

LEDGER

POEMS

JANE  
HIRSHFIELD

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# LEDGER





## LET THEM NOT SAY

Let them not say: we did not see it.  
We saw.

Let them not say: we did not hear it.  
We heard.

Let them not say: they did not taste it.  
We ate, we trembled.

Let them not say: it was not spoken, not written.  
We spoke,  
we witnessed with voices and hands.

Let them not say: they did nothing.  
We did not-enough.

Let them say, as they must say something:

A kerosene beauty.  
It burned.

Let them say we warmed ourselves by it,  
read by its light, praised,  
and it burned.



#





## THE BOWL

If meat is put into the bowl, meat is eaten.

If rice is put into the bowl, it may be cooked.

If a shoe is put into the bowl,  
the leather is chewed and chewed over,  
a sentence that cannot be taken in or forgotten.

A day, if a day could feel, must feel like a bowl.  
Wars, loves, trucks, betrayals, kindness,  
it eats them.

Then the next day comes, spotless and hungry.

The bowl cannot be thrown away.  
It cannot be broken.

It is calm, uneclipsable, rindless,  
and, big though it seems, fits exactly in two human hands.

Hands with ten fingers,  
fifty-four bones,  
capacities strange to us almost past measure.  
Scented—as the curve of the bowl is—  
with cardamom, star anise, long pepper, cinnamon, hyssop.

## I WANTED TO BE SURPRISED.

To such a request, the world is obliging.

In just the past week, a rotund porcupine,  
who seemed equally startled by me.

The man who swallowed a tiny microphone  
to record the sounds of his body,  
not considering beforehand how he might remove it.

A cabbage and mustard sandwich on marbled bread.

How easily the large spiders were caught with a clear plastic cup  
surprised even them.

I don't know why I was surprised every time love started or ended.  
Or why each time a new fossil, Earth-like planet, or war.  
Or that no one kept being there when the doorknob had clearly.

What should not have been so surprising:  
my error after error, recognized when appearing on the faces of  
others.

What did not surprise enough:  
my daily expectation that anything would continue,  
and then that so much did continue, when so much did not.

Small rivulets still flowing downhill when it wasn't raining.  
A sister's birthday.

Also, the stubborn, courteous persistence.  
That even today *please* means *please*,  
*good morning* is still understood as *good morning*,

and that when I wake up,  
the window's distant mountain remains a mountain,  
the borrowed city around me is still a city, and standing.

Its alleys and markets, offices of dentists,  
drug store, liquor store, Chevron.

Its library that charges—a happy surprise—no fine for overdue books:  
Borges, Baldwin, Szymborska, Morrison, Cavafy.

## VEST

I put on again the vest of many pockets.

It is easy to forget  
which holds the reading glasses,  
which the small pen,  
which the house keys,  
the compass and whistle, the passport.

To forget at last for weeks  
even the pocket holding the day  
of digging a place for my sister's ashes,  
the one holding the day  
where someone will soon enough put my own.

To misplace the pocket  
of touching the walls at Auschwitz  
would seem impossible.  
It is not.

To misplace, for a decade,  
the pocket of tears.

I rummage and rummage—  
transfers  
for Munich, for Melbourne,  
to Oslo.  
A receipt for a Singapore *kopi*.  
A device holding music:  
Bach, Garcia, Richter, Porter, Pärt.

A woman long dead now  
gave me, when I told her I could not sing,  
a kazoo.  
Now in a pocket.



Somewhere, a pocket  
holding a Steinway.  
Somewhere, a pocket  
holding a packet of salt.

Borgesian vest,  
Oxford English Dictionary vest  
with a magnifying glass  
tucked inside one snapped-closed pocket,  
Wikipedia vest, Rosetta vest,  
Enigma vest of decoding,  
how is it one person can carry  
your weight for a lifetime,  
one person  
slip into your open arms for a lifetime?

Who was given the world,  
and hunted for tissues, for chapstick.

## AN ARCHAEOLOGY

Sixty feet below the streets of Rome,  
the streets of Rome.  
Like that, I heard your voice, my life.  
Like that I listened.

I listened  
as to neighbors who live  
behind the back wall of a building.

You know the voices of them,  
the arguments and re-knittings,  
the scents of their cooking and absence.  
You know their plosives, gutturals, fricatives, stops.

Say to any who walk here,  
“How are you?”  
Ask where some bar or café might be found.  
You could talk together, and drink,  
and find your own neighbor.

But ask your life anything, ask it,  
“How did this happen? What have we come to?”  
It turns its face, it hums as a fish-hiding sea does.

*FECIT*

for a person in love, the air looks no different

for a person in grief

in this my one lifetime,  
while reading, arguing, cherishing, washing, watching a video,  
sleeping,  
the numbers unseeably rise—

305 ppm, 317 ppm, 390, 400

shin of high granite ticks snow-less the compound fracture

I who wrote this

like the old painters  
sign this:

*JH fecit.*

DAY BEGINNING WITH SEEING THE INTERNATIONAL  
SPACE STATION AND A FULL MOON OVER THE  
GULF OF MEXICO AND ALL ITS INVISIBLE FISHES

None of this had to happen.

Not Florida. Not the ibis's beak. Not water.

Not the horseshoe crab's empty body and not the living starfish.

Evolution might have turned left at the corner and gone down another  
street entirely.

The asteroid might have missed.

The seams of limestone need not have been susceptible to sand and  
mangroves.

The radio might have found a different music.

The hips of one man and the hips of another might have stood beside  
each other on a bus in Aleppo and recognized themselves as long-lost  
brothers.

The key could have broken off in the lock and the nail-can refused its  
lid.

I might have been the fish the brown pelican swallowed.

You might have been the way the moon kept not setting long after we  
thought it would,

long after the sun was catching inside the low wave curls coming in  
at a certain angle. The light might not have been eaten again by its  
moving.

If the unbearable were not weightless we might yet buckle under the  
grief

of what hasn't changed yet. Across the world a man pulls a woman  
from the water

from which the leapt-from overfilled boat has entirely vanished.

From the water pulls one child, another. Both are living and both will  
continue to live.

This did not have to happen. No part of this had to happen.



## ANTS' NEST

“On Being the Right Size,” Haldane’s short essay is titled.

An ants’ nest can be found at the top of a redwood.

No bird that weighs less than \_\_\_\_.

No insect more than \_\_\_\_.

The minimum mass for a whale, for a language, an ice cap.

In a human-sized room,

someone is setting a human-sized table with yellow napkins,

someone is calling

her children to come in from a day whose losses as yet remain  
child-sized.