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 **The Empathy Exams**
 Leslie Jamison
 Graywolf Press
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The painful inadequacy of writing about pain

Leslie Jamison's collection of essays is a magisterial examination of the different kinds of wounds, the depths of physical pain and the difficulties of talking about empathy, writes Sharanya.

SHARANYA 28th Jun 2014

I have two scars on my legs that bear stories worth empathising with. The ex-wound is a tight, shiny, oval scar, pressed deep into my left foreleg; the kind of scar beloveds might ask questions about on a summer evening when my legs are bare — *how did you get that scar?* It is a story that has been narrated to a trembling perfection — *on my 11th birthday, a Saturday — I scraped my leg on the sharp, steel step of my school bus — so much blood on my whites — the scar, it emerged —*

Leslie Jamison

The other is an ongoing, unglamorous wound. The scar itself is a dark, lengthy, faded mark on my right foreleg that is barely visible, I am told, but it is much too visible for my liking. It is an unpleasant wound, one from a severe illness from years ago that that I am embarrassed to name, that left my legs more disfigured than I can bear to remember. It requires validation I cannot ask for.

Leslie Jamison's remarkable collection of essays, *The Empathy Exams*, is about all kinds of wounds — anorexia, self-harm, alcoholism, reality shows, addiction, period pain, abortions, physical impairment, feeling too much, feeling too little, Morgellon's Disease, prison visits, to dab briefly — not the least of which is a particular kind of *feminine* wound-shame, where the wound is inseparable from the shame, that is impossible to talk about without irony lacing its edges, and write about without being viewed as some kind of heroic game-changer in this generation of literature (Jamison: "Empathy as forced symmetry, a bodily echo"). Responding to her essays has required me to pick at my own anthology of wounds and classify them—the unnameable, the witness-able, the shameful, the boastful; isn't that the ultimate form of empathy?

The Empathy Exams is, therefore, also about several kinds of empathies; the kind that comes easy and thus makes us feel good about ourselves ("Morphology of the Hit", where Jamison details being punched in the face and the surgery she got afterwards to hide the disfigurement), and even the kind we don't want to feel but do anyway ("In Defense of "Saccharin(e)"), where she unpacks the history of western society's suspicion of sentimentality, and recalls how she "first learned" that sentimentality was something she "should be running away from").

Reading *The Empathy Exams* is not a leisurely undertaking, in so far as it offers us no traditional catharsis. These are essays that require us to empathise — as humans engaging

with her feelings — pick a side and feel her feelings too. The process is exhausting, the scope is terrifying and the aftermath is, of course, mostly rewarding — because how do we not empathise once we are shown how to? What are our reasons for this neglect of empathy, when we do briefly feel it? Angry and relieved empathy checklists after I finish each essay:

Jamison is at her best when she is watching and transcribing pain that belongs to her world; a world that she cannot intrude upon because she is already there, in the constellation of its various violences.

I empathise with these former, mostly male addicts running the annual Barkley Marathon in "The Immortal Horizon" for nearly killing themselves on an extreme, nearly-twenty-six-mile long, niche trek-run across a gorgeously starved wilderness on Tennessee—*no, I am jealous, because these are men, and they are white, and they can run this epic trek-run without the fears that I will have as a brown woman.*

(This is glamorous pain, a glorious fantasy. I am empathetic of the pain I would have felt had I been selected for the run — the stories I could tell, the wonders I'd have seen, *ah, this reminds me of when I—*)

I empathise with the people — *who say they are* — suffering from Morgellon's disease — *do I though? Am I not just relieved to find no glinting blue fibres, specks or fuzz after I shower?*

(When I tell friends about this essay over cups of coffee gone cold, I am always relieved that I don't have it, terrified that I will, now that I think so obsessively about it. There is no room for pure empathy anymore. Jamison: "It was more like inpathy. I wasn't expatriating myself into another life so much as importing its problems into my own.")

Am I now Jamison's "wound-dweller" — "It was a wound; I dwell" — diving through a dump of wounds that she has exposed, some of them belonging to other people but all eventually becoming hers, to marvel at the depth of the bloodiest, and the pain of the most *invisible*, sticking myself to what I can empathise with the most?

"How do we talk about these wounds without glamourising them?" Jamison asks, in one of her most accomplished essays in this collection, "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain", whilst also urging us to remember that "the possibility of fetishising pain is no reason to stop representing it. Pain that gets performed is still pain." Elsewhere, in the essay on saccharin(e), she says, "I want us to feel swollen by sentimentality and then hurt by it, betrayed by its flatness, wounded by the hard glass surface of its sky." The reactions forced out of me, empathetic or not, have also raised another question — one that Jamison does not ask, possibly, which is the single, giant failing of this collection—*what are the limits of empathy?*

It is an important question for Jamison, who is often a white woman in a foreign land ("Pain Tours (I)" and "La Frontera") trying to empathise when she cannot, by mere virtue of difference. Jamison's descriptive ethnographic tours of Tijuana, Mexicali and Calixico don't tell us anything we don't already know about one of the world's most fraught borders. Jamison briefly acknowledges the sordid hilarity of "the grand fiction of tourism" — "that bringing our bodies somewhere draws that place closer to us, or we to it." But she moves on, quickly, to be an anthropologist to third-world "danger" — "this barely tethered and unquiet thing". She is always being educated, always amazed, always trying to feel more than she can, or should.

Empathy can be violent when adopted so mercilessly, at the expense of others. Her conclusions to the tours provide more relief than illumination, when she says, after a gangland tour in LA, "You feel uncomfortable. Your discomfort is the point. (...) The truth of this place is infinite and irreducible, and self-reflexive anguish might feel like the only thing you can offer in return." Her focus on her own anguish de-centers another's pain—pain that is supposed to be the source of empathy.

Jamison is at her best when she is watching and transcribing pain that belongs to her world; a world that she cannot intrude upon because she is already there, in the constellation of its various violences. Her insights are seductive precisely because they are so ruthless in their constant self-doubt: she skips from victim to voyeur, with one foot in each pond, and looks for the light. We don't talk about empathy because there is no easy way to verbalise it without giving ourselves away; vulnerability is a ceaseless wound. Jamison writes that "empathy means realising trauma has no discrete edges." In giving

word and witness to several indiscrete forms of empathy, Jamison has, perhaps, pushed the limits of how to talk about what we cannot fully know. And we are the better for it.



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