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A Carbon-based Life Form

A person tired with happiness grows sober.

Another, worn through
by sadness, stumbles into a kind of joy.

It is like a dog alone in a house, barking to hear its own kind—

Nothing needs to be added. Yet we do.

This Was Once A Love Poem

This was once a love poem,
before its haunches thickened, its breath grew short,
before it found itself sitting,
perplexed and a little embarrassed,
on the fender of a parked car,
while many people passed by without turning their heads.

It remembers itself dressing as if for a great engagement.
It remembers choosing these shoes,
this scarf or tie.

Once, it drank beer for breakfast,
drifted its feet
in a river side by side with the feet of another.

Once it pretended shyness, then grew truly shy,
dropping its head so the hair would fall forward,
so the eyes would not be seen.

It spoke with passion of history, of art.
It was lovely then, this poem.
Under its chin, no fold of skin softened.
Behind the knees, no pad of yellow fat.
What it knew in the morning it still believed at nightfall.
An unconjured confidence lifted its eyebrows, its cheeks.

The longing has not diminished.
Still it understands. It is time to consider a cat,
the cultivation of African violets or flowering cactus.

Yes, it decides:
many miniature cacti, in blue and red painted pots.

When it finds itself disquieted
by the pure and unfamiliar silence of its new life,
it will touch them--one, then another—
with a single finger outstretched like a tiny flame.

Sleep

Horses, yes.
Dogs, old ones especially.
People of course.
Even trees.

Planets, atoms, do not.
Bacterium, virus?
Unlikely.

Pens sleep
most of the time.
but awaken quickly—

one shake
or a few dry strokes suffice.

A fire sleeps by dark,
a cat by daylight,
each curled in a warming circle.
A rock lies still or tumbles,
but cannot sleep.

Does the wool
sleep along with its sheep?
The hoof with its cow?

The finger sleeps
and the ring does not—
what of the vow?

A woman touched by a man
pretends, sometimes,
to sleep,
for the pleasure of letting him think
that she awakens.

After, her thighs
sleep differently than before.

Sometimes the heart
goes sleepless or sleeps for years:
sometimes the mind.

I have tried to talk
with my sleep,
to ask it politely for this or that,
but it only averts its gaze.

"Go away," it says,
and, "Leave me alone."
As if without me
it could be anything at all.

Still, it knows who is slave,
who master.

And so I lavish on it
goosedown and soft cotton,
offer it sweetened milk

or wine,
tuck it into warm blankets
under a window opened just an inch.

Some speak
of entering sleep,
but it is sleep that enters us,
as a farmer, familiar,
confident, enters his field.

Night after night it tills and waters,
so that at times we awaken
buoyant,
other times in inexplicable grief.

And though the child
who refuses to sleep
is right perhaps to be inconsolable—
begging more time,
clutching her bear to her cheek—
she too will finally agree.

Joining the silent magpies
and tough-skinned conch and saguaro;
the swaying mule deer,
suspended pipefish,
and deep-sighing maple—

all who, drifting,
distal,
quilt the drowsy night-song of the mortal.

Jane Hirshfield

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Jane Hirshfield's fifth volume of poem's, *Given Sugar, Given Salt* is appearing this month from HarperCollins; the poems presented in this issue of *Disquieting Muses* are taken from that collection. Ms. Hirshfield is the recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim and Rockefeller foundations as well as the Poetry Center Book Award, Bay Area Book Reviewers Award, and other honors. Hirshfield teaches in the Bennington College M.F.A. Writing Seminars. Recent poems have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *The Nation*, *The Oxford American*, *Slate*, *The Threepenny Review*, and *Agni*.