

This world of shadows

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A Kerosene Beauty: Twelve Environmental Elegiacs, poems by Jane Hirshfield, mezzotints by Holly Downing, designed and published by David Pascoe at Nawakum Press, Santa Rosa, California 2017.

I have written all this because I have thought that there might still be somewhere, possibly in literature or the arts, where something could be saved.¹

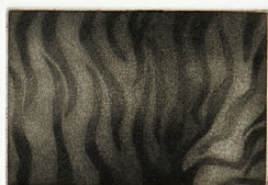
A wooden box, somewhere between a coffin and an exquisite lacquered tray, hand-crafted in Japan from Paulownia tree, encloses the book. Resting inside this carefully crafted object, the book is comfortably and safely contained.

Once the lid of the box is lifted, the cover is presented. It is made from a grey paper more akin to a sheet of cement than to any form of leather or buckram. The grey of the Brazilian stone leaf paper is roughly textured, like unpolished concrete, and has remnants of the fragments of the stone from which it was made, perhaps, still glittering in its surface. The back cover is similarly sumptuous and suggestive, an image in itself, made from a sort of woodgrain that could also be a rolling texture of satin or silk. Elemental materials have been employed to make this book, this cover suggests.

On opening the cover, a crimson red page is discovered, and throughout the book many differences in surfaces and textures continue to be found. Many of the pages are ever so slightly touched by the inked surface of printed letterpress formes. A semi-transparent white spidery-textured paper is sometimes blank, sometimes printed; a layer of plain tissue sits unbound between each of the images and its preceding page; and the heavy and firm surface of well-known French printmaking paper BFK Rives, in two colours white and tan, carries letterpress printed poetry & intaglio printed images.

The poems are printed on the tan paper, verso and recto, and the images, mezzotints, are printed on one side only of the brighter white paper. Their embossed echo fills the verso. The texts and images are presented in an unsteady rhythm, interspersed by the spidery-textured paper. These sheets have been tipped in not just to inter-leave or separate front from back of pages, but to create a break, a space, between poetry and image.

On some of the spidery-textured white pages, texts are set in a larger font than the font the poems are formed in, again employing the beautifully crisp & clear methodology of letterpress printing. The text 'brush of the wing / on the nape of



A KEROSENE BEAUTY

Twelve Environmental Elegiacs

Poetry by Jane Hirshfield

Mezzotints by Holly Downing

Nawakum Press | Santa Rosa | 2017

Ledger

Tchaikowsky's *Eugene Onegin* is 3,592 measures.
A voice kept far from feeling is heard as measured.
What's wanted in desperate times are desperate measures.
Pushkin's unfinished *Onegin*: 5,446 lines.

No visible tears measure the pilot's grief
as she Lidars the height of an island: five feet.
Fifty, its highest leaf.
She logs the years, the weathers, the tree has left.

A million fired-clay bones—animal, human—
set down in a field as protest
measure 400 yards long, 60 yards wide, weigh 112 tons.
The length and weight and silence of the bereft.

Bees do not question the sweetness of what lies below them.
One measure of distance is meters. Another is *li*.
Ten thousand li can be translated "far."
For the exiled, *home* can be translated "then," translated "scar."

One liter
of Polish vodka holds twelve pounds of potatoes.
What we care about most, we call beyond measure.
What matters most, we say *counts*. Height now is treasure.

On this scale of one to ten, where is eleven?
Ask all you wish, no twenty-fifth hour will be given.
Measuring mounts—like some Western bar's mounted elk head—
our catalogued vanishing unfinished heaven.

your neck' is printed on a page that sits over an image of a feather, for example; 'susceptible to sand and mangroves' sits over an image suggesting coral structures, clumping shapes sitting in a dark, maybe underwater, world.

Paper is used, here, as a protective layer, pacing and preserving our engagement. The relationship between the poems and the images isn't sequential, however, and the meaning and connections between the pages slip back and forth, poetry and image extending into each other in evidence of their collaboration.

A Kerosene Beauty presents a collection of subtly textured surfaces that suggest a subject being burnished into existence, & these textures are in stark contrast to the slippery smooth polished wood of the desk on which the book lies as I read it. The book opens completely flat, in a cleverness of a complex system of binding, & a gluing and stitching together of these different surfaces. Its pages form a broad expanse, in the format of a landscape. Its foredge, head and tail are neatly guillotined, and these are the smoothest parts of its form.

The Paulownia box also holds another layer of wood which sits beneath the book. When this smooth sheet is lifted out, an extensive colophon page (in another enclosure, of paper inside an acetate sleeve) is revealed. A list of the people involved in the many types of construction and fabrication that

were drawn on to make this book is presented: the book's publisher and designer, the type that was cast and printed, the specialist papers commissioned, a box crafted in Japan, the binder, a printer to edition the mezzotints, and, of course, the intricacy of response between poet and artist that is the beating heart of this dedicated and time-consuming production.

A dedication is the first text:

In this world
we walk on the roof of hell
choosing blossoms.

Kobayashi Issa²

There is a constant reference to Japanese culture throughout, and it is not just this haiku-like poem that suggests this. The Paulownia box, the papers, and a reverence for natural forms all echo something of Japan. In a metaphor linking Japanese paper to the natural world, Jun'ichirō Tanizaki wrote: *Japanese paper gives us a certain feeling of warmth, of calm and repose. Even the same white paper could as well be one colour for Western paper and another for our own. Western paper turns away the light, while our paper seems to take it in, to envelop it gently, like the soft surface of a first snowfall. It gives off no sound when it is crumpled or folded, it is quiet and pliant to the touch as the leaf of a tree.*³

Bees do not question



the sweetness

A *Kerosene Beauty* declares itself as an elegy, as does Tanizaki's small book *In Praise of Shadows*. With the 'pessimistic aesthetic ... not of a celebrant but of a mourner',⁴ this Japanese author writes about a way of life in early twentieth century Japan that was, he felt, being lost. A *Kerosene Beauty*'s lamentations, while latched onto a Japanese reverence for nature, are also for the loss of biodiversity and for the destruction of the Earth's natural resources. It presents, as the authors declare on the title page, *Environmental Elegiacs*.

As things grow rarer, they enter the ranges of counting
and

someday this knife edge will dull

The poem 'Ledger' continues the rumination on counting and taking stock:

What we care about most, we call beyond measure

The sweetness of the memory is invoked:

They're in the past, yet we just keep travelling
towards them, then away,
refugee honey

Then an image suggests coils patterned with a beehive's comb of hexagons and, in the character of the mezzotint, emerges from darkness. This most perverse of all fine art printmaking processes demands that a copper matrix be laboriously rocked or pitted with a fine pattern of indentations that when printed yield an image with a sumptuously velvety, deep black surface. The artist then carefully flattens this textured surface on the metal matrix, wielding brusque metal tools, to find the light of the image. The smoother the plate becomes, the lighter its printed image will be. This is the central methodology of the mezzotint, to draw light from darkness. There is no bright white in the images, they are made in praise of shadows, 'this world of shadows we are losing'.⁵ The whole book might itself be considered a ledger: a reckoning of piles of paper, a putting together of pages, a framing of a collection of textured surfaces to form order.

A *Kerosene Beauty* is constructed with an endorsement for and faith in the poetics of an image, rather than employing the image as illustration or narrative. The relations between text and image are tangential, suggesting each other but delimiting neither. A set of three images on one page suggests a celestial view, a sky, maybe pinpricks that let the light bleed in, or the last burning points on a cindered log—'Under every footstep, / burning magma'.

The carefully chosen words of the poet & the burnished plates of the artist present a series of translations, text to image and vice versa, just as this essay presents another encounter, a translation of their work into another form.

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

And with an image of a flame, of a kerosene lamp's irregular sooty burning, another translation:

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.

In another type of witnessing, Ceridwen Dovey writes heartbreakingly of the impact of humankind's relentless struggles for power and resources on innocent animals. In *I, The Elephant, Wrote This*, Dovey presents the life & death of an elephant herd in war- and drought-torn Mozambique. She imagines her elephant-subjects envisaging that their own deaths, according to the wisdom of their herd, will be gloriously inscribed into the night sky as stars: *My twin sister and I, like all young elephants in our*

(of the herd) warned. 'It is the province only of the very young to want things to work out badly. The souls in the sky live only as long as we remember their stories. Beyond that there is nothing, not for them nor for us'.⁷

We will all, at one time or another, try to come to terms with this absolute loneliness. As philosopher Jacques Derrida reminded us, 'One friend must always go before the other; one friend must always die first'.⁸ We must learn how to come to terms with the absence of the loved person, to speak of and maintain both their singularity & their alterity, as the only solution to sustain our fidelity and responsibility to them.

In *A Kerosene Beauty*, the two authors have presented a double challenge in a lethal combination—the mourning of the unavoidable loss of an individual with the wilfully blind and careless destruction that will lead to the loss of a sustainable environment on Earth.

*I have written all this because I have thought that there might still be somewhere, possibly in literature or the arts, where something could be saved. I would call back at least for literature this world of shadows we are losing.*⁹

NOTES

1. Tanizaki, Jun'ichirō. (First published in 1933). *In Praise of Shadows*. Leete's Island Books: New Haven Connecticut, 1977, p 42.
2. Kobayashi Issa, 1763–1828, was a Japanese poet and lay Buddhist priest of the Jōdo Shinshū sect known for his haiku poems and journals. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kobayashi_Issa Accessed 17.5.18.
3. Tanizaki. *Ibid.* p 9–10.
4. Thomas J Harper, 'Afterword', in Tanizaki. *Ibid.* p 47.
5. Tanizaki. *Ibid.* p 42.
6. Dovey, Ceridwen, *Only the Animals*. Penguin: Melbourne, 2014, p 155.
7. Dovey. *Ibid.* p 162–163.
8. Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, editors Pascale-Anne Brault, Michael Naas. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2001. p 1.
9. Tanizaki. *Ibid.* p 42.

herd,
were raised
on a feast of stories
about our ancestors, whose
souls glowed at us from constellations
in the sky.⁶ But 'Death is not something to
worship now that you are adults,' the matriarch

