

NIGHT OF NO EXILE

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Night of no Exile is a collection of poems preceded by a critical article entitled “‘Exile seems both a blessing and a curse’: A *Blissful* Reading of Li-Young Lee’s Poetry.” That article discusses Lee’s quest to achieve communication, truth, and transcendence through poetic language and concludes that he finally reaches his goal through a leap from narrative poetry to lyricism. The “exile” alluded to in the title of the article is not only geographic, but also interior—an exile due to the natural limitations of all languages, and which can be bridged only in linguistic ways. Lee’s solution to that problem (lyricism) turns his poetry into what Roland Barthes would call “a text of bliss,” a text that manages to deeply destabilize language, while simultaneously achieving a new kind of meaning.

In the main body of the manuscript, the first section contains short love lyrics. The second section, “Night of no Exile,” is an attempt at the demanding genre of the longer lyric poem. The third section uses short lyrics to explore various topics, such as discovering one’s identity, friendship and solidarity between women, family history, and childhood memories. Finally, the last section includes poems, four of them longer, attempting to combine narrative and lyric impulses in a way not unlike Li-Young Lee’s experimentation with those two genres.

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PART I: CRITICISM

“EXILE SEEMS BOTH A BLESSING AND A CURSE”:¹ A *BLISSFUL* READING OF LI-YOUNG LEE’S POETRY

Li-Young Lee’s works have not yet been much analyzed, but he seems to have been unlucky with his critics, who generally prefer to examine historical, political, or religious aspects of his poetry, instead of focusing directly on his distinctive language and idiosyncratic philosophy. Of the two scholars I was able to track down while researching this essay, Walter Hesford (“The City in Which I Love You: Li-Young Lee’s Most Excellent Song”) offers an extensive analysis of how the *Song of Songs* influenced Lee in “The City in Which I Love You,” and Zhou Xiaojing (“Inheritance and Invention in Li-Young Lee’s Poetry”) tries to rescue Lee from the Asian-American-poet label, while also analyzing how classic Chinese poetry helped to shape Lee’s sensibility and his style. This rescue needed to be performed—if for no other reason because Lee himself hates being seen as a narrowly ethnic poet—but such a heavily political reading of Lee’s works, even when accomplished with as much skill as Xiaojing displays in his article, may divert our attention from Lee’s fundamental poetic goals, as he expresses them himself so attractively, but also so mysteriously, in his multiple interviews:

We’ve been duped, in a way, to think our body is our personhood, our job is our personhood. The whole Universe is humming, is vibrating. It’s that hum that I want to hear . . . Humming supports this chair; humming supports mountains; humming supports this body. To be a poet is to reveal the hum, which is “logos.” It’s pure mantra, Tao, law, whatever you want to call it. . . If we’re quiet enough we can hear it. And poetry is that frequency. (Dearing & Graber 110-11)

In another interview, Lee defines poetic craft in a hardly less cryptic manner: “There

¹ Haba 259

is a kind of musical inevitability I want, . . . the way the poems open, the way they disclose themselves” (Miller 36). Because Lee is both so articulate and so puzzling when he describes his poetry, I want to take him at his word and to try to read him using his own guidelines. Consequently, I will not try to dissociate Lee’s philosophy from his poetics because he himself does not; for him, writing is a philosophical / religious activity of the purest and highest kind:

My first love is poetry and I’m trying to find a way to write sacred poetry, poetry that sends the reader to a sacred place or calls to a sacred place inside the reader. I don’t know how to do that. That’s my wish. That’s what I meditate on and hope for: to discover the sacredness in the profane world. (James Lee 13)

Concretely, in terms of rhetorical and stylistic strategies, how does Lee try “to discover the sacredness in the profane world”? What form does this “sacredness” assume in his works? Is his attempt successful? We can only be sure that Lee managed “to discover the sacredness in the profane world” if this sacredness shows in his poetry, if he succeeded in making it visible and perceptible for his readers. The idea is thus to find in Lee’s poetry something concrete (rhetorical strategy, stylistic device, etc.) that he uses repeatedly and that seems to affect the reader strongly enough so we may describe it as producing a kind of epiphany, a feeling of getting in touch with the invisible, the unknown, the thread that holds the universe together.

This hypothesis has a huge built-in problem: describing or producing an experience such as a religious epiphany through language is almost impossible because, by nature, that kind of experience is ineffable, beyond language. Lee thus undertook a challenging task: “to discover the sacredness in the profane world,” the poet must go close to the limits of language, the limits of its power to signify.

Are there moments, in Lee's poetry, when we feel in the presence of such limits? And is not the poet led to question the very power of language to signify, its ability to help us communicate? Lee is far from naive, and, while in love with language as much as any poet, he also knows that language is a dangerous force, a power to reckon with and which will not automatically submit to the speaker / writer:

I'm highly aware that I'm a guest in the language. I'm wondering if that's not the truth for all of us, that somehow we're all guests in language, that once we start speaking any language, somehow we both bow to that language, at the same time we bend that language to us.

(Miller 36)

Moreover, communication, for him, is something very intricate at best, and often impossible. He has stated repeatedly, especially about his last book, *The Winged Seed*, that poetry was also something he did because he found it so hard to truly reach out and touch the people closest to him and whom he most loves—his father, wife, sons:

It seemed that I was unable to communicate to any human being at all . . . The things that are closest to me and dearest to me defy language . . . Why can't I communicate? Part of it is because language itself is both a vehicle of communication and yet an obstacle to communication . . . My feelings are somehow outsized. They seem to me frequently larger than myself, overwhelming. In that way, they seem to defy language."

(James Lee 11)

For Li-Young Lee, it seems that we are all exiled—not just exiled from a language (which would be Chinese, or maybe Indonesian for him), but exiled into language. Sooner or later, we realize that language is exile itself.

Lee's problem with experiencing and communicating an epiphany through poetry can

now be reformulated in terms of language and exile: is there any possibility, for a poet to reclaim language's ability to signify, thus escaping the type of alienation and exile Lee describes as not being able to communicate and to understand one's world, one's life?

I. "Braiding": Trying to Force the Ineffable into Language

Trying to find where Lee's poetry reaches the limits of language in an attempt to express the ineffable, I used Jakobson's binary opposition between metaphor and metonymy² as my primary theoretical tool. In prose, language's descriptive and narrative power (what Jakobson calls the metonymic function of language) can be hampered / transformed by the irruption of similes, metaphors, and other comparative devices (he calls that phenomenon the metaphoric function of language). Each shift between the two functions of language points at another type of meaning, which we could call something like *poetic meaning*. That meaning is not discursive or rational in nature, being more closely related to the language of the unconscious or the experience of the divine. That meaning can actually never be fully expressed. Instead, the gap (*la béance*, as Roland Barthes would put it) in the text between metonymic and metaphoric functions merely points at the existence of such a transcendent, ineffable meaning.

This description comes close to the one Roland Barthes gives of textual bliss (*la jouissance textuelle*) in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973). For Barthes, bliss happens when the reader feels that something is breaking down inside his/her reading experience—and what is breaking down is meaning itself. Barthes describes "the deep laceration the text of bliss inflicts upon language itself" and adds that textual bliss is "a kind of vertical din (the

² Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" (1956). The metaphoric dimension of language is what Saussure (and Jakobson himself in his *Essais de linguistique générale*, 1963, chapter II) describes as the paradigmatic axis of language, while its metonymic dimension is also known as the syntagmatic axis of language.

verticality of language and of its destruction)” (12). Bliss, however, is not identical with happiness. Textual bliss is an unsettling, almost painful experience for the reader because it is coeval with a loss of meaning:

Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (Barthes 14)

After trying to apply that theory to Lee’s poetry, I finally found a similar disjunction / gap that occurs frequently in his poems and that could induce for the reader an experience similar to Barthesian textual bliss. Very often, Lee’s poems begin as narrative poems—he starts telling a minor story, an anecdote taken from his daily life. A casual reader, at that point, may easily overlook what almost always happens further down in the poem: a discreet (or not so discreet) leap from the narrative mode into the lyrical one, a place where the narrative impulse breaks down, where coherence and meaning stammer. Li-Young Lee himself seems aware of such a possibility, given the way he defines the lyric moment in his 1995 interview with James Lee:

The lyric moment for me is exactly that: a moment in which all of who we are is simultaneously true—the contradictions, the paradoxes, the opposites are simultaneously negotiated. (11)

This claim points out to the limits and limitations of language and made me curious to explore in more detail what kind of topics or themes triggered a lyric moment in Lee’s poetry, how the lyric moment disrupted the narrative impulse of the poem at the micro-level of the line / stanza, how that disruption would affect my reading of the poems, whether or not Lee managed to communicate a sense of the ineffable or the sacred through his leaps

from narrative to lyric, and whether or not such a device could yield some kind of resolution for the cognitive / affective / linguistic crisis that made it necessary in the first place.

“Braiding” (from *Rose*, Lee’s first published book, in 1986), is a poem that contains a good example of such crisis (*Rose* 57). The occasion of this poem (the apparent and immediate topic, which I will call “surface narrative,” or just “narrative” from now on) is the habit of the narrator to brush and braid his wife’s hair every night before going to bed. The beginning of the poem seems merely anecdotal:

We two sit on our bed, you
between my legs, your back to me, your head
slightly bowed, that I may brush and braid
your hair. My father
did this for my mother,
just as I do for you (...)

Although the content of those lines is quite unusual, they read very much like prose, except that the line breaks are consistently strong (nouns or important pronouns). Later on, we spot a few metaphors: “the hem of your hair” (line 7), “rocking in a rower’s rhythm, a lover’s even time” (lines 12-13), and “wintry scent” (line 15). The text starts looking more like a narrative poem and less like prose, but we can still in no way call it lyrical: the small metaphors just quoted make the reading more lively by adding extra meaning to the lines. They do not make the meaning break down at all; instead, they strengthen it.

Those metaphors build up the meaning of the poem by introducing sensual (line 15) and sexual (lines 12-13) connotations, so that the brushing and braiding of the hair become a kind of symbolic sexual intercourse. “Rhythm” and “even time” also tell us that there is harmony in that action, and “my father / did this for my mother / just as I do for you” marks a continuity and a connection between the generations. The world that unfolds in front of the

reader is unified and orderly.

The second stanza introduces another bit of narrative that does not seem to have much to do with the first one, except for the feeling of being cold:

Last night the room was so cold
I dreamed we were in Pittsburgh again, where winter
persisted and we fell asleep in the last seat
of the 71 Negley, dark mornings going to work.

Those lines and the following display the same concrete, precise language and the same presence of the body and of sensory perceptions:

(...) I remember
the thick, oak tabletops, how cool
they felt against my face
when I lay my head down and slept.

Two lines arouse the reader's curiosity: "How I wish we didn't hate those years / while we lived them." One wonders why the narrator has that strange wish, but one does not get an immediate answer. Consequently, this new curiosity shapes our reading of what follows—as does our desire to know what connects the two anecdotes narrated in the poem so far.

The third stanza is only a couplet with a one-return white space between its two lines: "How long your hair has grown. / Gradually, December." It is very different in length, tone, and nature from anything we have read so far. The large space between the two lines shows that something has been omitted (i.e., the middle of the stanza), or that there is some kind of mental silence or blank between the two remarks—some time elapsing, unanalyzed and unrecorded.

This ellipsis does not make the poem impossible to understand: both lines are about change (hair growing, December settling in), and change is how we know that time is passing. The

deep, hidden subject of the poem could thus be mutability / mortality. Read in this light, the lines about Pittsburgh and “How I wish we didn’t hate those years / while we lived them” start to make a lot more sense. The narrator and his wife should have made more of their hard years in Pittsburgh simply because now that time is over and gone for ever.

The positive temporal continuity portrayed in the first stanza is now breaking down, both through the ellipsis and through the introduction of the themes of discontinuity and loss themselves. Tears and gaps are beginning to appear in the smooth narrative surface of the poem, at the very same time that Lee touches upon new, painful topics. The following stanza expands the theme of loss:

There will come a day
one of us will have to imagine this: you,
after your bath, crosslegged on the bed, sleepy, patient,
while I braid your hair.

The narrator is thinking that one day either he or his wife will be dead, and the other will only be able to remember those intimate moments. Lee’s minimalist treatment of the themes of loss and death probably stems from an aesthetic choice: understatement and textual gaps may be the only appropriate strategies to describe absence.

From then on, we have a snowball effect: the initial narrative clarity of the poem unravels under the combined assaults of ellipses and other narrative-complicating and narrative-hampering rhetorical devices:

Here, what’s made, these braids, unmakes
itself in time, and must be made
again, within and against
time. So I braid
your hair each day.

My fingers gather, measure hair,
hook, pull and twist hair and hair.
Deft, quick, they plait,
weave, articulate lock and lock, to make
and make these braids, which point
in the direction of my going, of all our continuous going.

First, Lee uses cataphora in, “Here, what’s made, these braids.” “Braids” is the essential word of the line, but he postpones the reading of that word by inserting “here” and “what” in-between, thus building the careful reader’s curiosity and anticipation.

The second device we notice is an elaborate system of repetitions: “made,” “unmakes,” “made” (lines 1-2) and then “time” and “time” (lines 2 and 4). Besides, “against” echoes “again” (line 3). Lee then adds more repetitions with “hair” and “hair” (lines 6 and 7) and also starts building a series of loosely synonymous verbs whose function is similar to that of the repetitions: “braid,” “gather,” “hook,” “twist,” “plait,” “weave,” “articulate.” This device reinforces the effect produced by the repetitions, but in a much less conspicuous manner.

We may now wonder what kind of meaning those elaborate rhetorical strategies build. The repetitions in the text are iconic of the repetitive motions made by the narrator’s hands as he braids his wife’s hair, but the deep themes we discovered in the poem clearly show that Lee did not take so much trouble only for the sake of verisimilitude or a baroque aesthetic effect. The last two lines of our quote give us a serious clue: the braids “point / in the direction of my going, of all our continuous going.” This statement is pretty confusing: braids normally hang behind a woman’s head and down her back, so it seems that Lee and his wife (the “we” of the poem) are walking backward. I pondered that puzzle for a couple of years, until I found the missing piece in a recent interview Li-Young Lee gave to the *Crab*

Orchard Review:

So, to a Chinese mind, the future is behind us, and the past is before us. So, to a Westerner you walk forward into the future, and you leave the past behind. To an Easterner we walk backward into the future and everything we see here is the past. (Dearing & Graber, Fall / Winter 1998)

Actually, Lee is saying that the braids point toward the future, into which he and his wife blindly walk backward, Chinese style. One consequence of this vision of life is that the future cannot be planned, foreseen, or tamed. Believing that we all fall backward into an unforeseeable future, a Chinese person is deprived from the comforting fiction most Westerners have about the future as visible and knowable. The future thus easily becomes a source of anxiety and fear.

The fifth stanza of “Braiding” deals with exactly the same topic as the fourth one: how one day, in the future, the narrator and his wife will be parted by death, though they cannot know when and how. Human love / life is pitted against time, which always brings change and death. Change and death are the theme of the first four lines of the fifth stanza: “Here, what’s made, these braids, unmakes / itself in time, and must be made / again, within and against / time . . .” The narrator loves, lives, and works “against time”; his effort to overcome time is like Sisyphus’ attempt to roll his stone up the hill: “And though what’s made does not abide, / my making is steadfast . . .”

Braiding hair can finally be described as an elaborate conceit Lee devised to speak about things that are almost impossible to explain and analyze because they are so abstract, unknowable, and scary: mutability, death, loss, and the response to those problems he developed as a person and poet.

What is the emotional quality of that response? Lee could easily be crushed by the futility of the only action he has to oppose to mutability and loss, but this is not the case, as we clearly see in the last part of the fifth stanza:

And though what's made does not abide,
my making is steadfast, and, besides, there is a making
of which this making-in-time is just a part,
a making which abides
beyond the hands which rise in the combing,
the hands which fall in the braiding,
trailing hair in each stage of its unbraiding.

In the lines “there is a making / of which this making-in-time is just a part, / a making which abides / beyond the hands which rise in the combing,” Lee points toward something which, exceeding time, escapes it—a form of transcendence, which consoles the poet, but which never becomes completely explicit. That transcendence could be the “logos,” “mantra, Tao, law” mentioned by Lee in his interview with Dearing and Graber, or it could be the Christian God of the Bible, or the immortality of the poem, or even the persistence and inherent value of love itself. However, because that consoling transcendent principle remains veiled and is expressed only in such an allusive way, I personally do not find it extremely convincing and powerful, and it is possible that Lee did not manage to convince himself either. This problem may be why the last stanza falls back on the theme of mutability and has such a melancholic quality:

Love, how the hours accumulate. Uncountable.
The trees grow tall, some people walk away
and diminish forever.
The damp pewter days slip around without warning

and we cross over one year and one year.

The poem ends with a return of the braiding metaphor, except that now years are what is being braided. The metaphor is now fully developed and explicit. However, the conflict is not resolved: the last stanza is filled with verbs expressing loss and separation (“walk away,” “diminish,” “slip around,” “cross over”). This series of verbs echoes the braiding-related series in the fifth stanza, but contradicts them and complicates the feelings Lee weaves into the poem. Loss seems to be winning in the end.

We can thus see “Braiding” as a partly successful, partly failing attempt at expressing the ineffable and making sense of mutability. The conceit of braiding allows Lee to start examining what happens when the human mind has to struggle with the knowledge of death and loss. However, the conflict is not completely resolved. The elusive last part of the fifth stanza does not yield a completely satisfactory possibility for transcendence; Lee’s language does not manage to express the divine fully, and the last stanza reverts to melancholy and pain.

Lee obviously did not solve the problem he had tackled in “Braiding” and thus needed to go back to it later on. He did so in at least two poems, “This Room and Everything in It” (*The City* 49) and “You Must Sing” (*The City* 69), and we are now going to examine how his metaphysical / linguistic crisis evolved to try to determine whether or not he found a satisfactory answer to his questions.

II. “This Room and Everything in It”: Stretching Language to the Breaking Point

In “This Room and Everything in It,” Lee tries to show that rational thinking can not allow a human being to make sense of his / her experience of love, loss, and death. This time, however, language is openly at the heart of the discussion—because language is the usual vehicle of rational thinking. The poem starts as a traditional love lyric loaded with Platonic

assumptions, but Lee then undermines and invalidates those assumptions by systematically destroying the discursive coherence of language that normally carries the rhetorical power of rational, philosophical discourse. While seeing that destruction as necessary and unavoidable, the poet also seems to find the loss it triggers (i.e., the loss of rationality as a means of making sense of his world) deeply puzzling and painful, and that kind of epistemological shift fits neatly into Barthes' definition of textual bliss (as loss), since the reader who really takes the poem apart and digs into its meaning can not avoid coming to deeply destabilizing conclusions about the nature of his / her own world and experience.

When attempting a close reading of "This Room," we soon realize that, like in "Braiding," the surface narrative or pretext of the poem is a thin, conventional love lyric with elegiac undertones:

Lie still now
while I prepare for my future,
certain hard days ahead,
when I'll need what I know so clearly this moment.

The first stanza of "This Room" seems to refer to the same things as the fourth stanza of "Braiding." Once more, a lover tries to gather strength for that day when he imagines that death or some other accident will deprive him from his present happiness. We also notice an apparent alienation between the narrator and his beloved; the stanza starts with a direct order to the beloved, "Lie still now" ("lie" is an imperative) before shifting its focus to the narrator: "while I prepare for my future, / certain hard days ahead." Lee posits a separation between the lover through the opposition of "you" and "I." Whatever the narrator fears does not seem to affect the woman he loves. She appears stronger, inaccessible, and remote.

The stanza is also interesting because of the way it ends: "when I'll need what I know so clearly this moment." However, we are not told what the narrator knows so clearly. The

world of the narrator is unstable and mysterious from the start. From the very beginning of the poem, the focus is on mutability and change, and what little the narrator positively knows is not yet disclosed. In the second stanza, the narrator's world further slips out of control:

I am making use
of the one thing I learned
of all the things my father tried to teach me:
the art of memory.

We feel a rift between the generations: the son was not a very apt pupil and probably disappointed his father by learning only one thing “of all the things [his] father tried to teach [him].”

In the third and fourth stanzas, Lee further complicates the enigma by introducing two more puzzling concepts: distance and the difficulty of love.

I am letting this room
and everything in it
stand for my ideas about love
and its difficulties.

I'll let your love-cries
those spacious notes
of a moment ago
stand for distance.

Your scent,
that scent
of spice and a wound,

I'll let stand for mystery.

Distance seems to connect with memory in some implicit way, and the difficulties of love could relate to the distance the narrator established between himself and his beloved in the first stanza, but what is the relationship between memory and the difficulties of love?

The speaker of the poem uses a deliberate rhetoric strategy to try to keep together a world (and a narrative dimension of the poem) that seem to unravel more and more with each new line, and that strategy is based on comparison (and later on metaphor) on a stylistic level, while being symbolic and Platonic on a philosophical level. The lines just quoted display a repetition of “stand for”: “stand for my ideas about love,” “stand for distance,” “stand for mystery.” This operation is clearly similar to the one that produces symbols: one concrete thing is more or less arbitrarily chosen to “stand for” an abstract concept, and that concept can not be guessed or inferred by simply examining the concrete object alone—one needs to be told what the concrete object stands for to decode a given symbol. The “stand for” mechanism is deeply ambiguous and perverse: whereas it somewhat stabilizes the narrative by using symbols as a heuristic tool, it also introduces “mystery” as a new term in the last stanza we just quoted, and then slides into wild, puzzling metaphors in the sixth stanza. That evolution, however, is foreseeable: ingrained in the symbol itself is a congenital instability or ambiguity of which we are seldom conscious—symbols are double by nature. No symbol ever refers to one concept only. Any given symbol refers to one concept *and the semantically antonymous notion*. Thus, for example, the Christian cross stands for life (resurrection), but also for death (Christ died on it), and, in the Western world, white stands for joy and purity (wedding and christening gowns), but also for sorrow and impurity (a woman can choose to mourn in white, and shrouds are also white). We can also take the example of fire, which is regularly used as a symbol of life (nurturing heat, internal flame of life) and destruction (fire consumes everything). We thus see that our most potent and

fundamental symbols always have a deep semantic ambivalence.

This element makes us guess that the narrator's strategy to understand, stabilize, and master his world through symbols can not be very successful. A first, almost invisible breach appears in the very next stanza (sixth stanza):

Your sunken belly
is the daily cup
of milk I drank
as a boy before morning prayer.

Grammatically, the center of the stanza is the copula ("is"). The structure of the passage we just quoted is *noun + is + noun* (belly *is* milk). The belly of the beloved *is* milk, it does not *stand for* milk. The structure under consideration is a metaphor, and metaphors do not have much to do with symbols, first because they need to be at least somewhat analogical and semantically justifiable, unlike symbols, which are arbitrary; second because they go much further than the symbolic mechanism and squarely state $A = B$ (belly = milk), whereas the symbol does not (we may perceive the cross as meaning death, but the idea of death can be expressed through hundreds of objects other than a cross).

However, despite that little slip, the narrator goes on with his rhetorical attempt at ordering and taming his world—actually, his strategy becomes very heavy-handed and clearly Platonic in nature in the next two stanzas (seventh and eighth stanzas):

The sun on the face
of the wall
is God, the face
I can't see, my soul,

and so on, each thing

standing for a separate idea
and those ideas forming the constellation
of my greater idea.

Now, the narrator sees the ultimate reality of the world in Platonic terms: the world of Ideas, an idea made up of Ideas. However, we know we cannot take any of it at face value: metaphor intrudes in the very middle of this orderly world, sowing its potentially fertile but certainly not orderly possibilities: “the sun on the face / of the wall / is God, the face / I can’t see, my soul.” What is on the wall is sunlight, not the sun itself, and walls seldom have faces, even in the Platonic world of ideas. Besides, if the face the narrator “can’t see” is his soul, he is obviously not enlightened in a Platonic way: Platonic enlightenment is remembrance, a recovery of vision, of the power the soul had to contemplate Ideas directly before being reincarnated in an inferior, impure body. The narrator is not a very good disciple of Plato, obviously. His painstaking, slow plodding along until he finally makes his theory explicit (“and so on, each thing / standing for a separate idea, / and those ideas forming the constellation / of my greater idea”) also tells us that Lee, who is usually so subtle and light-handed, is writing a parody and that Plato is going to bear the brunt of the joke. Sure enough, the nature and tone of the poem soon change in a dramatic way:

And one day, when I need
to tell myself something intelligent
about love,

I’ll close my eyes
and recall this room and everything in it:
My body is estrangement.
This desire, perfection.

Your closed eyes my extinction.

The two rhetoric elements that Lee uses to undermine the Platonic argument he just spent so long putting together are punctuation and (again) metaphor. Punctuation works as an alarm for the reader, telling him / her that something important is happening and to pay attention to it, while metaphor truly destroys the Platonic correspondence system and also turns the poem, which was mostly narrative so far, into a lyric—a text of bliss, full of contradictory, intense, simultaneous impulses.

Punctuation remains conventional until the end the second line, stanza ten: “and recall this room and everything in it:” (emphasis mine). After that colon, we expect a list or catalog or some sort, and we do get one, but we also get a capital letter at the beginning of the next line: “My body is estrangement.” In line 4, “is” turns into a comma: “This desire, perfection.” Technically, this line is a fragment, which also tells us that conventional syntax is breaking down and that something important is changing in the poem. In the fifth line, even that comma disappears: “Your closed eyes my extinction.” We have a metaphor in which the copula has been removed. The direct juxtaposition of “your closed eyes” and “my extinction” gives a great strength and immediacy to the metaphor: the lyric soars.

Thus, we see that the mechanical / syntactical disorder of the lyric impulse parallels the disorder we find in the content of the lines under consideration: Lee carries us from “estrangement” (negative term), to “perfection” (positive term), to “extinction” (negative term again). Similarly, the vehicles of the metaphors are disparate and apparently unrelated: the narrator’s body, then his desire for the beloved, then her eyes. Moreover, because each of those three short lines contains a new metaphor, we get a feeling of great speed and confusion. Our previous orderly Platonic cosmology falls to pieces. The following lines of the poem, which acknowledge that event, consequently come as no surprise:

Now I’ve forgotten my

idea. The book
on the windowsill, riffled by the wind . . .

Notice the line break on “my.” It is a very unconventional line-break, and many practitioners of poetry would not hesitate to call it weak (because “my” is a pronoun and consequently does not carry strong connotations), but Lee probably uses it in a very deliberate and subtle manner, both to point out the collapsing of poetic craft (as well as of philosophy, rhetoric, or any other linguistic discipline) and to emphasize the word “book” at the beginning of the next line. The book (culture, rationality, philosophy) is riffled by the wind of experience (subjectivity, love, desire, loss). Lee tells us that rationality and its vehicle, language, are not sufficient tools to make sense of emotional upheavals and the most intense and frightening part of human experience.

However, stubborn in his error, the narrator of the poem goes on trying to put the shattered pieces of his system back together:

Now I’ve forgotten my
idea. The book
on the windowsill, riffled by the wind . . .
the even-numbered pages are
the past, the odd-
numbered pages, the future.
The sun is
God, your body is milk . . .

Because the narrator falls prey to such a metaphorical frenzy, we immediately know his attempt is doomed—especially when we realize that Lee used even more unconventional line-breaks, such as the one on “are” (“the even-numbered pages are”) and the one on “odd,” (“the past, the odd-”). Finishing a line with “odd” of course draws attention to that word,

driving home the oddity and uncanniness of the narrator's situation. The end of the poem, after that, is predictable: we watch the lyric take over while the narrative and its logic (and all logic?) finish to crumble pitifully: "useless, useless," the narrator comments, finally realizing the inanity of his effort.

We pointed out how the narrator's Platonic system of symbols was undermined by the a sprawling series of metaphors, starting in the ninth stanza, but what happens now goes even further: metaphor itself becomes destabilized. The relationship between vehicle and tenor breaks down. Lee takes apart all the metaphors he has used so far and then reassembles them in a frantic game of mix and match:

The sun is

God, your body is milk . . .

Useless, useless . . .

Your cries are song, my body's not me . . .

No good . . . my idea

has evaporated . . . your hair is time, your thighs are songs . . .

it had something to do

with death . . . it had something

to do with love.

Again, punctuation is our best clue to understand what is happening: suspension points are everywhere, showing that ellipsis and fragmentation are taking over. Now, it becomes perfectly obvious for everybody, including the naive narrator, that logic, philosophy, and discursive discourse can not handle the peaks of human experience—those moments when emotion and the body prevail.

III. A Leap of Faith: “You Must Sing,” or The Lyric Alternative to Discursive Language

If logic and its discourse can not help humankind understand and accept love and loss, then what can? What options, if any, does an artist have? In the last part of this essay, I want to study the tentative resolution with which Lee came up in a short poem entitled “You Must Sing” (*The City* 69).

At the end of “This Room,” the only thing left after the systematic destruction of Idealism and Platonic discourse is lyricism itself. In “You Must Sing,” trying to make do with what is available, Lee consequently explores the possibilities of lyric discourse itself. He tries to use the lyric to understand human experience in a radically new way—a way that brings not only knowledge, but also healing because it manages to express the inmost truth of the self and to discover how a connection between the self and the world becomes possible.

“You Must Sing” is not a strictly formal poem, but it is surprisingly more so than the rest of Lee’s works (which are mainly free verse or prose poetry). “You Must Sing” is a faux sonnet, a poem of fourteen lines written in irregular pentameters (lines of ten or eleven syllables without an identifiable metrical pattern, but always containing five strong beats). The poem has no end rhymes, but has many internal rhymes, alliterations, and an elaborate system of repetitions. Understanding the structure of “You Must Sing” is important because skillfully rendered form puts pressure on poetic language, and that pressure heightens lyricism. In that respect, “You Must Sing” is so closely knit that it achieves intense lyricism, which helps Lee reach his goal of a poetic language so powerful that it becomes a heuristic tool to explore and understand the world, to connect with the others, and to heal the self.

“You Must Sing” is lyric from the very beginning. It has no surface narrative and starts *in medias res*, introducing the readers to a not-overly clear situation and letting them figure it out for themselves:

He sings in his father's arms, sings his father
to sleep, all the while seeing how on that face
grown suddenly strange, wasting to shadow,
time moves. Stern time. Sweet time (. . .)

Knowing Lee's biography allows us to infer that he is writing once more about the death of his father, but the poem is in the third person and thus does not make any direct autobiographic claim—and, consequently, neither does it have the emotional appeal automatically associated with autobiography. The emotion generated by the poem has to be born from and carried by something else, and that something can only be language itself.

The situation at the beginning of the poem is confusing. The first line and a half reads, "He sings in his father's arms, sings his father / to sleep." The archetype this scene calls to memory is a father holding his young son in his arms and singing him to sleep, but this is obviously not what Lee is describing here. The son is in his father's arms, but he is also the one singing, and the father is the one going to sleep, i.e., by the middle of the second line of the poem, the situation is totally reversed: the father has assumed the place of the child and the son the place of the father.

Things become clearer in line three, when the face of the father is described as, "grown suddenly strange, wasting to shadow." We now understand that the father is dying, and his death is what caused that strange role reversal between him and his son. The son is singing his father to his last sleep; he is trying to facilitate his father's death, to make it easier and less painful.

In the second quatrain of the poem, Lee discusses the possibility of a communion between the father and the son—a communication made possible by singing:

.....Because his father

asked, he sings; because they are wholly lost.
How else, immaculate noon, will each find
each, who are so close now? So close and lost.
His voice stands at windows, runs everywhere.

The next stanza starts after the father's death, which is not described at all, but simply indicated by a tense shift, from present to preterit:

Was death giant? O, how will he find his
father? They are so close. Was death a guest?

By which door did it come? All the day's doors
are closed.

Communication has become an even more pressing issue now that the father is dead ("O, how will he find his / father?"). The father is physically dead and gone, and keeping connected with him will require a new strategy, as stated in the last line of the third quatrain and the final two lines of the poem:

..... He must go out of those hours, that house,

the enfolding limbs, go burdened to learn:
you must sing to be found; when found, you must sing.

The son must willingly accept his loss and the passing of time. The burden ("go burdened to learn"), which must be willingly shouldered, is of course grief. Because mutability and loss are at the heart of this poem, it is not surprising that metaphors about the nature of time play an important role in the way the poem unfolds and develops. We find three of them as early as the last line of the first quatrain: "time moves. Stern time. Sweet time." Lee sees time as a person, instead of as the rather abstract and elusive concept we usually call by that name:

time moves (it is spacial) and has moral characteristics, such as sweetness and harshness (it is a person, or at least an entity of some kind). Time is also simultaneously sweet and harsh, which is yet another paradox.

Moreover, we soon notice that time and space seem to blend with each other. Something that can unfold only in time (the singing) is described in spatial terms: “His voice stands at windows, runs everywhere.” Similarly, the day the father died is seen as a house: “All the day’s doors / are closed. He must go out of those hours, that house),” and meeting the father (something that would normally happen in a place of some kind) will take place at a certain hour that Lee describes in spatial terms (“How else, in immaculate noon, will each find / each”).

Finally, present and past become one and the same thing. For example, the father is both gone and not gone: “O, how will he find his / father? They are so close.” (If the protagonist has to find his father, that means that the father is gone. However, father and son are still “so close.”) Also, the son still has to learn how to cope with grief and keep connected with his dead father (“He must . . . go burdened to learn”), but at the same time the quest is already over, and the last line of the poem sends us back directly to the first: “you must sing to be found; when found, you must sing.” There is no more *before* and *after* the father’s death. Linear time is abolished, replaced with circular time, or maybe an eternal simultaneity, in which all the moments of the protagonist’s life are coeval. Thus, loss becomes both eternal and impossible—the father is always already dead, but at the same time, he is always still there.

This wisdom, this insight into the secret nature of time, opens a possibility of healing for the singer/poet and stems directly from the power of the song itself and from the intense love that generated the song. Lyric language thus opens doors for the poet and his readers and brings forth knowledge. That knowledge is not logical and discursive, but immediate,

intuitive, and closer to a mystical revelation than to philosophical speculations. Bringing together past, present, and future, and shrinking distances as well as the difference between time and space, lyric knowledge thus bridges the gaps of exile and redeems the flaws of language—not without suffering and confusion, but also powerfully and tenderly.

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PART II:
NIGHT OF NO EXILE

I.

*Left
a note
on the fridge*

*reminder
of what's
missing*

*addressed
to myself.*

(F. Surget)

The Link

Jewelry on Royal Street.
Gold cloisonne with garnet
and emerald cabochons,
Victorian rows of pearls, onyx intaglios.

Frosted marvel of memory
mort. Ivory Christ on brass cross,
rapt, bored, absent—the nearby
reliquary craves for knuckles of saints.

In a corner, a marble torso on black velvet—
headless, armless—rests
on stumps, but the white breasts
ooze light, mimicking
the skin between your collarbones.

Blind centrifugal storm.
Speed tears the years away—
the night breeds sinewy whispers—
your long-forgotten, living voice
promises to lick my jaw line.

Cemetery Number One

Suck me into your river sands,
close your corrosive, clammy city
around my steps, and draw me under,
this very minute, while we know—
no longer young fools, not yet old ones.

A solitary locust chirrs on the concrete,
yearning for sex and love,
procreation and death.
I look into the eyes of the rain—
sticky, skinny toes wallowing in the mud.

Our people stood their ground here, brother,
stubborn, not minding that coffins
sailed the streets, that the whole city
was sinking into the delta of the river—
not caring. We blush their blood,

restlessly gulp their dreams.
This is such a short-lived season of joy—
rock me while the earth drinks
each mind-shattering split-second
of silence and light.

Cipher

Lying on the chest of the night
listening for your blood.
Striving to become breath
like you--white words on a black screen.
Self-knowledge tsunami—the craving of the flesh
a plaything when the raven of the mind goes mad.
Under the asteroid-stricken face of the moon
your love my hunger
a question doing its thing on my insides
it cannot be answered except by you
in the years to come—face to face—
for *now we see in a mirror, dimly.*

Cosmology

Foolish—to want your body
of blood and ashes,
dust and ice,
brittle like the mane
a comet drags across the void?
To want clay, rain, and hail,
your changing extinction—
knowing, beneath your features
the beauty of a perfect skull,
lurking.

Gone into your tornadoes,
sand storms, oceans, stars,
thousands of suns—
fast to melt into a vapor
under your skin.

Half-awake at night,
I shall fall into your flesh
of fire and molten rocks,
of ether, pneuma, atman,
all words failing us:
that which is you,
that which is not me.
Prisoners.

Echocardiogram

Your heart is the fluorescent, FDA-pink
chocolate we ate on Valentine's Day—
inside your chest, an autistic animal
chocks tubes in a red night.

A ghost pulses on the silver screen
like that orange-and-black Rain Forest
frog whose sweat can kill 15,000 people
—more than enough for you and me.
“Six weeks,” the doctor says.

I know that a man in green
will saw your rib cage, open
you like a car hood, and insert plastic
in your aorta. But what do doctors
know about our disease?

My face between your shoulder and neck,
I hear the sea and a whole swarm of drums.

Dirge

The scythe of a moon
has a liquid dot hanging from it—
naked Venus, the earliest star.
Tonight, I cruise Denton
to remember—to forget.

I wish you were also watching,
but it's 4:00 AM back home.
Your body flounders in a strange
bed, huddling its loneliness.
If you dream of me, you won't remember.

Tomorrow, I'll make us a Cajun box
out of oak boards and iron nails—
a glass lid and Chinese lacquer.
I'll weave into a contorted flower
the pens that wrote you letters,

a patch of your tattered sweater,
and the ivory necklace you kissed
on my arteries in the dark.
The night is burning low now—
the cold seeps through.

Golden Age

Slicing mushrooms
and bell peppers
with my back to the window
behind the slow fan
I watch meditative shades walk
across my wrists—
light to shadow
shadow to light.
Shadow.

Your fingers
steadily invade mine
their lean curves
overtake my manicure
their quick-bitten
nails shed a blushing glow
on the snow mushrooms.

The truffle-peel flavored
night drips in as I watch
our skillful hands
stir-fry bronze peppers,
cast their net
of reverberating waves
minutely moving
like my blood

when it reaches
for your secret sources.
Our matched fingers
fish for shell bits
and sprinkle wet chives
in the golden
goo before pouring it
over scalding sputtering iron.

The Labor Day I Took to Plumbery as a Hobby

I writhe my finger down the pipe
and bring back to light weeks and months of our lives
under their least commendable guise.

The drain finally surrenders. It was not that bad;
I just have to acknowledge something new as mine,
like chasing the cockroaches that race
across our backs during the hottest summer nights.

Sometimes, I still see my grandmother plucking
out the rabbit's eye with her sharp little knife

--Clean and fast, the best way.

She was a generous, wise woman,

un coeur d'or,

But she had seen her mother's death,
Starving times, a couple pregnancies,

A war, two wars:

The rabbit was toasted,

its blood a dark, smooth sauce.

Composite Monster

Hey, Young Tree,
are you going pangolin?
Stiff horn flowers
numb the flesh
I kissed into quivering;
morning coffee makes you
sick, and the first cigarette,
untouched, tastes of ashes.

You dream of violet jam
on unleavened loaves,
luscious roses coated
with chocolate,
and say, "Isn't that a pity,
living with a Unicorn,
so to tumble?"

"Les licornes sont des
chimères, mon prince."
Reach the truth of love
beyond its falsehood--
when I speak of you,
I speak of both.

Astral Twins

I drift in a liquid night, alone
with you at last. We never
see each other, but your fingers
brush my face, tentatively.

Lives ago, we met in an old
European city, while the tangent
moon stabbed garrets at midnight—
we half killed each other for no reason,

twisting in a naked knot, you, fast
as a snake, and me, willing to be struck.
I said, “Eat me,” to be tucked
under your golden skin,
but you vanished like Melusina.

Now I close my hand on your silence.
Blessed be the fetters drawing
us so close apart, blessed the blood;
asymptotes teach the smallest step matters.

Camera Obscura

At the cruel game
of love you seek shelter
by stealing an image of me—

a moving target
 is harder
to hit,
 or maybe

like a mirror,
the camera will prove
you have no shadow—
teeming years

reveal
 the old man,
your son,
 a child
with sleepy eyes.

.....
The silver-gelatin vortex
draws us in—the warning,
the drowning, desire for
absence. Erasure for death.

I cannot
heal you—
O anima,
my animus—

only turn the light off
and watch your face
with tiptoeing fingers.

II.

Night of no Exile

Night of no Exile

*"Too alien to know
our sameness and how our sameness survives."
Anne Sexton, "The Expatriates."*

Because the doctor heard two hearts,
her father bought a fishing rod
for his regal daughter, screwdrivers
and mighty hammers for his son.
A scrawny girl was all that showed up—
doctors are whimsical gods.
Squinting beyond her toe line
on the bobbing Gulf soup,
almost the temperature of the human body,
she thinks of her unborn brother—how her growing
shadow became the sudden jailor
of silence—the shifting hand of the scale
ever bouncing with their combined hunger.
Now, the sky etches New Orleans
like a reclining harem girl; under her breath,
two desynchronized hearts mill schismatic stories.
Ceremonious seaweeds skim the lead-dense
water that tastes of his skin; where the sun has bitten
her shoulder raw, salt prints its luminous,
shredding burn.

What is salt—
the "ness" of things,
their presence?
The broken crystal
decanter slicing
neatly through skin,
muscle and tendon,
and my amazement,
at six in the emergency room:
blood tastes
of metal and flame,
of iron and salt.

Lost in Quiberon, Morbihan, they saw cold
pools tremble under an eddying cloud
of pelicans in the consuming rumor of the sea—
She licked the cutting froth from her fingers
and tottered behind Mother across the sandy,
squishy grass. The wind pulled their hair,
gagged them. When the drizzle opened its acrid
gates, the moor closed in like a convent grate.
How on earth could that gray-green sprawling
waste beget the incandescent crystals that died
at night boiling a minute song? Why do oceans
span her life like arches of an indivisible bridge,
her head a stranger rocking on pillows
of casual locks? She wishes herself stone,
taunted by the blind excellence of a lover's eyes—
like mirrors.

Our hundredth life
you proved me red,
birthing yourself
in my arms.
I watched the blood
fade a lover,
my long-lost brother
rise in your eyes.
The pain burst with joy,
like a pomegranate
dropped on a hardwood floor.
We mourned our loss,
but loved the gain—
“We still have incest.”
(How foolish.)

Love was teasing them like a cruel kitten.
They sat chattering in the low light
of the fire with an ocean rain
eating the windows like spun sugar
panes on a saloon movie setting
and read of dungeon prisoners
inching their walls for a door—
they left behind a stone, a torn piece
of clothing—they howled treading it again,
scratching only sulphur to lick
and finally shrank to void,
petrified concretions of tears.
Our happy lovers thus read the incunabulum
and felt for the dead—why did they forget
themselves?

I pulled the black veil
hanging from the opening
in the wall of my dream,
but behind was only death,
and, dear, death has no face,
shape, color, substance,
is the essential not,
and, having no body
to praise it, is simple,
perfect, perfectly stunning.

*Salt is good: but if the salt
have lost its saltiness,
wherewith will ye season it?*
They must change their lives,
but keep rolling on, broken birds
carried by the wind—absent
to the wave, the sky. Drifting,
they watch oblivious clouds drift.
(Glass shatters in patterns, radiating
from the heart like a wounded rose,
a split star—or it breeds hundreds of sad,
diminutive icicles. They left the car
by the frozen ditch and traveled black
ice to the nearest pay phone.)
Is this their very best—this twirling to the end
of the world to finally stand in another city,
warmer but just as garish, basking in the neon
sunlight of its bisexual peepshows?
*It is good for nothing, but is thrown out and trampled
underfoot.*

Disaster area. Arise
salt, arise sweet
certitude of lust:
the earth ages
under the sun's
plodding footsteps,
but women shed
their skins like snakes:
each first of the month,
I could draw you into my circle;
lovers inhabit a green, selfish
paradise—what else is there?

Night, can you exile exile?
In this crepuscular, inverted city,
hunger's dogs roam the streets—
deep night scent of jasmine Bourbon,
invisible woman sleeping on cardboard.
Tonight, her hand is seeking his hand on Royal
against all reason, all hope, because the heart
has to have its way, its tiny noise—night of nights,
remember his eyes, his betrayal forget, but remember
his night eyes, and if you don't, look into hers.
“What do you fear, love? We shall awaken again
in the eye of the storm, the tender, desperate raid.”
As she dances on Siva's corpse, Kali rejoices
in her defeat: *the fire is not quenched*.
Let her be charred at her love's peerless eyes
swaying like lilies in the night's jungles—
who cares if hell is seasoned with the tears
of the drunken bee, the liquor dropped on the pane
by the suicidal gnat?

I left you to seek you
at the fountain of absence.
I'm not in quest of you—
you are my quest.
I shall not find you—
you never left.
Some day you'll call my name
as I doze off in the coward
late-afternoon heat,
and I will hear—
as all we can claim
is instant miracles.

They were one until Zeus smote them
with a big, yellow lightning bolt,
a little oversized, a little ridiculous—
they were one, male to male,
female to female—male and female—
like tight hedgehogs rolling down a steep slope
in their frenzy, and picking up momentum
and dry leaves, soft nose to nose, prickly backs
closing a sphere, a spoked axle.
They no longer live like animals now
(Abelard drained and dead, Heloise
burnt, still—and wrote.) If they open
their eyes again, will it only rewind the tape,
the same hourglass dripping with frozen smiles,
same betrayals, same panic-stricken horns ringing
the quarry—or will they get another chance,
like tears finally brimming down mute
cheekbones?

Life is a procession
of drunk idiots
rue de Chartres,
and every time
the night brushes
its silk to my skin,
every time a star
tears the sky open,
I know
I don't know
if you're mine.

III.

*For I have but the power to kill,
Without—the power to die—*

E. Dickinson

Nel mezzo del cammin

(For Mary Shelley)

Start with the idea of losing
your way in an October wood.
Leaves crisp like corn
coated with frost no stars
and everything so perfectly dark.

Squirrels scurry underfoot
fussing about the last details
of their winter sleep—no matter
how hard you look, no leopard and no
she-wolf—you forget about the lion.

Then expect a crossroad—
a maze of paths heavy
with possibility, but what do you fear?
Is not the night a Cretan labyrinth—
a starfish breathing you in?

Please meet your monster
so amazingly delicate and lucent—
the glossy mane, the sad mouth—
your heart like a goat skips skittishly
longing for the butcher's knife.

Fear is a circle each point the center
embrace the caressing daemon—
a parting—January First open
like a mother's grave—lovers walking
along the shoreline of a Swiss lake.

Who can salvage ignorance
by the weight like scrap metal?
Open death's eyes, shoulder
the blessing—razor-sharp?
The labyrinth spits you out.

The Fifteenth Anniversary: A Valediction

We breathed in the dimming light,
the slightly sickening sweetness of honeysuckle
rising from the garden. It was July—France.
We were dining with a Malian couple,
two relief workers my parents had just hired
for their non-governmental organization.
They were young. They were about to cross back,
go to their country, do the job we were paying them for.

I sat opposite the woman and couldn't help gazing.
She was black and lustrous. The little braids on her head
piled up like the waves of the sea, the secrets of the sea,
rising and falling. The scarifications
on her face and arms repeated the same clan patterns;
even the black embroidery on her purple dress seemed to follow
moon-driven routes. Our eyes met, and she smiled at me.
I thought she could only pity my pasty skin,
as pale as the diary in which, each night, I poured my acned heart.

Warm in bed, contented despite insomnia,
I imagine the other, intimate pattern, tiny and cruel,
and how it must have hurt when the old woman spread
the girl's legs open with her sharp shell shard.
Sometimes, history overwrites the bodies of women,
and the song of their flesh grows so loud
they lose hope to ever make their other voices heard.
They can only sit still and smile over chicken Provençal
at lucky girls whose white skins match the pristine diaries
in which, each day, they inscribe stories of their own.

Cage

The wolf is losing it. They sometimes do—
though this one was not born in the wild.
You take a step back while he howls,
rams his head into the metal fence.
The others watch, their opaque eyes
gleaming like ancient, polished silver.

When scarlet flows, you draw
your son and daughter to your chest—
but who will prevent you from glancing?
From your mouth, small mushrooms
rise into the chill, damp October air;
overhead, geese tear the sky apart.

(For John)

Pickax Murderess

I misremember her
freeing
in a tabloid
a dove—
but where
could she
have found one?
Only a steel cross
on the wall
behind her—
the bird
her hands
unfurling.

Catherine

I guessed immediately. Was it the sharp
angle of your ivory-carved cheekbone
or your eyes hiding behind a ragged
bang like rabbits in a burrow?
You wore black each day of the week
and carried the kind of huge umbrella
that's getting unfashionable even in Brittany.

The air was all alive with a scent of disaster—
could no longer recognize myself or you—
the crumbling pattern, the old drill—
the smallest amount of that yearning
had to bring the world to an end.
I was defeated like a starved fox.

At the Christmas party, your gaze
spun, a mad roulette wheel
among bottles, smoking ashtrays.
My boyfriend finally picked me up;
you cut your arms open at 3:30 AM.
At the hospital, I peered into your pale face
and embraced an absurd, ferocious revelation.

Still Life

with Fortune Cookies

The blue sky pulses with cold,
while we joke in the kitchen,
never apart, never touching—
this bashful lull a golden mote
in the sun's eye.

In dreams, you go to school naked,
struggle with sneaky logarithms, hunt
for food—I'm neither quack nor man
of the art—I just let butterflies
eat through my rib cage;
the sweetness of the night scares me.

Behind our fluttering eyelids
cavorts a pageant of masks,
evil, or tender—mostly confused.
I wake to count the fine lines
piling up under my eyes.

Time does not wear us out;
we take care of that—
unfold oracle-thin strips
of Chinese-American paper.
(I'm a helium balloon; I fear
you may break my string.)

Bamboo shadows stretch
on the screen door; we sip
Baileys from port glasses,
let darkness creep in.

Everything we do impales
us further on pale thorns—
on the table, six white carnations
die in murky water.

First time Guest

She hides in the racket of the mixer,
thinking of the knives flying close
to her fingers, and how large they are—
she is like her grandmother who could bone
a raw chicken in two minutes and a few odd
seconds. Repulsive, says her mother;
red meat is a manly task.

“I’m a vegetarian now,” she says. “Are you crazy?”
her mother asks. “Who put that into your head?”
Then a naked blade flashes on the cutting board;
she remembers other pleasurable dangers--how her neck
gets wet under the hot hair, the clawing, the fan
carving a moving shadow on the ceiling.

“I’m glad you’re finally getting married,”
her mother claims from the kitchen doorstep.
“At least, that will make the neighbors shut up!”
She suddenly wants to grow old—no desire,
no pain—but her life rolls unclaimable waves—
wading in the pool of light at the public reading—
pregnant with the first book—and the forbidden eyes
smiling at her when she sinks into her own skull.

Your Portrait

Hail pounds on the panes
inside that scrap of paper,
and your face evinces
a terrible hard-on, mute
and directed my way.

(I shall tear the lumberjack
shirt off your chest, your girlish
belly; rip off those tired jeans
so your thighs will flow.)
Sick with remorse and anger,

you let the night escape unscathed
as your heart skips every other beat.
Inside that fresh sepia shot,
oddly, all the dogs of hell
are pounding our truth—

(O diffident and virtuous litany—
we adore a face too earthly
to be God's—too lofty
to document flesh—
a slumbering hero, maybe?)

Your head rests on the piano
like a rose on a nodding stem:
lover, when you catch me at last,
make sure we wear those rings,
unflagging tokens of the fall.

Grade School

And it was the desire for capture
in flight that made you speed up
to no avail—

the boys were mostly older—or
they played football. They would catch
your ponytail's

flying banner, dash you to the ground—
or they would bind your thin frame
with their young

arms, force your out-of-breathness
against the singing drums of their chests.
Thus, you learnt

the narrow path between need and wound—
later that they were both forbidden—later still,
buried.

Last Crop

She was ninety-five; you would not understand
why I mourn her so helplessly. I'm not sure I do myself.
Maybe just in memory of my lonely childhood,
her stamina, her humor, the lace she gave me each year
on Assumption Day--my parents always forgot.
It's one o'clock in the morning. I play solitaire
as if it could fix my life--each smart move evening
a past one. I do not focus on the game
and lose incessantly. I vaguely wonder who
I am going to talk to if I cannot talk to you.
I could. I don't want to. Growing old may be
as surreptitious as a grief
that does not want to be assuaged.

The Trial by Existence

*“ . . . but thou, thou meagre lead,
Which rather threatenest than dost promise aught,
Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence.”
(The Merchant of Venice, III, ii, 104)*

“Do I look effeminate?”
You borrow mascara, draw
your lips a slender pink.
Standing behind you, I brush
the black flood of your hair:
a few strands gleam, ashen
with homely peroxide.

“I’m no woman.” You reel
like a frigate, all rigging loose—
adrift. Under your mane, I reach
for your slender neck, the male
skull that traps your future.
Eternal nomad, I cannot
comfort what I fathom:

you are a mirror of desire traveling
gender without a map—*freak*—
few know the vanishing trails
of your obscure Sahara.
Reclining in my economy seat
above the Atlantic, gentle, mad,
I’ll close my face and sink: your exile,

my exile, what are you doing
that I ever resisted? Brother,
we all took root in panic’s
windy tundra—country, offspring,
marriage—as if to warn off
the Pilgrim we can’t escape:
he travels light, fears no fire,

no frost. Portia, Portia, why wait?
We cling together—how could I forget
your strength, your flaws? Muddy streams
rush down your cheeks. Step closer:
no prince opens the caskets, but you . . .
Say *yes* and retrieve gold, silver—
or lead, that mild metal.

IV.

Exile seems both a blessing and a curse.

Li-Young Lee

All Saints' Day

(For Sheryl Luna)

Soon I'll drive my battered
Bronco to Mexico
through burning asphalt,
road kills, skeptical cacti,
an empty sky, to paint
my name in chocolate
on sugar skulls
for the dead I loved.

I'll cook with morning summer
dresses and bleached hair,
or toothless mouths
framed with wrinkles—
love dreamers, doting wives,
divorcees, mourners of husbands.

We'll chat and laugh, steam
hot tamales, cry over dry orange
blossoms and bushels of onions,
tell ghost stories to frighten
the younger girls silly
and roll pan de muerto
with smooth, hard pins.

At noon, men and boys will forsake
the gossipy shade of the porch—
women, work, politics—women.
They will gather inside like locusts
in a ripe wheat field
and devour all but the wax smell
of votive candles.

Flat bread and wine will pass
round many times,
while children spin away
like pied dervishes
to play soccer on the lawn
before we all scrub
family tombs
in the glaring sun.

Last year, we lost
grandmother's grave.
Me and my brother sweated
for hours, wondering aloud
if the thin worn-out slab
had vanished—stolen,
collapsed like a tired shell—

in the oldest section,
so many were crumbling,
ceramic crosses and flowers
askew, sliding slowly
toward gaping cracks
smiling dumbly in the center.

Later, we found the tomb
in the oldest section of the yard
under the great magnolias,
intact and dull,
a pool of obedience—
“I don't remember her much,”
my twin whispered,
an eery seriousness
breeding circles
like a stone
in his eyes' dark water.

I put my arm around him,
and he smiled faintly,
losing his fingers in my hair.

(Four poems for Mike)

I. Diving

Three homes are no home:
born in Pakistan, raised in Libya,
I am American now.

My name is Samson, or sometimes Sam,
but I am Mike. Every time I close my eyes,
I am Mike.

I drink salt and tequila. My problem--I know
what you think. Hold my hand,
don't speak.

When I graduate, I'll join a rock band.
My parents want me to marry a girl
I have never seen.

When I walk alone at night, I sing to myself.
Street lights splash my brain, no sparrow,
nothing to give.

II. Night Shift

Walking to work in the crisp morning,
I see baby-green leaves
and think of you, curled up in bed,
gone.

Should my poem twist around your mute wrist
and doze off there? The fishermen
on the coast near Marseille eat sardines
and tapenade

on their decks before lifting their nets.
Pricked by the sun, the thick-hided sea
rolls like a sleeper and begets curling
waves.

III. To a Friend Worrying about his Sister in India

Not for your sweet brown eyes,
though sweet they are,
but because you're frightened of dogs,
frightened of water,
stuck in America without a car.

Lying in the dark with your guitar
across your chest, you plot rescues.
For a while, you look older;
responsibilities make your shoulders sink.

When I think of your sister,
she wears your delicate bones
and dark skin, the same long hair,
black but gold-streaked.
She has skirts on, silver bangles,
a ring on each finger, and she laughs,
not because she does, or can,
but because this is your wish for her.

IV. Olga: To the Man She Deserted

I know you retaliate by toasting
each night my health, your death.
Throwing stones into the brook,
I wonder what set my blond hair,
spread, fan-like, on your chest
against my taiga, my tongue.

When you left your ruthless dunes,
you knew you would not go back,
but I swore to myself that, before long,
I would hug my mother and sisters
and bite into the pine-flavored snow.
I should not have taken your hand,
knowing I would have to go,
but America was so small: not a friend
for me on that Pigmy land.

Now, I am back home, but nothing
feels the same. Bread and tea taste bitter;
when I wake up at three o'clock in the morning,
I see your dark face on the warbling stove.

Tourist

Last Summer, I went to Rocamadour
with my lover and my father
to look at the Death Dance on the wall of the Church,
and we stood there,
trying to make out the details,
and who was holding whose skeleton hand.
That was no easy affair
because the fresco is nine hundred years old,
and Death Herself is beginning to fade away.

Seven Pomegranate Seeds

I walk on the eyed wings of flesh-
dissolving butterflies in your dreams,
and my absence is the core of desire.

You overlook me on poppies; I find
a way into your food, lap your blood.
You have time—I have—eternity.

No spectacle more sickening, here,
than butterflies densely flocking
into a body that won't stir.

Lost on the dandelion-starred
meadow, you look at the bones—
so white their glare hurts

like precious metal on a shield.
Why shudder? I have eaten you
hundreds of times—we relish it.

Fajitas at 10:00 PM

The evening is too ripe, like the green
peppers stacked on the counter top.
She pours olive oil in the skillet
and enjoys the thick, juicy scent.
Chop, chop, chop, onion lace.

“You should be able to do it with your eyes
closed,” her grandmother said, handing her the knife
when she was seven. She feels she could.
Tonight, it seems they are working side by side,
the huge, old cook in her neatly patched apron
and the girl sporting a sweat-drenched, dirty shirt.

“Mind that frying-pan! Don’t look: listen and smell.”
Oracles fell as doughnuts slid into the hissing oil:
“A nice girl does not sleep around.” She blushed,
thinking of the young man with the bright eyes,
the poorly-kept secret. “Is he good to you, at least?”

And also, years later, just before signing
the check that would send the young woman
to the American school: “Don’t leave. Not yet . . .
Wait until I’m gone.” She broke the commands
one by one, but tonight, it doesn’t seem to matter.

She smells the steam rising from the pan—
another two or three minutes—and stacks
the tortillas on the white towel. Then, she wakes up
her American husband who dozed off waiting.

Three Graces

I.

Putting your head in the oven
was not necessary.
In February in England,
you can just lie down
in your embroidered house dress
with the frigid kitchen tiles
searing the skin
between your shoulders—
then, hug yourself
tightly and listen to the lisp
drifting from the mouth
of your favorite cooking appliance.

II.

Why dissect? Emily
finally refused to publish
and chose to hand-stitch
drawer-tuckable fascicles,
and she sometimes
pricked her thumb—
sometimes kneaded bread,
arranged flowers in tall vases,
or played the piano alone
towards the small hours
of the night.

III.

I also confess that I spent
last Sunday scavenging
(instead of writing)
eight nondescript supermarkets
for a certain hair spray
packed with silk proteins
and natural vanilla extract—
*Leaves your hair shiny,
scented and touchable.*
It was sold out.

Star: An Anatomy of Grief

I.

Portrait of a young woman in the inter-war years.
(I am writing as they lower your coffin into the ground,
writing to you seven thousand kilometers away.)
On my desk, three studies of a parrot's head in red and black;
a cascade in an unknown landscape;
the absurd hope that your picture will smile again.

II.

Poetry is a blanket of silence
wrapped around death.
In my wintry nights,
it hides your voice
and rocks it to sleep.

III.

My grandmother used to grow Christmas roses.
My mum calls them peonies,
but I know she is wrong.

They were white and pink,
squatting on sturdy stalks
like country girls on their hams.

They bloomed in December,
and one year the frost took a hungry bite at them.
Now they grow inwards.

IV.

Shattered panes
whose bits couldn't
be pieced together,
were we to try--
we are not.

I'd rather leave
things unfinished
than butcher them.

Full Circle: A Meditation

The collapsed fence defines her defeat,
but can she care? An asthmatic landscape
puffs toward the old house like a busted accordion,
almost too barren to bear the desolation
of the attic stairs, rotten, giving way,
step by step.

She tries to remember New Year's Day—
the butter-cream cake written with coffee
and the chocolate coins one ate for luck, for money—
but even the blood-red Christmas roses
in their crystal urn fade against this oblivious
blue afternoon and the memory of five-year old wild
in a spring garden, a grandmother clapping
and shouting until they were all lying
on the grass in their homemade liveries—
onion peel, sorrel, chicory, beet juice—
all the light-hearted Easter eggs that rolled downhill:
so fast.

She spots the white lime rocks that surrounded
the flowerbed behind the patio—around the blue
fir tree, they now draw a wheel-shaped herb garden—
the old one is all gone: even she cannot be sure
that it grew next to the patch of lilies,
hemmed in rosemary, sage, and Italian parsley.
*Now the Christmas bottle in the casket
holds the old sour wine with peach
and liquor hurts so bad it nearly kills . . .*

Yesterday, holding her twin curled up
in her arms, she kissed his pulsing neck,
a Nefertiti's head dangling on its long chain—
she supposed the tiny heart there a present
from his estranged wife—one learns
how to smuggle shadows, damaged goods.
He tried to show her his left kidney—
that place the scalpel would find blindly,
that island of white skin and silky fur
she shuddered to relinquish.
Her finger patiently traced the future scar,
naturalizing the new landscape.

She takes three steps into alien territory—
the fence abates like a wet flame.
Can she trespass? Is this not home?
Home is people, not places.
One morning, plundered of its fleshy core
a household starts rotting like a corpse:
the 1930's wedding picture in its ornate frame,
the walnut-root-plated furniture losing
its finish in her mother's living room,
the books whose stories she no longer tells . . .

Are bodies dwellings? Shells in abiding danger
of losing what kept them knowable,
a three-o'clock-in-the-morning scent of sleep,
the loudness of the chest in throes?
The peach tree still stands in the shadow
of the house; she touches the ragged sticky
paper taped around the trunk to prevent
ants from raising aphids on the lower branches;
a little glue adheres to her finger.

“Who can walk in love’s footsteps?”

The well is abandoned—the water pump,
torn off from the kitchen, rusts in the yard
near the attic’s stairs—the collapsing stairs
that refuse to fuss. Exile is home
after many winters, and the face of absence
is a cloud of butterflies. She draws
a line in the dust on the kitchen’s shutters—
a white line like the mark left by hard water
inside her grandmother’s kettle—she would drop
oyster shells in it to catch the lime—they lost
their colors first, then their edges, their shapes.

“Your name is exile,” her brother
concluded, drawing remote shadows
on her face with his thumbs.
Bodies are houses burning in the night
of the mind—so bright they blind the beholder.
She turns her back on the sun, closes her eyes
to regain perception. In the high guest bed
at their parents’, she waited with him—
for sleep, wisdom, a miracle—
watched the blue smoke slowly spire up
from his midnight cigarette, his two
o’clock cigarette—the ashtray rising and falling
on his chest—his breath shallow, water-clear,
and cold with pain. Under her eyelids, now,
the January-first blue sky spins like a dervish.

Stones freeze and split a little more each winter,
and the dead slide by, further and further,
diminishing, never out of sight,
but the body is memory. While it holds,
everything remains—made of flesh,
the hardest stone: each other’s only home.