

Notes and poems for the discussion on Jane Hirshfield September 2021  
Poetry Club. Hosted by Betty & Ron

*From Jane Hirshfield, Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World, Chapter Nine, "Poetry, Transformation, and the Column of Tears, pp. 243-44.*

### **Words transform.**

**Propaganda is a language that steers, hardens, and stupefies. Seduction's words narrow and intensify, arousing one-pointed desire. The language of fact confirms, informs, offers what we hope are reliable bricks for the mind's further assemblings. Directions direct, imperatives order, explanations satisfy, or do not.**

**Poems can, of course, be turned to each of these ends. But when that happens, if it is all that happens, they become stunted versions of themselves, like plants kept in too confining a pot. . . . Poetry allowed its full root-run unbinds us, and itself, from all knowable ends.**

**Poetry's ends are, in truth, peculiar, viewed from the byways of ordinary speech. But it is this oddness that makes poems so needed—true poems, like true love, undo us. . . . Contrary, sensual, subversive, they elude our customary allegiance to surface reality, purpose, and will. A good poem is comprehensive and thirsty. It pulls toward what is invisible to an overly directed looking, toward what is protean, volatile, unprotected, and several-handed. Poems rummage the drawers of what does not yet exist but might, in the world, in us. Their inexhaustibility is the inexhaustibility of existence itself, in which each moment plunges from new to new. Like a chemical reagent, water passing through limestone, or a curious toddler, a good poem reveals, entering and leaving altered whatever it meets.**

### **Questions to Focus Discussion:**

--In past meetings, we have discussed several theories of poetics, including Zapruder, Poe, Wordsworth, Rilke, and others. Other theorists employ explanation as their primary technique. JH's passage is representative of her entire book; it relies heavily on poetic technique to convey poetry's special use of language, its intentions and impact. Does her method clarify sufficiently, or, to use her term, does it "satisfy"?

--Is JH as successful as other poetic theorists in conveying her own interpretations of poetry's modes and role? As poets, do we aspire to these purposes and ends in writing our poems, and do we judge the quality of our poems by these or similar standards?

--JH writes a paean to poetry, a prose poem extolling poetry's power for our lives. Are we persuaded that poetry has the intent, the agency, and the impact which she claims?

--JH claims that poetry is important and, like other art, is fulfilling. Would we agree that it is "needed" and for the reasons she cites?

--JH employs some powerful metaphors as vehicles for the ideas she intends to convey. Are these devices sufficient to carry her points?

## **Excerpt from Chapter One**

### **Kingfishers Catching Fire:**

#### **Looking with Poetry's Eyes**

"A mysterious quickening inhabits the depths of any good poem—protean, elusive, alive in its own right. The word "creative" shares its etymology with the word "creature," and carries a similar sense of breathing aliveness, of an active, fine-grained, and multi-cellular making. What is creative is rooted in growth and rising in the bringing into existence of new and autonomous being. We feel something stir, shiver, swim its way into the world when a good poem opens its eyes. Poetry's work is not simply the recording of inner or outer perception; it makes by words and music new possibilities of perceiving. Distinctive realms appear to us when we look and hear by poem-light. And these realms clearly are needed—there is no human culture that does not have its songs and poems.

One way we praise a work of art is to say it has "vision," and good poetry and good seeing go together almost always. Yet before art's more ground-level seeing can liberate itself into that other vision we speak of, a transfiguration is needed. The eyes and ears must learn to abandon the habits of useful serving and take up instead a participatory delight in their own ends. A work of art is not a piece of fruit lifted from a tree branch: it is a ripening collaboration of artist, receiver, and world."

Jane Hirshfield, "Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World," page 3-4.

Buy the book here:

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/229023/ten-windows-by-jane-hirshfield/>

Three of us picked out three poems:

Ron's poem

### **Optimism**

More and more I have come to admire resilience.  
Not the simple resilience of a pillow, whose foam  
returns over and over to the same shape, but the sinuous  
tenacity of a tree: finding the light newly blocked on one side,  
it turns in another. A blind intelligence, true.  
But out of such persistence arose turtles, rivers,  
mitochondria, figs—all this resinous, unretractable earth.

Amory's

### **Things keep sorting themselves.**

Does the butterfat know it is butterfat,  
milk know it's milk?

No.

Something just goes and something remains.

Like a boardinghouse table:  
men on one side, women on the other.  
Nobody planned it.

Plaid shirts next to one another,  
talking in accents from the Midwest.

Nobody plans to be a ghost.

Later on, the young people sit in the kitchen.

Soon enough, they'll be the ones  
to stumble Excuse me and quickly withdraw.  
But they don't know that.  
No one can ever know that.

*Source: Poetry (September 2012)*

Linda's  
A Blessing for Wedding

Today when persimmons ripen  
Today when fox-kits come out of their den into snow  
Today when the spotted egg releases its wren song  
Today when the maple sets down its red leaves  
Today when windows keep their promise to open  
Today when fire keeps its promise to warm  
Today when someone you love has died  
    or someone you never met has died  
Today when someone you love has been born  
    or someone you will not meet has been born  
Today when rain leaps to the waiting of roots in their dryness  
Today when starlight bends to the roofs of the hungry and tired  
Today when someone sits long inside his last sorrow  
Today when someone steps into the heat of her first embrace  
Today, let this light bless you  
With these friends let it bless you  
With snow-scent and lavender bless you  
Let the vow of this day keep itself wildly and wholly  
Spoken and silent, surprise you inside your ears  
Sleeping and waking, unfold itself inside your eyes  
Let its fierceness and tenderness hold you  
Let its vastness be undisguised in all your days

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Source: Tricycle magazine (2010)*