



book of hours
an illustrated manuscript

jay heins

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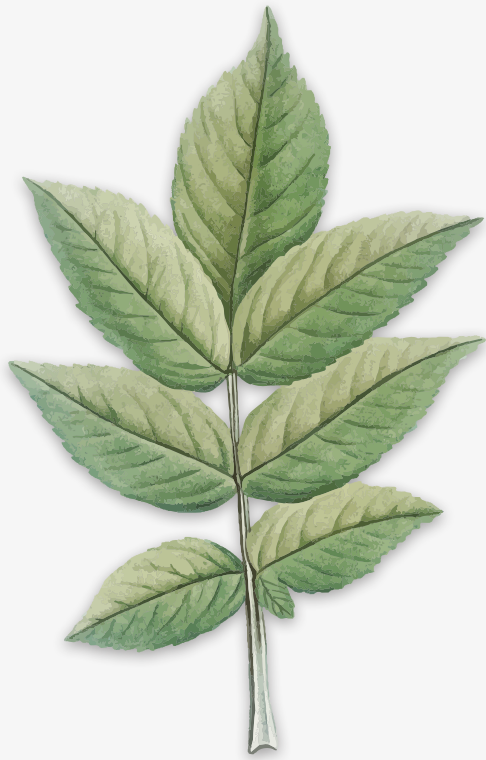
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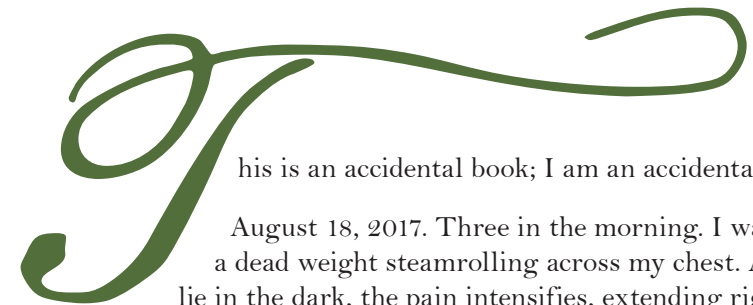
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introduction



his is an accidental book; I am an accidental poet.

August 18, 2017. Three in the morning. I wake to a dead weight steamrolling across my chest. As I lie in the dark, the pain intensifies, extending right down to the tips of my fingers. Waves of nausea and cold sweats. If you'd shown me a list of heart attack symptoms, I would have checked them all. *But I'm a healthy 48-year-old cyclist who rides ten thousand kilometres a year! This can't be happening. It's indigestion. Really, really bad indigestion.* Denial is a strange thing. At seven the next morning, I take the garbage to the curb, lift the recycling bin and almost collapse. It was time to go to the hospital. Diagnosis: The widow-maker. Left anterior descending artery 90% blocked. Treatment: One stent plus angioplasty. I'm beat up, but recover in a few weeks.

Six months later, my wife Tanya is diagnosed with breast cancer. We've caught it early. Treatment: Surgery and a round of powerful drugs. We consider ourselves lucky.

We feel none of the anger and depression you might expect. Of course, there's the normal-grade grief that comes with health challenges like these. But hovering quietly above the trauma is something else. Gratitude. Events that bring you close to death have a curious way of focusing the mind and forcing you to identify what's important. It's revealing, the moments that stay

A photograph of a bird's nest made of twigs and grass, nestled in a tree branch. The nest is positioned in the center-left of the frame. To the right of the nest, the word "spring" is written in a white, cursive font. The background is a soft, out-of-focus view of a tree with many thin branches, creating a sense of depth and a natural setting. The overall tone is light and airy, with a muted color palette of greens and browns.

spring



how to cook a poem

take one inconsequential event
latch on by imagination
add a sequence of images
imbue with symbolic meaning
marinate in a fugue state
winnow the grain
build up in layers
clarify and distill
draw out the essence
crystallize a gem, a jewel
meta *amuse-guele*
consommé of new experience
this inconsequential thing
that exists only
for its own pleasure



little victory

I used to think that days are divided
into good days and bad days, but
now there are only *days*.

Days are indifferent.
Days are agnostic—

your nostalgia
and your agony.

One bright day: a family visit, our niece, five,
wakes us singing “Good Morning Song.”
The way we love small things.



fall



Baldwin Cemetery

A home burial plot lies hidden
on a tree-covered hill
above farm fields
off Cross Loop Road.

Small lawn lovingly tended.
Wildflowers. Fine latticework fence
with a fresh coat of paint.
The lilac bushes are taking over.

Their sweet perfume brings a sadness
that settles across the valley.
Branches and monuments to kin; roots
thread slowly through earth and ribcage.



elegy

Not much remains of my grandparents' farm.
Out Barr Line, turn at the church on Stokes Lane,
first left, a short way down the pale gravel path.

There are ghosts where buildings used to be.

The farmhouse, torn down years ago.
Timber and boards from the barn, scavenged.
Broken slab cattle stalls. Lone hydro pole.
Earthmovers piled dirt where none was before.

Wrecked and rusting equipment. It's quiet,
a copse of trees shelters from the north wind.
To the south, a mile distant, the woodlot;
too far for childhood adventure.

Under lowering skies, a wisp of snow curls into the air.
Corn stalks shorn six inches from the ground.
Desolate rows where their home used to be.

But I remember where the good bones are buried.

Jay Heins' debut poetry collection, *book of hours*, gently asks you to consider both small miracles and large tragedies. Inspired by medieval Christian illuminated manuscripts, Heins adapts this practice of pairing poetry with visual art into a nature-based secular kind of worship. These unconventional prayers are a devotional practice of gratitude juxtaposed with grief, meditations on how death informs life. Consider the lilac bushes taking over the cemetery. The "hills / that unzipped green / only yesterday" set against the doors of the chemo ward. Heins' poetry sketches the beauty and pain when "time removes the guardrails." Always returning to nature for solace, with a focus on the cyclical, *book of hours* reminds us that "time stops; yet / I am moving / and the river flows."

Heins traverses time through silence. His poems are a summoning spell for significance in all that we take for granted, a regression into childlike wonder towards the minutiae and discovering new absurdities in habit.

—**Khashayar Mohammadi**, author of *Me, You, Then Snow*



Heins has the gift of facing tragedy without hopelessness and beauty without cliché. *book of hours* somehow offers comfort while also reminding the reader of the inevitability of death. While in some moments "everything / is broken," in others we reside "where waves lift stones / and fall back with a miraculous clatter." The photographs paired with each poem have the effect of both grounding the reader, allowing a clear view into the speaker's world, while also creating a sense of space and exploration. "Days are indifferent. Days are agnostic" but they are also full of moving water, of laughter, of sunshine reflecting off your loved one's hair. Heins deftly holds these two extremes in balance, leading you to understand they are not in opposition at all.

—**Conyer Clayton**, author of *We Shed Our Skin Like Dynamite*

book of hours is a well measured taking stock of middle age. Beauty has been discovered, celebrated but harder lessons come with the weather and time. Heins learns to "forget everything, just try to be a good person." And that is the biggest trick in the universe. These poems come from an uncluttered and untroubled human heart, real life has a hard edge and Heins meets it head on. Then tempers it all with a softened blow of good hope.

—**Michael Dennis**, author of *Low Centre of Gravity*

