

invisible sister

invisible sister

poems by

Jeffrey Ethan Lee

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for Hsiao-Ming & Ethan

Preface

by David Moolten

Jeffrey Lee offers us a poetry of diverse people, multicolored and manifold in age and class and temperament. Lee reaches out to them and with a soulful rawness, inhabits them, foibles and all. Those who populate his America can be cruel and blind but also beautiful and ultimately empathetic. In its extroverted vision, its enjambed, jazzed rhythms and anaphora, one finds the honest American excess of Whitman and Ginsberg and, in the shorter, fragmented pieces, an early C. K. Williams. The pioneering here is in the sensitivity to culture, the “dialogic” forms, and the bold exploration of gender. In fact, most of the book is devoted to a long poem told in episodes, *invisible sister*. He explores her experience with wisdom and intelligence. Some of the pieces feature a He/She dialogic progression that uniquely fleshes out their internal conversation. But his work, while personal and political, is also always weightlessly felicitous. Even the street slang vernacular, the tragedy or farce, is saved by music. It is a maxim of aesthetics that the response to art, even tragic art, is joy. To quote Lee in the piece he calls “towards euphoria,” “in love at its pinnacle / I reached out for its sky.” Here and elsewhere he reaches through a postmodern squalor to rise above his gritty subjects to a richly satisfying lyric that can enrapture the reader. It is a pleasure to introduce his first volume of poems.

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I.

prologues

peace valley elementary school during the vietnam war

I could've been anyone

the three black kids in the whole school at the time
whom no one else played with at recess—

the girl so embarrassed to exist
her eyes slid sideways whenever you talked to her,
or the pretty blonde who liked the smart boys
and who could afford to sympathize with anyone—

the one who smiled equally at us all,
the janitor married to the 4th grade teacher
in bad plaid dresses, greasy gray hair,
a stooping gait and a bulldozer face—

the 5th grade teacher who loved reading
after-recess stories to us,
stroking our damp heads on wood desktops,
her voice smooth like her fingers,
her book a lantern held slightly before her—

the tall oaks hemming the field
that whistled and hissed shrill in the hurricane—

the mouse that bit the boy at Show and Tell
triggering so much rage he yelled, "*You bastard!*"
then ran outside, his clenched-white fist
flinging it to the asphalt—

the big white splash the mouse made
in the frothing thundershower
stunning everyone—

or that boy's friend who raced right after him
half to stop the killing and half just to get soaked!

or the Texan we teased for being short:
“Ah thought evrathing frum Texuz wuz BIG!”

the 2nd grade girl only I would like
because I couldn't see her “cooties”
and she didn't see my color—

the 2nd grade teacher with a face all smooth,
her hair all light,
her voice like singing
until her navy man returned for her;
like a flower unstrung from the sun
she cried and clung ecstatic
against his unyielding uniform,
its blue the darkest we ever saw,
his aura raw like the war—

the kid whose right hand didn't work, “Lefty,”
who was left out of games till the only other choice
was Barry the smelly fat kid—

or Barry's sister who dressed “weird,” he said

with a leer that mired the air
like germs when he laughed
"She's a slut."

or the silence in me then that rose
like smothering black smoke—

or Barry's brother Don who broke their old dad's leg
because he did their sister—

or the fish Don caught and cleaned alive
right before my eyes,
its heart unable to stop itself
under his probing switchblade—

or the too-large army surplus clothes Don always wore
as if a faded jacket could make a man
of any dropout during the draft—

the creek where as long as daylight held
we'd re-enact Bismarcks and Titanics
making drowning cries for plastic disasters,
then lob bigger rocks—

or Silly Willy who'd hug and kiss us
at any hockey goal, saying, "They do it on TV!"
until we yelled in his face, "EWW! Don't be GAY!"

or Will's sister whose hippy boyfriend on the couch

pushed her panties down in her unzipped cutoffs
stroking her musky crotch,
which I'd never seen, let alone smelled....

or the dust-cloud rug by the TV that I stumbled on, crashed in—

or Will's mom then just watching the evening news crying—

or her silver-framed Navy officer photo
making her weep
not because he was dead
but because, "He's gay," Will confessed,
"...and I think I am too, like my dad."

the rich kid Larry with well-groomed hair and perfect clothes
whose mom reclining on the couch
stroked my head like a cat's
until, half-hypnotized in my hair,
her eyes were wet with yearnings
and she called me her beautiful doll—

I could've been anyone
if only the cells of the self
would've let me out,
if only the war on
TV continually
would ever turn off,
but the time would come
just once in an eon

when I could be
ecstatic as any thing
beyond its self,
when I was
each injury,
every injuring word,
all the injured,
and each sun-struck wave
of grass blown to bliss,
each inhale of sky in
every tremulous body
losing itself inside an other's,
all the hiding selves who seek.

sex ed blues

I'm the wrong person in the picture—
the caption says “Winners
of the Spelling Bee”
and the girls smiling at me
during the shoot are saying I'm cute,
but I can't believe it.
I'm thirteen,
I'm not white—
I'm unthinkable.

I'm thinking I could get killed for smiling back
because in 4th grade
when Laura asked me to kiss her
her boyfriend threw me across the floor
into her wood-backed steel-tube chair
and ironically as I struggled up
my head bumped under her seat
and her dress fell over my head,
then in the light blue confusion
off balance I bumped into this soft white
patch printed with little flowers
and she squealed, embarrassed,
pushing my head down while I tried to stand
till we tumbled over
and when I knew where my face was
my mouth dropped open
on the most wrong of all places—
I was about to be killed at nine.
I struggled to get up again

but she cried my name out
laughing as she slid her whiteness away,
and I came out from under her blue,
her face flushed bright red...

“Why’d you open your mouth, there?”

“It— it was an accident..”

“It felt good!”

I looked at her boyfriend
and our eyes met, astonished.

towards euphoria

Elated by the sunrise over my yard,
I saw floods of orange-red and indigo
in tints so luminous that the grass
bright as waving scythe blades
reflected the sky, a soft ocean breathing,
and the trees pointed up like arrows,
I wanted to soar into its colors—
and then I saw
a one-boy helicopter narrow as my shoulders;
its body had no skin and its skeleton
of tubes was shaped like a stretched-out Jet Ski
with a tail fin and small propeller,
and its long blades were wide as bird wings
red orange yellow green
drooping like steel mirrors
nudged by the beautiful wind
that painted the body *blue indigo violet*
—I climbed in, gripped the controls
and the blades broke into a whir
quiet as a little fan
and I rose like a helium balloon
and flew north toward the spring
of all insane sexuality—New York City—
over Bucks County before it would sprawl
into asphalt blots and concrete malls.
I saw a few humble highways,
clustered roofs amid cultivated fields
crawling with tractors plowing
stubs of stalks of last winter's corn

into the dark brown loam;
I smelled the mud and cows and leaves
and the sky was so warm
I caught a thermal stream
that lifted me till I saw the ocean,
its blue curves along the shore
and soon I saw the skyline
of chromium and silvered glass
on an island like a jaw
moored between two rivers glinting
like a billion acetylene flames
but my fuel was low—

I had to land
on a wide white helipad,
and I wanted all my friends from Choir
to see this—I wondered where they were...
Then I saw Tim and Eric, Chris and Glen
racing by dressed like we were singing—
I tried to catch up—I yelled,
but only Eric turned, shouting:
“RUN!” like they were being chased,
probably by cops

(we were *bad*...)

So I tore ass after them,
saw a cop trailing me and broke off
down a side street

then an alley—
I pushed through a door so old
it crumbled in my hands

like moss and wet cardboard,
 bolted down a black alley tunnel,
emerged into a den of people smoking,
 crashed in the haze
of a heady flower's fumes....
 I stepped in the musky heat
lit only by momentary lighter flames
 and hot orange embers in brass pipe-bowls
and I wanted to try some—
 somehow I knew they'd let me,
and someone did
 put a pipe in my mouth.
I took it all in—
 its pungence made me gag
before I could cough—
 tears obscured my lit ember,
and then as if by a signal
 all the people were panting,
groping and stripping each other hungrily
and I saw
 everything....

It dawned on me this was my big chance
 to get "defrocked,"
and somehow I knew help was nearby
 but before I could even get excited
I transformed suddenly
 into a girl of seventeen.
I had breasts—I was shocked

to clutch them, but after feeling them
for a few seconds I stopped feeling so bad.

But then I reached lower and
oh, what was there was
so distinct, yet I knew it
like I'd touched it all my life—
its pleasure so indelible
the urge to try each part
was irresistible, and I was
drawing stares as if I was
beautiful in a way that wounds
whoever sees.... and I was
so turned on by lovers' groans,
feeling its lips splay, slicken suddenly
and swallow—O—finally—
but the door burst apart
into withered flowers
and flashlights stabbed the waves of orgy
like steel probes made of smoke.
One cop stood surveying us,
a silent totem pole—
he came to me and I knew why
he pushed me down,
and I even understood everyone's relief
thinking maybe they'd still go free.
I wasn't afraid because I knew
just what he'd do,
his flashlight beaming selfishly
and his shaft a heavy shadow,

but instead of hating his rage,
I enjoyed his hunger
and wanted him more than his anger
could bear—he pushed in
and I was stunned, filled—remembering
as if I'd done it hundreds of times
(or as if I'd done anything at all)
and I wanted him to split me in half
with his slow stoke
with my sex clutching,
with my heels bucking, till I was
coming so hard inside suddenly I was
translated out of self and was
myself watching this fucking,
then I was bolting for the door
while Vice Squad cuffed
the naked and forlorn...
I fled through the tunnel
and out to the street
and saw Tim and Eric, Chris and Glen
running across another avenue.
I lost them in crowds but found myself
before a kind of cathedral
shaped like a great white stadium.
I entered its sanctuary—
it was an inverted amphitheater,
with concentric pews in rising circles
steeper and smaller towards the center,
and I stepped instinctively up

towards the one light
drawn the way I always was
towards euphoria,
and I felt myself transforming utterly
getting higher—as I rose closer
to the shining that was so sun-like
it erased all sight but itself
(even through closed eyelids)
I was almost upon it
wondering what would happen
if I touched it—
its glare obliterated me
in love at its pinnacle
I reached out for its sky.

II.

invisible sister
(a long poem)

invisible sister

1.

my invisible sister Iris says
she digs black men, whites,
latinos, indians, asians, and even
 “the chicks” (her word).
“Hope that’s not ranked high to low” I go,
but she says, “You must have
 preferences...
 predilections...” (like, she *knows*—
 having seen the instant I dug some
 “*sweet thing,*”
 she pegged my type.)

She did the hard
 drugs first:
if I inhaled it, she shot it,
 if I shot up, she overdosed,
 by the time I had a bad name
 she was Famous Graffiti—

She wore a tee-shirt
 signed by a hundred boys—
there wasn’t space for even my initials;
 I couldn’t have signed
 even if I’d wanted to...

She’d kiss the man who tried to kill me.
 She’d kill us both, driven by moods:
 they did her talking,

they did her boyfriends
and everything else she did
but leave.

2.

She says
at her first wedding party
“there wasn’t another asian there
except this dude
some white drunk dissed
as Fu Man Chu
to his face...”
Same drunk asks her to dance
thinking he’s hot
and she deflects with “No”
and he pushes so much Self
in her face,
says she’s “sooo pretty”
and “a real good
Sport”—
She says “I’m sick, sore...”
but Flammable Exhale infuses her hair,
his eyes hungry
for her core—
he backs her into the dance,
floored that she’s not an asian steam-jungle,
so he screams her name

over loudly retro sounds,
calls her “The Non-dancer from Nowhere,”
so the guests all watch
 an instant, then away—
he’s too vain to dance too near
her fought-for composure
 —all she wants is air,
far above the townhouse jammed with noise,
the jetstreams and
 vaportrails to anywhere...

He later insists on walking her to her car—
 she says “No” but he follows,
says “You *hafta* kiss me,
 I *want* you to kiss me before you go.
You *hafta*...”
he leeches to her fretting,
“What’s *wrong?* You seem *nervous?*”
 So she relents into
 range, stretching up
 she kisses his cheek
but he digs her mouth
 her ear his tongue scraping
 clutching with words
for some crack
 in the implacable—
 “*You smell good...*”
“But I was far gone—”
 “*I’ll see you, again,*” he promises—

“farther in....”

Her voice, vacant, darkens

“It was my first
—I mean, *forced*—dance
with a white man.”

3.

My invisible sister seemed crazy
when she opened
her mouth—letting me know,
she showed me her body
on the verge of the first rain
after the longest
drought in seventeen years—
she stripped
naked and lay
in the night’s grass
while the gale flailed
the fallow blades
entangling her hair
and she was clutching herself
excited for the dark clouds
to shake louder thunder
till they peeled sheets of sweet cool down,
a sea of vertical waves
crashing in her aching
and she rubbed the flood in

over and over every-
thing she was
crying for it to soak
every pore and hurt
she'd ever had—
she never loved anyone more
than this rain

Iris remembers her first time

She's thinking back
to the pretty blonde girl's brother

*—then she was nearly twelve, I was ten,
the time we slipped away
far from the party's crowded pool—*

while she focuses on the lines
around her wide brown eyes,
lengthening her lashes,
rouging olive cheeks dark as lips,
glossing lips stoplight red
like melting plastic
under hot mirror lights,
but she wants this cruelty—
she's so angry.

*She wanted me to be there in the barn
though I was still scared of sex
because girls had exclamation marks
instead of dicks—
when this blond boy just wanted to,
she wanted me to watch
but I looked far away
as much as I could,
smelling the dry fields,*

*the dung, the bats, and her—
her hair's tangled thicket
against her flimsy perfumed dress.*

She focuses on her lines
holding an aluminum chair for balance
as each leg stretches
and turns out softly opening,
one extends straight back
through heel, ball, toe into *pointe*,
glides into a lift,
the strength-move
making her lycra string costume disappear—
but it's hard as rope everywhere.

*It looked like a deep
flower in the fields
but there was a mushy smell (his?)
and sounds like long kisses
with a wet sponge,
its depths so good
both of them groaned weird—
it'd blossomed like a mouth
and sour milk puffed out of him;
she laughed like
he'd told the funniest joke
and he nearly smacked her,*

his blue eyes cold as sky.

She focuses on how to flow
under the thirsty lines-of-sight,
braces her queasy stomach,
clenches up her insides to go on
as if there were a reason to,
as if there were love
instead of cash
reaching up to pull her strings...

*She'd still think of him
even when we played in the basement
where it smelled like laundry and dough—*

And when she's gone deeper into herself
she's surprised by the mirror wall
where her hands, her arms spread
expressing so much yearning

Iris in fragments

1.
the body at the bottom of the stairs
is bruised blue-black from tumbling down
amazingly without any broken bones,
 almost naked in its puddle,
 its heart a nightmare's gong
with no regular rhythm coming
under my cold hand
and, incongruously,
I think she could be me
before I snap
 out of it
racing for the 911 number
in numb hands
desperate before
the pre-dawn gray
blues her skin
and sinks deeper
than blood
into me.

*—but already
it is snowing
in my dream
where february's sky
half-cloaks the cityscape—
I lean across
the lines of her*

*limbs like saplings
under snow, the
frail field where
her eyes flicker
afraid if I
breathe too hard
they'll blow out—*

2.

thirty hours later
the haunted body
a deeper hue
of olive between
sheets she wears
grief-stricken, yet she
can't feel what she's done
(aside from a month's worth of tranqs)
to herself, to me, and everyone
but the word "selfish"
simply misses her...

she'd started loathing them
when her dancing made more
per hour than a real job all week—
it seemed so stupid.

"One guy offered me ten grand to do him,
said he'd *even* marry me..."

“Wow” (I can’t help being impressed), “Marry for *how long?*”

“I dunno. Fuckin’ *moron...*”

Hey, ya know, I can’t remember
the last time we played a game...”

“Ya mean like, Go Fish?”

“Yeah,” she smiles faintly.

*when the lights
black out as ice
downs the lines
(the violence of power
is also when it fails),
and amputates the voice
on the—
only the old sofa’s smell
guides me across the room
back to the body
I somehow believe
should glow, but
there’s only a window
and beyond the distant buildings
the dusk glimmers,
a white-blue lake—*

3. (*his side*)

And when we walked out
over the crisp snow
and into the cemetery,
the stones blued
by the february moon
chilled me,
and our shadows
on the luminous
crust of ice
seemed to lead us
farther in
till you saw it,
a marble angel
with wings posed
in the crisscross
shadows of branches
waving across her
form in half-light—
drawn in, you asked:
“How old was it?”
I pulled out a lighter,
kneeled and then
hunched over
to flash a fire
that licked
the years
inscribed there,
“She was two...”

and when I stood
the flame rose too
and found tar streaks
and thick flecks
on its cherub face
and across its chest,
and I knew
without looking at
or even hearing you breathe
you felt a kind of hurt
seeing this,
and you were
mesmerized, eyes
shining darkly—

4. *(her side)*

“...that night when I lost it
and swallowed down
the whole bottle,
in the bathroom
mirror my face
went so dead,
almost white,
another person was
staring through...
I didn’t hesitate,
it felt so easy,
it was so violent
it was sublime...”

*—but the body revolted,
I saw where
it’d thrashed
and kicked the bed so hard
its foot broke off
so it all tilted,
and did it spill
the body into the hall
or did it want to pass
the door mauled
by fists or heels—
was it open
the whole time?
I couldn’t see*

*or I was
clutching my stomach,
tearing my clothes
in pains too awful
to stagger blind
between the banister
and the stairs
I crumbled down,
the rugged tiers,
their rushing darkness—
limbs scattered
like a scarecrow
prone by reflex
retching just enough
to be saved—*

5.

(his side)

And when
we walked out
over the crisp snow
and into the cemetery,
the stones blued
by the february moon
chilled me,
and our shadows
on the luminous
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their rushing darkness—
limbs scattered*

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shining darkly—

*like a scarecrow
prone by reflex
retching just enough
to be saved—*

4 a.m. phone call from my sister

half asleep
I barely grab the phone

“I just had a dream about you where
you were unspeakably cruel
I knew it wasn’t really you
you were a disguise for
you-know-who....”

“Jeez it’s 4 a.m.”

“You got mad at me in bed
for touching myself
I was coming and you hit me
and threw me out—”

“—of bed?”

“of our *house*—so I thought
I better steer clear for a while
leave town but when I went back to New York
to my Squalor-On-The-Installment-Plan
(my artist buddy’s studio)
I was so miserable trying to sleep
on this paint-stained conference table
with streetlight slicing through the blinds
and surplus chests and crud
stacked half to the ceiling
and canvasses like room dividers

and I hear this dull fork scraping
in a tin can—and that TV
I'd thought was next door
was ten feet behind me
a Slouch Potato eating Chef-Boy-Ar-Dee
a greasy worm-guy in boxers and a tee shirt
was watching the whole time—”

“*You?*”

“No —the TV behind this painting
that blocked a dust-cloud couch
where he was the whole time I was crying
half-undressing there
and touching myself—”

“*Again?*”

“I was so stunned, I said *Who the Fuck Are You?*
This is MY place. I rented this, and he said
apparently I hadn't heard
yesterday there was this 'Incident'
where this other guy
went nuts here and took over...
You're making no sense! I yelled
Ask him yourself! he snapped,
and there was a *third* person
a catatonic scraped off the
Port Authority sub-basement floor

eyes wide open, shivering
clutching his knees
in an invisible shopping cart
you could hear rattle
and see like a cage in his eyes....
Where'd he come from? I asked,
Slouch goes, *I just said— there was an Incident*
yesterday, he moved in here and
the deal you had before IS OFF—
So I'm exhausted, crying, half-naked,
with TWO Human Rejects in my studio
and one—at least—is insane!

"Where're you now?"

"New York— I just had a dream about you
where you were so cruel
but I knew it wasn't you—
it was Mick *disguised* as you in my dream....
we had a fight and you were
hitting me— not hard, but enough to hurt—"

"Gimme a minute, I can—"

"I was so miserable I left town
to hide in New York for a while
at my artist friend's loft
but these freaks were there
so I got out, looked back at the loft

the Soho sky before dawn
the stillness like a lull in the machine—
you could almost not hear the roar
for a minute— see the sky's own light
and I only wanted to watch
the gray light turn to white
the dark silhouettes of warehouses
bear their colors again....
And that's when I thought about you....”

“Where are ya exactly—”

“And, when I woke
bits of it came back— and I realized
I don't have that friend in New York anymore
I don't have that place anymore
I don't even have the key
I always thought I'd have.”

his poem (without adjectives)

For a year
we had nothing
but anniversaries
of events
we pieced together
from letters
and photos,
albums of night-
and daymares.
It was the season,
a summer without
warmth, like you said
on the solstice:
“After this
the year chills
into January...”
and the radio played
*“Nothing changes
on New Year’s Day”*
—nothing except
loyalties,
addresses,
friends, jobs, and
everyone’s in
Berlin or Trieste
or Paris, even
Bangladesh,
whereas I
journeyed by

standing in place,
watched a world
drift under the snow—
It's just like this,
when you have
a year of
anniversaries,
a year without
 a memory—
 each word
 exhales
into fog
 as if it
were whited out.

his poem (without adjectives)

her blues

For a year
we had nothing
but anniversaries
of events
we pieced together
from letters
and photos,
albums of night-
and daymares.
It was the season,
a summer without
warmth, like you said
on the solstice:
“After this
the year chills
into January...”
and the radio played
*“Nothing changes
on New Year’s Day”*
—nothing except
loyalties,

—and the teaspoons
you gave me
are tadpoles running
through my fingers
in dishwater, oh
not really—
unless
the traffic
on Race St. is
a multi-colored chain,
or a pigeon flock
is scattered cards
winging their numbers
away, or
a car door
screeching open
in icy wind
is a seagull
crying over the lot—
and who is
facing me

addresses,
friends, jobs, and
everyone's in
Berlin or Trieste
or Paris, even
Bangladesh,
whereas I
journeyed by
standing in place,
watched a world
drift under the snow—
It's just like this,
when you have
a year of
anniversaries,
a year without
a memory—
each word
exhales
into fog
as if it
were whited out.

and always was
comes through me,
a melody
luring me in
like a velvet dress
or a dark pond
that injures me—
and I never
hear over three-
thousand miles
that you're some-
where else till I read
"Itemized Calls" like
breaking china—
even if
I stop dancing,
even if
I start
laughing
at photos
of accidents
in the papers.

she wanted to be....

heaven to him

[his side]

[her side]

she wanted to be of the race
of beauty
as though beauty itself could be
a raceless race
of the desired
so touchable
it could be
almost real—
she wanted art to lift her
beyond her skin
(not erase her
in casting color schemes)
as though she could belong
like anyone
among the dancers
beloved
in desolations keen as her ribs
losing what little there was to
show through sweats and tees
for someone else's future

—this poisoned place,
I know it's
heaven to him—
but what if
there never was
an america
to discover—
what if
there is no wound
like this,
the gaffe
the ache that
the unyielding
father leaves
like a sudden falling
pall,
the earth underfoot gives way
snow quivering over
sidewalks swirls
spelling words with

(*anyone* else's—)
if only
she trained deeper
stretched farther
till she smiled aglow
flowing smoother rhythms
despite fractured
selves between
night/day moods
between two tongues
(her mother's fading,
and an other's racing)
hanging on
a rope of why
was it such torture to just be
or not
another picture of
bedraggled waif
too ethereal, lost to and
poisoned for any life

cursive crystal
letters that
I read as if
he could've been
a better man
but he was security
crutches of cash
that never replace
one's mind
at peace
like the unheard singing
of the stars
stuck with velcro
to their heaven—
our father
whose
bring-down comes
whatever's done
on earth as it is
forever—

where her love
and loved ones
welcomed her

who never
forgives us
our trespasses—

Iris' painter hears the rain music return (off Broadway)

clutching pen and pad in the soaking thundershower
Mick taps the tinted limo glass

she's across the street now
sorry she wanted this autograph

while behind black glass the star says "Go"
and Mick spins fender-swiped loses his balance

crashes catching his knee his arm
then his face splashes asphalt

she runs across the semi-darkness
arms rising to her face in shock until she cradles

his head his face in blue-white light
lips swelling gritty eyes unfocused

he lurches up she takes his weight
becomes his crutch

they stagger as one on three legs
his right shoe fills with dark red

he'd meant to show her what
he'd still do for her traffic splatters by

despite her stupid marriage
her bittersweet life even her kids

"I'm sorry," she says
a red light casts its crimson tint

he wants to say he's okay
his lips don't work

her umbrella's gone dropped
or washed away? she looks down

sees his pant leg darkening
blood sloshing out his shoe

she leans him against a drugstore's
corrugated steel face

her eyes full of awe
he mangles the question,

"Broken glass?"
"You didn't have to—"

freed by the cold pain
in his lips his knee

his eyes gaze into hers
and hers hold him mesmerized

by what he means
and her voice can't open

her mouth trembles
and he knows

white rain through streetlight roars
a perfect excuse

to finally put her lips by his ear
"I'm sorry—"

he hears what she's never said
he tries so hard to hear

that a silence blooms between
her face and his

even the gutters go quietly
"I never told you..."

I would—"

He wakes up utterly

despite his draining blood
his lips shiver but ask

"Would you, still?"
it's unbearable to think

what she might say or not
equally unbearable to not hear

then she can't hold it back
sinks her face in his neck

lips tremulous sobs opening her mouth
arms hugging too hard

and it is hopeless and he knows it
her breathing desperate

but it is a pure despair
that answers, "*Always... always.*"

If only
we could be—"

and her breaking goes straight through him
a wave he can't stop drowning in

they have one soul
but they're submerged

until he hears the rain music
return

Iris' blues for her painter

before the words *if only*—
before the world of *could be*—

there the long sun-beaten grasses
drew us far into the fields
 you reached out for my hair
and I was already smiling,
turning partly teasing you with
your weaknesses
 running away but not far

you drew my hair
in dozens of sketches
so many erasures
so much charcoal
stained your soft fingers
till you could trace each curve and angle
each hollow and rise
where you made the light hold me
 the grass sheltering us like a cradle—

someday there could be
a well for us to draw upon
 where we could see ourselves held still
as if the water could bear our images
while all we want
 disturbs them—

the world sands through

my fingers
pouring

my body sands away

who throngs my hiddenness
my drivenness—

when my lips in your neck sink
and you vibrate deeper in
holding me harder than I can stand
we say nothing will say nothing will forget
will never say it
when you rub against me
accidents open

my hope my loss
knowing how it is

mystery repeats itself
to those who remember

so i must forget
and reap it anyway

what if this world is what we are afraid it is?

now these off-white skies grow hard—
winter in the fields of swamp grass

bows the brown and umber blades
flashing yellow-green like corn silk
but sharper shrill

unlike that black-glass flow
so utterly still
it once mirrored dusk's slow coming
while the slightest wing
bent the spreading tops of seeding grasses
their stalks more tall than our bodies
could ever be

even if we walked across the if
that strands between us

and the if that *is* us

the tawny grass tips
brush away the sky

and we are the shadow
in a wave rolling so purely
the eye aches at its beauty

the charred sky behind the rainbow
that is
so in the iris' blues
so in a flame

Iris returning after five mostly wasted years

Those hours in october sun
talking across cool shorn grass
 that she lay upon
 so I had to brush the dead leaves
 off her back
the fine yellow knit relinquishing
 the last umber crumblings
 under the spangling light
pouring through
 like confetti around her
 and slowly down her—
I was so lost in her
 my I.D. cards could have been
 waterfalling around me
no one, no one, no one
 is like this—
but I didn't know how much
 I didn't know—

Years later
 our words have sharpened into glass
 prisms that splinter the sun
no more like us
 than faces through a kaleidoscope

but we were there once—

I look up— the sky opens
apathy goes farther through the mind

than any memory
a car's Doppler revs past
chromed and painted roaring
a siren punctuates
a mounted policeman's
asphalt-iron horseshoe rhythm
a man singing badly bumbles past
a bird from a near branch warbles
somewhere the karmic baggage
of previous deaths
slightly lessens—

Will I ever be released?

Have I always been free?

Out of her blues she called to say

"I'm sorry I tried to..."

I just couldn't stand it."

I barely breathe can't speak—
what if every unsaid word
when the soul breaks through or loves
is as tactless as every curse
all the blame each mistake?

She pleaded, "*Can I see you?*"

It was so long between too few and far—
too late to remember who should
forgive who for what—

"Why did this have to take so long?"

“How could it not?...”

It took five years
before the April day
when only robins, sparrows
and peewits sang
lightening the walk along endlessly rusting tracks
under a mile-long freight chain
abandoned mammoth husks
leading far from the highway
the houses their voices
where untrimmed limbs
hemmed us in closer
curling above the train
an arch of candy-light green
with yellow-white light dabbing
the tall grasses where you sat
white buds and blossoms there
like someone blowing on your face
to wake you
your eyes glimmering
after so long

—five mostly wasted years

out of touch

with half our lives—

“and one early morning hour—”

“when I remembered

how my overdose hurt you

it stung through me

like the stench of burning plastic—

we came to this
clear running creek's
rocky base's treble splash
down a long steep drop
through thin brown boughs
and mossy half-downed logs—
that day you listened
uncritically to the birdsongs
ashamed of craving artifice at all
your eyes unable to rise
but still asking the grass (or gravel)
till the air filled with your asking
and I had to say
what no one had—
"I forgive you

*I could barely stand to....
until one early morning
when the city was becalmed
like shivering leaves and
I saw the shimmer rising
around the buildings—
then the sun breaking through
painted each thing into life
as indestructible
as the light bearing
each form into the world—
how I loved each thing
like a soul
and learned its mercy....*

before thunder erupts

through the wide sky

with the long rain

soaking and shifting

the rivulets of spring—

A higher wind carried

straggler voices

behind us

taunting you

even then—

and I heard the air move

across the tendrils

noticed how

branches reached out

while scuttering leaves

my soul

around me

opened

its empty arms,

pressed me

in recesses

of white

where I

kneeled crying

like a girl

wrapped in flutters

of the flailing soul—

the secret body

(an inner self)

tumbled over
the ties of tracks—
You lifted your face
the mask of self-
inflicted histories
a shed chrysalis—

waded outwards
through rivers
washing me until
the soul
could hold the flesh
made of
woman

Your hair was wet,
the shame that masked your youth had vanished
as though it had never seared you,
or as though a gentle rain
had salved a drought to the roots
and bathed every vein with the liquor
that urges rebirth
with winds exhaling through every field,
each tender shoot swelling towards the light
ramming past the crusty loam
to sense the whole horizon
through one gleaming leaf
unfolding for the returning sun—
your eyes at last filled
with their own ember light.

Notes on the poems

“invisible sister”

In part 2, the drunk’s breath is dubbed “Flammable Exhale” because his breath is so heavy with liquor.

“Iris remembers her first time”

In the fifth stanza, “turn out” and “*pointe*,” are ballet terms. When legs turn out, they supinate (or rotate open). Here Iris does a *tendu* back and then she rises into a kind of an *arabesque*.

“Iris in fragments”

In part 2, when “she can’t feel what she’s done / (aside from a month’s worth of tranqs),” “tranqs” is colloquial for tranquilizers. For an explanation of the dialogic form of part 5, see the “Afterword: On Dialogic Lyric Form.”

“4 a.m. phone call from my sister”

In the sixth stanza, when Iris mentions “Squalor-On-The-Installment-Plan,” she is alluding to the title of Celine’s *Death on the Installment Plan*. In the eleventh stanza, “the Port Authority sub-basement floor” refers to a lower level of the Port Authority Bus Terminal (NYC) where one used to find many vagrants. In the antepenultimate stanza, Soho in Manhattan, south of Houston Street, is famous for its loft spaces occupied by artists and galleries.

“his poem (without adjectives)”

The lines, “*Nothing changes / on New Year’s Day*,” are from an early U2 hit song, “New Year’s Day.”

“his poem (without adjectives) / her blues”

In “her blues,” “Race St” is a major street that runs east-west through Chinatown in center city Philadelphia. Later, the neologism “screeing” is meant to evoke “screeching,” “screaming,” and “reeling.” A little later, Iris’ lines, “and who is / facing me / and always was,” echo lines from Petrarch’s “*Hor ch’el ciel e la terra e’l vento tace*,” (“Now when sky and earth and winds are silenced”), which was set by the composer Claudio Monteverdi in his 1638 *Madrigali guerrieri et amorosi* (“Madrigals of War and Love”).

“she wanted to be / heaven to him”

Iris’ side of this poem ends echoes the Lord’s Prayer.

“Iris’ blues for her painter”

Iris’ lines, “the world sands through / my fingers / pouring / my body sands away / who throngs my hiddenness / my drivenness,” echo Beckett’s French *Six Poèmes (1947-1949)* as translated by Beckett into English.

“Iris’ returning after five mostly wasted years”

In the ninth stanza, a peewit, also known as the northern lapwing, is a bird whose call sounds like the word “peewit.” The “yellow-white light dabbing the tall grasses” was inspired by the technique of John Constable, the English landscape painter. Lines 4-10 of the last stanza closely echo the opening of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*.

Afterword: On Dialogic Lyric Form

It was a life-altering moment, which would require an essay in itself,¹ when I first began to write in a two-voiced lyric form, in which the dual columns are each a lyric alone but a greater whole when combined. The new form was a way of recording moments of spontaneous communion between people and other moments of great shared emotion. The parallel voices in these dialogic lyrics are like the left and right hands on the piano—their harmony can be completely appreciated only if you hear each voice independently before you play them against each other. But once you do hear their harmony fully, it is a much more profound experience.

When I began writing in this form, I was inspired by the counterpoint of J. S. Bach. His counterpoint was remarkable to me because the musical ideas were so distinct as separate melodic voices, yet together they seemed to attest to a sacramental vision of reality. He layered elements in succession that re-enacted an intimate sense of creation as an interplay between humans and the divine. He seemed to experience the joy of creation as if it were always in counterpoint with the Creator. His multi-voiced texture and his use of passing tones (temporary dissonances used to add interest and surprise) were so sophisticated that he could make metaphysical statements about reality. I felt that his music possessed a pervasive fortitude in the face of eternity.

John Cage's musical ideas also inspired my thinking about this form; his indeterminate forms placed random events within a structure. I had heard a percussion ensemble discuss and perform a contrapuntal "Construction" by Cage and was indelibly mesmerized

¹ A longer version of this essay is at the *invisible sister* webpage at www.mmminc.org.

and excited by its spontaneous yet structured interweaving leitmotifs. There was an ideal simultaneity between distinct voices and sound worlds. The players said that they even had the freedom to include their feelings about the audience in their performance; their score did not prescribe too closely when they had to play. There was the same excitement that one feels in great improvisational jazz, where there are shared chords, scales, melodic and rhythmic structures, but how they occur depends on the performers and audience in a unique time and place. Though some composers complain that Cage scores are too amorphous, I felt a strong sense of direction and specificity, a style unique to Cage.

Importantly, if the accidental could be integral to the aesthetic experience and even to a unique style, then one had to admit that surrendering some control to performers and audience members could be as important as asserting control. Thus, one could leave a certain open space within an art work and still express a unique style without all the baggage of a continually controlling personality. The consequence was that *the work of art allowed the performer and audience into its very structure as an intrinsic and essential part of the whole experience.*

From a philosophical perspective, the cost of this indeterminate form was that there could never be an ultimate meaning. No one, not even the author, could claim absolute “authority” over interpretation. Formerly “eternal laws of art” would have to incorporate the fleshly worlds of contingency, history, and even the garbage of existence. One would have to admit of a greater totality than any one self could ever contain.

For me this was a revolution in thinking about literary language because I felt that there was greater wisdom in the philosophical vision of Martin Buber, his dream of the double-cry, his *I-Thou* bond. There had to be an antidote to the *The Waste Land* in which multi-voicedness only intensified the sense of isolation in lyric consciousness. (That consciousness was like a Kierkegaardian

individual, the ego as an *einzig* unable to truly be known by or to know anyone else completely enough.) There had to be a way to allow for otherness within a lyric voice—including even kinds of possession by and of otherness.

So it was a revelation to me when in 1984 I wrote two long lyrics independently, one in a female voice and one a male voice, and then put them side by side and read them against each other and found that they said something in combination that neither alone could ever communicate. “The Sylf,” which was published in 1997 in *Crossconnect* (<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/xconnect/>), presented on the left side a young woman artist doing laundry in a coin-op laundromat. On the right was the voice of her love, a male dancer. Though neither mentioned sex, together they made an erotic love poem. The truth between them was only heard after hearing each of them individually and then putting their voices together.

Importantly, neither voice had to sacrifice its integrity for its partner. For some distance and conflict are always with us in any real dialogue that seeks the truth. Harmony is possible only in this way: two distinct voices at a distance sound at the same time, each with its own peculiar inflections, fortuitous correspondences, and moments of spontaneous communion.

Around the same time, thanks to the philosopher Hwa Yol Jung, I discovered Mikhail Bakhtin, who laid the groundwork for a Copernican revolution in literary language. Bakhtin wrote, “Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction”² If truth emerged between voices in counterpoint, then it became possible to create a dialogic lyric that was more profound, humanistic, world- and flesh-affirming.

² *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 110.

The *invisible sister* web page

Because a book can be a nexus that gathers the energies of poets, writers, readers, performers, and artists of all kinds, the *invisible sister* web page—with author contact information, upcoming reading information, new audio files of the poetry, a longer essay on dialogic form, answers to recurring questions, outtakes from the manuscript etc.—is at www.mmminc.org

BIO NOTE:

Although he still believes he could make more as a bartender, Jeffrey Ethan Lee has been teaching creative writing and literature for over a decade. Under duress (meaning: threats, violence, or other action brought to bear upon one to do something against their better judgment), he admits to a great love of teaching, which has prevented him from becoming rich (ever) or drunk (hardly ever). Therefore, anyone with plans to open a university in a bar should send an e-mail ASAP. He would even bounce the rowdy drunks, i.e. for the right pay, and as long as they were senior faculty from other departments. After he changed his name and left Philadelphia, he joined the English Department of the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, which was named after Horace-Go-West-Young-Man-Greeley. His wife, Hsiao-Ming Chen, went with him there, and their son, Ethan James Lucas Lee, was born on January 26, 2003.

Lee won the 2002 Sow's Ear Poetry Chapbook competition for *The Sylf* (published 2003), published *Strangers in a Homeland* (chapbook with Ashland Poetry Press, 2001), and won the first Tupelo Press Prize for literary fiction in 2001. He also created *identity papers* (2002), a full-length dramatic poem on CD with actress Lori-Nan Engler and percussionist Toshi Makihara, available from Drimala Records [visit www.drimala.com]. He has published hundreds of poems, stories, and essays in *Many Mountains Moving*, *CrossConnect*, *Drexel Online Journal*, *Crazyhorse*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Washington Square*, *Crosscurrents*, *Green Mountain Review*, *American Poetry Review*, etc. He has an MFA and Ph.D. from New York University.

Visit www.unco.edu/poetry/jeffrey.lee or follow the link at www.mmminc.org

Advance notices for *invisible sister*

“In these poems Jeffrey Ethan Lee comes to hold and know the whole fragile, euphoric world. “*I could’ve been anyone*,” he writes, and with gorgeous, insistent and astonishingly musical lines, he moves in and out of selves and what is to be apprehended. This is no *sotto voce* debut, but a full-voiced one.”

—A.V. Christie

Jeffrey Lee creates a new way of reading in *invisible sister*, but more importantly a new way for the reader to see the book as performance space: to be orated, sung, swilled; more than this *invisible sister* teaches the reader how to hear and experience its special and peculiar music. The joy of the invisible is the tell-tale footprint, the door moving slightly ajar—this is a special and unique book that opens new space in the page for perception and then for the further deepening of that same space. The voice makes a sound because a stringed instrument in the body vibrates. The margins of this book vibrate—the absent center is the sound.

—Kazim Ali