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On Joseph Lease's *Broken World*

Broken World by Joseph Lease. Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2007.

Acute lyricism is a touchstone of Joseph Lease's poetry. Beginning with the 1994 chapbook *The Room*, continuing in *Human Rights* (1998) and in two chapbooks earlier this decade, and reaching its finest realization to date in the long-awaited *Broken World*, this lyricism performs the labor of political, aesthetic, and psychological thought. Lease's work keeps raising vital questions: What does it mean to construct a self engaged in dialogue with other selves? How can obstacles to community be raised in ways that make (possibly jaded) readers care about them? How can expression of democratic community be capacious enough to acknowledge differences yet not fall prey to debilitating balkanizations?

The title *Broken World* calls out to other titles in the book, "Soul-Making" and "Free Again." Though partly a space to name the world's injuries, Lease's poetry sounds a *poesis*, a making that encourages reconstruction and liberation from "brokenness." In short lyrics like "Ghosts," "Soul-Making," and "Cy Twombly," Lease's music, sometimes evincing a slow stateliness and at other times speeding, deploys a mode of repetition reminiscent of Gertrude Stein. His heightened diction and surprising concatenations of phrases and clauses awaken the reader to salient affirmation. In "Cy Twombly," his language captures the post-abstract expressionist painter's gestural freshness: "this is the generation or this is the transformation what if they cannot find / here or there or sunset suggested projected provoked one-way ticket the / sweetest songs in the words you have become them one-way ticket or this / is the transformation is wonder."

Perhaps the book's most dazzling short text, "Little Lightning Bolt," takes a famous children's game and moves away from its well-known phrases to depict a superego that has gotten oppressively out of control:

Simon says, put your hands on your
head.
Simon says, put your finger on your nose. Simon says, you
haven't
done enough. Simon says, you don't care enough. Simon says,
compulsive old answers can't leave the world alone. Simon
says,
you're going to die. Simon says, don't let yourself care. Simon
says,
you can't stop caring. Simon says, man-tall but thin as a phone
call,
compulsive old answers can't leave the world alone. Simon
says, you
only have blood, marsh light, and sparrow. Simon says, put your
hands on your head—

Within this poetic drama, the presumed addressee, the ego, is put on the defensive for lack of accomplishment and lack of "caring" (but for what—oneself, others, the world's fate?) in the face of the individual's mortality, yet s/he is instructed not to "care" and then immediately told that not caring is impossible. What makes the superego's contradictory (but exclusively negative) messages especially debilitating for the ego is confusion about whether the last two references to "caring" are connected with death or with some generalized, unfathomable put-down. Further, reiterated barbs against "compulsive old answers" could either be an attack on the ego's dogmatic rigidities or "Simon's" admission that everything the superego "says" is damaging to both self and world in its "compulsive" certainty, its intrusiveness, and lack of regard for the fluidity of psychological development. These answers have a human scale ("man-tall") but are as questionable ("thin") as the authority of a voice going through the phone lines.

Simon's evocative reduction of the ego's possessions to "blood, marsh light, and sparrow" may signify, respectively, central physiological components or ancestry, relatively dim illumination or limited wisdom, and the self's interaction with elements of nature on the "marsh." Aside from the more positive inclusion of the "sparrow," the superego does not promote "caring" for others or virtue but inculcates punishment and an excessive sense of individual limitations. Even if disoriented at first by the nasty pull of the articulated superego's "phone call," the reader can achieve critical distance in the process of contemplating and evaluating the prose-poem's elaborate contradictions and uncanny ambiguities.

Lease's book includes three long poems that underscore the range of his achievement. "Broken World" is an elegy for James Assatly, the poet's friend who died at 31 of an AIDS-related illness not long after completing a novel that both Lease and the eminent fiction writer Edmund White deemed remarkable. In the opening stanzas, Lease mourns Assatly's dying in spare and elegantly tuned images:

faith and rain
brightness falls

blank as glass
brightness falls

until he
can't bend
light anymore.

At once, Lease's measured incantation affirms his "faith" in the ability of a consummate storyteller to "bend / light" into potent narrative shapes and the tragedy of his friend's "fall" into "blank" darkness. A catalogue of diverse negations underscores the *absolute* loss of this "brightness": "Won't be stronger. Won't be water. / Won't be dancing or floating berries. / Won't be a year. Won't be a song. / Won't be taller. Won't be accounted / a flame. Won't be a boy. Won't be / any relation to the famous rebel."

As an elegy for a gay person with AIDS, "Broken World" includes defiance of homophobia: "You are with me / and I shatter // everyone who / hates you." In the single prose paragraph of Section 2, Lease's speaker critiques masculinist culture that promotes homophobia and sexism and involves the hawking of destruction and obsession with material acquisition: "To be a man, to be, to try. I hate the word *man*. I'm not crazy about the word *husband* or the word *father* either. To try. To heal the night or day. I'm busy selling fighters and bombers. The NASDAQ moves in my face. I'm wired to my greasy self-portrait." The speaker feels trapped in patriarchal endeavors and seems to detect no other cultural space to occupy; what he hates is not specific words but the limitations of those words' definitions and consequences that they have for human relations: "Two blocks from campus, a boy, maybe ten or eleven, yelled at a Junior High School girl: 'Ho-bag, incest baby,

spread your legs.'" Part of the tragedy of Assatly's untimely passing is that, presumably, he would have gone on in future work to challenge such limitations with diverse, plural definitions of these terms. However, the poet insists, "you are with me," despite many signs of physical absence. The last section, entirely in verse, reconfigures the potent lyric motifs of the first in order to suggest that death will not undo the perpetuation of a fundamentally generous, generative, natural spirit: "Arrows on water; // you are with me— / rain on snow— // and I shatter / everyone who // hates you. / *faith and rain // brightness falls / blank as glass // brightness falls.*" It is possible to have faith that "brightness falls" (as life-affirming empowerment) on those capable of receiving it, and that blankness is a trope for the erasure of hateful ideology.

Many of Lease's long sequences throughout his career have interspersed prose-blocks and verse. In "Broken World," there is roughly twice as much poetry as prose-poetry, but in the thirty-plus pages of "Free Again," prose-blocks predominate. "Free Again" compellingly juxtaposes a current sense of crisis in the collective ethos with the exhilaration of potentially transformative insights. There is also a deep appreciation of intense sensory experience. The first prose-section begins: "When I can't sleep I am full of red buds and torn curtains and shiny cars parked in a lot." Note the powerful ambiguity in these three images: "buds" could be emblems of soulful beauty or of spiritual bleeding, while the fact that "curtains" are "torn" seems either the elimination of a negative barrier or a violation of privacy; "shiny cars" could be likened to an elegant sculptural assemblage or a sign of deadening commercialization.

Throughout the poem, references to pollution's stench signal a critique of the dominant social order: "there's a brownfield in Alma—petroleum processing—he says he'd rather work at 7-11 than live over there in Midland near all that stuff—you can smell it in the wind— // Letters shine outside 'low-income housing'—there are arrows on / the water—crab-apple colored—thaw reaches up through mud, // drenching wet opens stink, / stains concrete moss-colored—". In this relatively comma- and periodless poem, the dash frequently and dramatically separates large and small units of utterance. With strangely beautiful description, Lease suggests many Americans' sense of a paucity of choice.

Not only did W. Bush fail to repeat his father's oil success in Midland, Texas, but this "*mid* land" points to how the middle class is manipulated: "I want you to stand there in your brightly frisky middle-class personalities and chant after me: 'How about another tax cut, how about

another tax cut—'our wilderness' and liberty and justice for us: just equal the course of empire. . . ." Republican tax-cut promises, a trope of entitlement, are posited as the middle class "self's" "triumph" over "big government," which "gives away" money to the poor. An alleged scarcity of resources makes class warfare seem necessary for self-preservation.

However, in "Free Again," class conflict can also be fought *within* a person: "My lower-middle class manners tear through my upper-middle class manners: I stared at braided colors in water while my peers figured out the art of the deal. I was (I wanted to be) a Midwestern boy with a disco in my eyes—Chicago Jew, greengolden suburb Jew, son of a Coney Island Jew." The past's uncomfortable, but appealing presence struggles with attempted mastery of "upper-middle class" cultural opportunities.

Lease's ironic questioning of "our" notion that "we" possess "wilderness," coupled with the declaration that "we are moving, swallowing pockets of garbage in our fat / harvesting tumors," implies linkage of a more profound self-interest and the common (ecological and social) good. Emancipatory hopes of "the soul inventing the world— / the soul inventing the soul" should be understood as both spiritual *and* political desire. At one point, the poet's condensed lyricism and elegant visual balancing of lines evoke excrement, enchantment, and quasi-utopian promise:

Stillness in red, stillness in green—I
have no words, light hangs like rope—

We breathe our eyes, promise the
wind, boxes of shit, pieces of glass—

Color the wind, we breathe our yes,
open the doors, one vote one corpse—

One seed of light—

The admission of "no words" can be a preliminary, regenerative silence or a difficult impasse, just as the "rope" joined in a simile with "light" may represent a force that lifts the "we" above its inertia/crisis or one that "hangs" it. Though juxtaposed with "boxes of shit," the imaginative synesthesia of "breathe our eyes" infuses perception with renewed spirit. In the removal of a mere "e," newly invigorated "eyes" morph

into the breath of affirmation, the possibility that the purchase of the franchise through violence ("one vote one corpse") will result in "one seed of light" (as opposed to Bush, Sr.'s paean to voluntarism, "a thousand points of light") flowering into a superb collective energy.

Throughout *Broken World*, Lease's alternations between verse and prose offer satisfying tonal and structural variation. Absorbing the nutrients of American Emersonian/Whitmanian/Dickinsonian tradition and recent poetic innovations, his lyricism evinces verbal subtlety and complexity at the same time as it conveys intensely enacted perception and abiding sincerity.