cracked harp of ribcage,
blunt of heel,
opened bowl of the skull,
twin platters of pelvis—
each of you will leave me behind,
at last serene.

What did I know of your days,
your nights,
I who held you all my life
inside my hands
and thought they were empty?

You who held me all my life
inside your hands
as a new mother holds
her own unblanketed child,
not thinking at all.

Jane Hirshfield¹

Reflections

By way of introduction, I'll note that this poem is considered an *ode*, a specific form involving direct address. There are several odes in *The Beauty*, Hirshfield's most recent collection — "My Weather," "My Proteins," "My Eyes," "My Corkboard," "My Sandwich." And in each case, the poem — the ode — pays careful attention to that which might go unnoticed, unexplored.

"My Skeleton" dares to ask, *when is the last time you really considered your own bones?* There is perhaps something wryly humorous about this notion, but the poem deftly manages what is, finally, a solemn reminder of physical degeneration and our own mortality, asking, *What is it to have a physical body that will one day die? What is it to be mortal? What lasts? What disappears? What do we take for granted?* In this case, the poem suggests one might take one's own body for granted, the very frame and structure of one's physical presence.

While Hirshfield's interest in Zen Buddhism is rarely explicit in her poems, I can sometimes detect traces of her interest in Buddhist practice. For example, "My Skeleton" is largely about the temporal nature of things, of our own bodies, specifically, and as Hirshfield

¹ "My Skeleton," by Jane Hirshfield from *The Beauty*, Knopf Doubleday.

explains in an interview, “A central teaching of Buddhism is that nothing lasts. Not love, not monasteries, not life itself.” Certainly not the human body. And because the ode is essentially a poem of concentrated attention and address, it is not too far-fetched to connect the kind of concentration necessary for meditative practice with the concentration that an ode invites. How appropriate, then, to consider this a Lenten poem as we enter a season of more attentive reflection and a more deliberate if not more ascetic focus on what it means to live and die.

I am drawn to the last image of a mother “hold[ing] / her own unblanketed child, / not thinking at all” because it illuminates not only attentive devotion but also newness of life. Whether you are a mother or not, there is something primal, something holy, and something altogether delicious, always, about beholding beauty, beholding a miracle. Poems themselves, at their best, have a way of being “unblanketed” this way. A little miracle in your hands. They are clear, without sacrificing complexity. They are able, in Hirshfield’s words, “to know the world in many ways at once — heart, mind, voice, body.” Too, they can reveal rather than obscure and remind us that what we may first have feared was inaccessible or impenetrable is actually something knowable and intrinsic. “Not thinking at all” suggests that when we are able to devote our attention without forcing meaning-making, we are open to a new way of understanding our lives.

The poet Jack Gilbert has a beautiful essay called “Craft of the Invisible” in which he talks about the invisible spirit, the gentle, invisible force poetry has that allows the heart to ripen. In that essay he includes an anecdote from an interview with a famous musician who had been a child prodigy and he ends with this: “...his father was cleaning out his music and dumped some of the scores in the child’s toy box. When the boy found them, he wasn’t sure what they were. When he finally managed to pick out the notes on the piano, he got more and more excited. Finally he ran upstairs to his little sister and said: *We don’t have to be afraid anymore.*”

Indeed, there is nothing to fear with poetry. It is meant to delight, to awaken, to nourish, to inspire. Hold the poem “unblanketed”—lightly, lovingly—the way your skeleton, even when it fails or stumbles, has still held you all your life.

✠ About the Poet

Jane Hirshfield has been awarded the 70th Academy Fellowship for distinguished poetic achievement by The Academy of American Poets, an honor formerly held by such poets as Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Elizabeth Bishop. In 2012, she was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. She will read from her work at St. Stephen’s Church on March 23 at 7 p.m. A reception and book signing will follow.



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