

Jane Hirshfield

ONCE: AN ASSAY

Once wakes up in the morning, brews coffee,
 goes outside in its bathrobe to bring the paper from the street.
Once notices the day is possible rain.

At the same time, Once is lightly climbing a tree,
 a tall sycamore
slanting over a late-summer stream.
 A single yellow leaf at once floats down.

A water snake flows one way, the leaf the other.
Once goes with both.
 Then coils in a spring-latched doorknob,
while also swinging its large head around
to scratch the itch that troubles one coarse-haired hip.

Once knows *again* exists
 but this is theoretical knowledge.
Thus Once is ceaselessly tender, though without large passion.

Once doesn't know any better and so loves this world,
in which babies starve, after long enough,
in silence.

Is Once heartless?
 – You may well ask,
who pass your life inside its large, dry hand.

Once turns its face toward the question:
 a horse-shaped alarm clock of bright blue plastic, with red tail.
The dream its whinny wakes you from is also Once's.

This sneeze, this pain, this rage or weeping: one moment only.
Leaving, Once takes in its pocket your slightest sigh.

Just try to breathe it again, Once murmurs. You'll see.

If you protest, it is Once's own and only protest.
If you agree, it is Once that for its instant accedes.

This Möbius is hard to understand but easy to manufacture.

A single strip of paper, turned once, it's yours.