

Jason Eng Hun Lee, *Beds in the East*. London: Eyewear Publishing, 2019. 90 pp. ISBN 978-1-912477-82-1.



When Jhumpa Lahiri's first short story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* appeared twenty years ago, the world was introduced to the idea of the role of the writer as administering to the many ills of men and women, often those that stem from ideas of cultural and physical dislocation. It is the writer who had as a calling to use language or words to treat these many ills which we have to face in this ever-changing and global world. In so many ways Jason Lee's debut collection of poetry *Beds in the East* does the same thing but at a more personal level. In this very impressive debut collection he traverses over the many destinies of the self that have come about, but more than administering to only his afflictions, the poet is also able to lyrically celebrate his joys and triumphs along the way.

In the first half of the volume, aptly titled "Beds in the East," the poet explores the various memories, sights and sounds of his adolescent self in the first place he called home in the east Malaysian state of Sabah. In the opening poem "Out of China" the poet introduces the controlling trope of sea navigation, which will engender the rich and diverse themes of the loss of self amidst the many dislocations experienced in childhood, as he renders the complex world of sight, sound and meaning from around him. The poet tells us that, not unlike his

grandfather who made the voyage to a new land, he too will have to endure the journey and arrival of such a migrant experience, possibly metaphorically, or later in life:

Amid sails that toss and fly like torn paper
I too will cross the unknown straits
and be cast into the sea's rough cradle,

Will stoop across this deck and feel
a straining vessel founder upon reefs
as sharp as any anguished, rallying cry. (1)

The stage and scene is set for the poetic self to journey on after the first arrival, to discover new landscapes that will engender the many rich and profound memories of a youthful life and thereafter. Lee then begins by intoning the themes of growing up and making sense of a complex and sometimes confusing adolescent world, or as he avers at the end of the poem, while just making out the hazy lines in the seascape, just before landfall: "Those faint grey lines will find their shape,/ as we anchor our memory off a new landscape" (1).

It is these "faint grey lines" that will bring forth the great profusion themes such as childhood, family, racial identity, travel and love in the first half of the volume. In the titular poem "Beds in the East," Lee invokes the many sights and sounds of growing up in Sabah. It is a strange land for a young child to understand, amidst the bewildering sensuousness of the streets full of curious shapes, people, speech and of course the falling rain, which happens almost daily in a tropical country like Malaysia. What is interesting here is that these scenes and the scenes of all the other poems in this section are actually the recalling of a life once lived, which today reside in memory. The glaze of such remembering is constantly negotiated as "the strains of another life," which suggests to my mind a past that can never be returned to, which remains in a sense unresolved. The poems "Lion Dance," "Catching Grasshoppers," "Rafflesia," "The Chameleon," "Family Gathering," "School Parade," "Kinabatangan" and so forth all bear testimony to this.

In "Passion Fruit Tree," the poet's adolescent world finds itself having to change and disappear altogether, as the poet experiences a new idea of voyage – this time it is a physical and cultural dislocation that causes him to destroy the symbolic tree that he had nurtured so arduously. The tree here of course exists in a highly metaphorical world, akin at times to William Blake's "Poison Tree" poem which deals with the more sinister side of the human psyche. For Lee it is nurturing the tree of childhood which in the end is destroyed by the overriding theme of having to grow up, abruptly transplanted from the very landscape which nourished the young mind and soul of the poet.

From the excitement of being launched into the “faint grey lines” of the landscape at the outset of the volume, the poet in the next half suddenly finds himself more mature but even more bewildered living within the new landscape of adulthood, the “present.” But that is not to say that the poet is unable to coexist in this new landscape; in fact, he says in the poem “Becoming” that “This is no loss of control./ This is just becoming” (42). The poem ends with this highly memorable stanza which points to a new sense of direction for the persona, in a new and uncertain world that demands adaptation and constant change:

Find the old stars fading in the sky,
strip the old symbols from all the new signs.
Loosen thoughts from things divine:
nothing finds itself in place for long.
This is how the world revolves.
This is life becoming. (42)

I feel that the real jewel in the book is in this second half in which the poet grows up and the world becomes for him far more complex in terms of human friendships, multi-racial identities, first loves and death. From a state of child-like wonder of the almost paradisaical innocence of the first section of the volume, the reader becomes more and more aware that childhood innocence must in the end face great dilution in the form of adult experience (“Passion Fruit Tree” comes to mind once again). The poems I most remember after reading this volume are the love poems, or poems about love, if you like. While Lee warns us in “Becoming” that the “heart’s compass whirls around” without finding a “stable home,” the treatment of the theme of love is both exquisitely written and meaningfully rendered. Lee is generous in giving us a handful of such poetry in “Two Ocarinas,” “Shipwrecked,” “When She Left Him,” “In Your Absence” and “Speed Dating.” Here we do not have the usual brief and intimate moments of a love blossoming or turning sour upon parting. Instead, there’s a whole scope of emotions and situations which characterise a range of life lived, which is uncanny for a young poet to be able to pull off successfully.

“Shipwrecked” stands out as one good example in this regard (it is also my favourite piece). Where a young poet would typically view love relationships as something beautiful but transient, this poem displays the mental acuity and emotional fortitude that is rare for such a young practitioner of verse, especially in such matters of the heart. He continues the nautical trope here, seeing how he and a former love have become like ships doomed out at sea, which cannot live up to the expectation of the other:

You found no ballast to steady yourself
in me, knowing the ship carried my name.
The tide promised more driftwood, more hard rock

and shingle pounding under your stern as
you stood rudderless at the sea's frontier.

You wanted me to show you a new world,
seeing far out from that mangled shore, lights,
always lights dispersing the mist for you,
praying that I would find your wretched hulk,
fix you up and put you back out at sea. (54-55)

In the end, the poet as interpreter can only do just that, record the many maladies of being human. Of course, such a preoccupation will find its end amidst a lack of resolution, though often discovering newer and richer possibilities of tension and meaning. Perhaps the many ills cannot be cured and no writer, or poet, pretends that metaphorical language alone is capable of such things. And yet it is the sheer vitality of such an approach that tells me that Jason Lee has a wonderful future in verse ahead of him. He acknowledges that such a journey to find meaning in his metaphors in "Arrivals" is just the beginning, and that he needs to go

Back, where my past folds out and spreads before me
as one complete life, where events flow and mingle
with the great little lies the world revolves around.
Now I must lead the tongue's forked path onward
To find it passing on through forever. (86)

Leonard Jeyam
University of Malaya, Malaysia
Email: leonardr@um.edu.my