

invisible sister

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made out to: Many Mountains Moving Press
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“The title poem [is] a *tour de force* of persona and plot as a brother watches his sister careen out of control. “invisible sister” does indeed set up a dialogue of great tension.... Iris, the invisible sister, serves not only as witness to her own experience but becomes a sort of every-girl when she is coaxed into a barn by her white friend.... [F]ull of dualities: life/death, dream life/waking life, female/male, Asian/non-Asian, *invisible sister* itself suggests multiple readings and serves not only as a book of poetry but as a blueprint, sheet music, a play waiting to be built or performed.... Jeffrey Ethan Lee[s] careful line breaks, as well as his deft use of white space and text, suggest a deliberate and thoughtful architecture. [T]here is much to be admired in all of Jeffrey Ethan Lee’s poetic personas and voices....”

—Denise Duhamel for *American Book Review*

“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, National Poetry Series Winner

“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, Winner of the New England/NY Poetry Prize, Alice James Books

Visit [the invisible sister web page](#)

at www.mmminc.org

[click on the Many Mountains Moving Press link]

with online poems, author contact and ordering information, upcoming readings, free poetry audio files, an author interview, a writer’s blog, and more....

BIO: Jeffrey Ethan Lee’s next poetry book, *identity papers*, is forthcoming from Ghost Road Press, 2006. Lee won the 2002 Sow’s Ear Poetry Chapbook prize (\$1,000) for *The Sylf* (2003), created *identity papers*, 2002, a full-length dramatic poem with music on CD, available from www.drimala.com, published *Strangers in a Homeland* (chapbook with Ashland Poetry Press, 2001), and won the first Tupelo Press Prize for literary fiction in 2001. He has published hundreds of poems, stories and essays in *Many Mountains Moving*, *Xconnect*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Drexel Online Journal*, and *Washington Square*. He teaches creative writing at University of Northern Colorado.

Review by Marj Hahne

Rain Taxi Review of Books (Summer 2005 online issue)

<http://www.raintaxi.com>

invisible sister by Jeffrey Ethan Lee

Many Mountains Moving Press, Boulder, CO.

70 pp, ISBN 1-886976-15-5, 2004, \$11.95

invisible sister, Jeffrey Ethan Lee's first full-length collection of poems, is a daring act of language that delivers with grace the self inescapably splintered by language. In the book's prologue, Lee names some of the things that betrayed him, such as "whiteness" (p. 9), "pretty blonde" (p. 3), "beautiful doll" (p. 6)—terms of race and gender that indelibly constructed and confined the self: "I could've been anyone / if only the cells of the self / would've let me out" (p. 6). This fragmented self ("all the hiding selves who seek" (p. 7)) takes the reader through the book's core, a long poem broken into chapters from the life of Iris, the "invisible sister" of the title.

Iris, named for the eye's light regulator; for the rainbow and its goddess; for the plant of sword-shaped leaves and variously colored flowers. No wonder, then, that eyes, rainbow, sky, sun, light, shadow, and leaves are among the words and images that reverberate throughout *invisible sister*. Also echoing throughout are words of color, weather, phase, and extension: white, blue, rain, snow, ice, flame, roots, limbs, branches, lines. Fragments of lines unfold a story told in two voices (his and hers), the overlapping of which conveys this certainty: Iris' being heard is key to her visibility, to the whole self's seeing the multicolor truth.

The resounding of all the fragments of phrase, image, and music—like a soul's insistent presence—is striking, convincing us of the self's triumph not only despite, but perhaps because of, its fragmentation:

A higher wind carried	
	<i>in recesses</i>
straggler voices	
	<i>of white</i>
behind us...	
You lifted your face	
	<i>the soul</i>
the mask of self-	
	<i>could hold the flesh</i>
inflicted histories	
	<i>made of</i>
a shed chrysalis—	
	<i>woman</i>

These are the last lines spoken in the two voices, harmonizing finally to speak as one, "to sense the whole horizon/through one gleaming leaf/unfolding for the returning sun" (p. 63). *invisible sister* affirms that "even if we walked across the if/that strands between us/and the if is us" (p. 56), we can find the courage to forgive our betrayers, to honor our multiple selves in all their uncertainty, to let their voices speak simultaneously—and in so doing we can emerge fully in communion with ourselves.

Review in *Polyphony* magazine (Fall 2004) by Jennifer Chapis

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Many Mountains Moving Press, Boulder, CO. 2004

70 pp. \$11.95, ISBN 1-886976-15-5

(Visit <http://mmminc.org/mmmmpress.htm> for free audio files, an author interview, online poems, outtakes, and author contact info and more)

“...I rose like a helium balloon/and flew north toward the spring/of all insane sexuality,” writes Jeffrey Ethan Lee in his debut collection, *invisible sister*. The book begins as a poetry of childhood—of curiosity, embarrassment, cruelty, and rage, of innocence explored, revealed, and plucked. Between these pages, the notion of the self, as a single, defined entity is unheard of. He writes, “I could’ve been anyone/if only the cells of the self/would’ve let me out.”

A fascinating page-turner, this imaginative collection reaches deep into hidden hollows and takes hold of the questions residing there. Hunger, sexuality, and injury fracture with such potent honesty that the act of distancing and crafting a voyeur-self into music feels, as its witness, both deviant and out of body. Remarkably far from a poetry of stock discovery where the writer overpowers the voice of his work, rather here, the *speakers* do the speaking—a limitless language of yearning, trauma, and intrigue.

In “invisible sister,” the long title poem which makes up the bulk of the collection, the tongues of two separate voices—one male and one female—call out in an unscripted dialogic form that, like the earlier section, leaves readers to decipher between the imagined, the desired, and the feared. “What if this world is what we are afraid it is?” These poems have the utmost respect for their audience, thereby leaving room for reader interpretation and interaction. Not a chance of dozing off, nothing here is or will ever be spoonfed. Like human personality at its individual ideal, each poem is true to itself and its “art,” never led around on the choke chain of story-agenda or the traditional expectations of established forms of verse. What happens when spontaneous voices and events find home and harmony in the rhythms of a dialogic structure? Not unlike with the music of John Cage (one of Lee’s influences), we find wholeness in organic layers of distinct displacement.

It is no surprise to learn that Lee’s writing is profoundly affected by music, and specifically Johann Sebastian Bach. Of his own melodic two-voiced lyric form, Lee writes, “...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.” As if the voices cannot, despite their trying, hear one another, the raw mesmerizing lyric continues to haunt and taunt, thereby keeping readers in a state of satisfying hunger. This is not a world set in stone and brick but a living, breathing identity in flux. Unbound by form and body, it is bravely and openly human.

Review in Small Press Review Nov.-Dec. 2004 by Thaddeus Rutkowski

invisible sister by Jeffrey Ethan Lee

In his poetry, Jeffrey Ethan Lee gives order to a series of instinctive associations through a conscious command of language. By this method, he creates a pointillist picture of American life as lived by someone who is not an ordinary American.

In the first part of *invisible sister*, called "Prologues," Lee offers a graceful account of thorny childhood experience, beginning with a tour of an elementary school. Here, we are reminded of behavior that too often is ignored or kept hidden: cruelty to animals, meanness toward sexually aware girls, mockery of short people. Yet, the speaker finds someone he can communicate with, even appreciate:

the 2nd grade girl only I would like
because I couldn't see her "cooties,"
and she couldn't see my color

As the prologues come to a close, the speaker travels through a dream of debasement (at the hands of a cop), eventually rising Dante-like to a sort of peak, where he (the speaker) experiences a vision of pure light, a feeling of euphoria, an image of paradise.

The second part of the book consists of the long poem "invisible sister." This is the heart of the work, and while it is challenging in its complexity, it will reward any reader who has ever struggled for communion with another person. Several segments are written in a form that Lee calls the "dialogic lyric"--essentially a conversational verse form. The two sides of the conversation are placed next to each other on the page, so it is possible to read one statement at a time, or to read across both statements to arrive at a new, mingled speech. The effect is eerie, yet powerful.

Like the first part, the second ends in an upward movement, but this time the action is more earthly. And the focus has shifted to the invisible sister herself, who emerges from her own journey reborn, without shame, with an "ember light" in her eyes.

from the *Drexel Online Journal*, February 2005

What I'm Reading

Ann Sitarz is reading Jeffrey Ethan Lee's *invisible sister*.

After first looking at the cover of Jeffrey Ethan Lee's *invisible sister*, (Many Mountains Moving, 2004), it took me approximately ten minutes to peel my eyes away from the entrancing photo to investigate the table of contents of his poem collection. The cover is a black and white picture of the back of a long-haired, shirtless woman with her legs folded in front of her as she looks in a mirror. The most striking aspect of this cover is the tattoo covering the entirety of the girl's back....

This risqué and hypnotizing picture impeccably captures the images Lee draws in his verse.... the experiences of a young woman tattooed by both promiscuity and grace, disorientation and beauty. Lee offers to his reader a vision of realism on the subject of young sexuality.

The facility with which Lee characterizes females is impressive. He brings this flare to a crest in the He/She dialogues—"his poem (without adjectives)/ her blues"—in which the verse reflects an internal exchange rather than a spoken one. The poems are fixed side by side but discordant with each other in tone—one hopeful (his) and one cynical (hers). In his *Afterward*, Lee calls this a "two-voiced lyric form" and explains that "the two columns are lyrics alone but a greater whole when combined."

Bio Note for Jeffrey Ethan Lee, author of *invisible sister*

Because readers who have been intrigued by the characters in the book *invisible sister* keep asking me if I have a sister, I would like to say before the generic Bio note (below) that I never had a sister.

Readers who are curious about the creation of the character Iris can find some answers in the author interview available through the *invisible sister* web page. Readers who still want to know more can send questions directly to me, also.

Jeffrey Ethan Lee's first full-length poetry book, *invisible sister* was published by Many Mountains Moving Press, 2004 (visit www.mmminc.org and click on the MMM Press link). Lee won the 2002 Sow's Ear Poetry Chapbook prize (\$1,000) for *The Sylf* (2003), and he created *identity papers*, a full-length dramatic poem with music on CD, which was nominated for a 2002 Grammy (visit www.drimala.com). He also published *Strangers in a Homeland* (chapbook with Ashland Press, 2001), and published hundreds of poems, stories and essays in *Many Mountains Moving*, *Xconnect*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Crosscurrents*, *Drexel Online Journal*, *Green Mountain Review*, *Washington Square* and others. He teaches creative writing at University of Northern Colorado. Visit www.unco.edu/poetry/jeffrey.lee. He has a Ph.D. in British Romanticism and an MFA from NYU. Continuing research interests include the literary dialogue between Dorothy and William Wordsworth and Asian American literature.