

ERYN GREEN

The Crisis and Connection of Division: On Joseph Lease's *Testify*

Testify, by Joseph Lease. Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2011.

In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade explains that one key feature differentiating sacred spaces from profane ones is just that—differentiation. Whereas sacred spaces are signaled by the definition of a place, profanity is signaled by a lack thereof; profane spaces have no edges, they blur. “The threshold is the limit,” Eliade writes, “the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds—and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.” Joseph Lease’s fourth collection, *Testify*, explores, establishes, laments, and bears witness to these spaces built up in 21st-century America. Lease’s book lives on and between the edges of personal, social, political, and environmental territories, recognizing the undeniably fractured body politic of contemporary culture, while also finding tenderness and hope in the fact that even the most riven distinctions are also connections.

Testify is a book where crises of the state and crises of the self are essentially (sometimes devastatingly) interlinked. In Lease’s collection, there is finally only one interwoven *culture*; one plane on which the conflicts of society and the trials of the individual are played out. Divisions—of class, of gender, politics or race—do not here so much prove the discrete compartmentalization of life, but rather its connection, its beyond:

You
Are past the boundary now, past the world that
Made the world, you are past the water’s skin, past
The edge of coming home: you are free and you are
Drunk and guilty—like a picture in a glass, like the
Fullness of the sun, like a body come undone, you
Are past the water’s skin, long and long and run
Away—

Here, in Lease's "America," disturbances in one arena of existence have an impact on all other areas (in this way, Lease very much observes Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, and also Alfred Whitehead's integrated worldview). This spiral cosmology—this sense that worldly, spiritual and material conditions are woven of one and the same fabric—allows *Testify* to resound with a tone of profane grace: Lease finds sacred spaces in fallen landscapes, but also bears witness to the corruption of so-called refuges.

In "America," all else has already failed before the poem even begins (the title page for the poem includes a date that looks disconcertingly like a tombstone, "November 2004–April 2008"). Lease's collection opens with a call to action and an injunction against apathy:

Try saying *wren*

It's midnight

in my body, 4 A.M. in my body, breeding and olives and cherries. Wait, it's all rotten. How am I ever. Oh notebook. A clown explains the war. What start or color or kind of grace. I have to teach. I have to run, eat less junk. Oh CNN. What start or color. There's a fist of meat in my solar plexus and green light in my mouth and little chips of dream flake off my skin. Try saying *wren*. Try saying *mercy*.

Try anything.

Lease lives in an "America" where "my scream is a brand name," and the infiltration of corporate structures ("Oh CNN") into the marrow of our private lives is inescapable, yet where the uncanny eruptions of grace appear with as much frequency as ever before. There is a worry expressed throughout *Testify* that our democracy "is so polarized it is in danger of being paralyzed and pulverized," but there is also the steadfast belief in a country where "As soon as I go outside, I'm in five different streets at once." This tension (between wanting to believe in freedom and not always being able to) is the source of much of the anxiety felt by a speaker throughout the book who "wants to (you know) feel like a giant eyeball," (i.e. be a transparent reflection of the world; a prism through which light passes and is made more visible) yet who is everywhere confronted by the opacities of manufactured

bureaucracy: "you can't / get to the real world, they keep showing / the real world on TV."

Lease's poems are then, in a real sense, love letters to a country and culture he is as worried about as wed to: "*And—as if this phrase had never been abused in our life- / times—to the ideal of a free society.*" But Lease's poems are not despairing. Rather, *Testify* is a collection of awe-strikes, of explosions of the sublime. Despite the recognition of a deeply fractured populace and political infrastructure, there are everywhere moments in *Testify* where the sacred, where joy, bursts through the seams of the poems like daylight. The inarguable vehicle of much of this joy is music. In Lease's work, sound and song are the fundamental particles of all forces and substance. In the syllable and in the cadence of a line, Lease packs the energy of prayer. Consider "Home Sweet Home":

Sky
Like whiskey and
Windows learn the
Sky
Sky like
Whiskey the
Sky and
Behind it
Lamplight

Lease's work maintains a hymnal, sweetly incantatory quality that opens up language to the meanings of the spirit dictionary. Here, words are not simply referent vessels, but rather units of energy capable of passing between our world and the eternal. And so, much like a book of prayers, Lease's *Testify* is an anthology in the oldest sense of the term—a gathering-together of flowers; a bundling of various stems, stamens, blossoms, and weeds of expression into poignant co-operations. Fitting, then, that the collection ends with two poems that serve, in their ways, as elegies and ruptures, respectively. During the time that Lease was writing *Testify*, his father, "an old-time Jewish radical who writes about radical energy in American literature" became quite ill with cancer. Lease spent long portions of time "sitting with my father and my mother in their small, dark house in the Midwest. The house [that was] so full of light and life and possibility when I was growing up." The second-to-last poem in the book, "Send My Roots Rain" is the testimony of this experience, and one of most

haunting poems not only in the collection, but in recent recollection. It begins:

presence was broken for a while, stillness was floating in
plaid dark like a promise to the living and the dead, and the
most horrible heartburn, and the old couple in the kitchen,
lights out, lights out, waiting for sound—and the leaves roll
just like faces, and the faces blow like thieves, and we all
keep our explosions, and you taste joy in the night, and the
lost boys answer slowly, and the corpse picks up the phone,
and we all claim that we're holy, God won't leave our
dreams alone—

At this point in *Testify*, grief catalyzes Lease's anger, awe, outrage, tenderness, and joy into the desperation of a spoken or unspoken communicate with God. It sets the emotions free—not dissolving them, per se, but rupturing:

Spin the wind,
Are
You winter—are you summer—here at
The end of the world—the edge of the
World—Every day—gets a little closer—
Moving faster than a rollercoaster—in
The night you kind
Of let go—and let it go—

Finally, then, Lease's fourth book can be perhaps best understood as a *complete* spiritual experience—a paradox, a contradiction, a eulogy, as well as a new birth. Lease's poems are explorations in the truest sense of the term, pulled by probes and lures down into depths of unknown and uncanny and haunted glory, buoyed back to the surface by breath and life. Lease fears for, worries about, and loves deeply, the world he inhabits. He leaves it sometimes in *Testify*, but never for long, and never in a way that keeps him from coming back, even if what he comes back to isn't exactly what he left. *Testify* bears witness to this fact:

When the soul opens, there will be a cheap hotel: tenderness at the heart of the sky, the town, and not to hear any misery in the sound of the wind—you came back to the world: the green world, the fertile world, the corn world, the gun world

You came back to the world and there was
nothing there

The grace, the unyielding generosity of Lease's poems, is that not even "nothing" is nothing. The trick of *Testify* is to find instead of cracks, fissures of light; instead of boundaries, connections; instead of decay, new forms of regeneration. So much is the heart of *Testify's* prayerful song, and so much is the concluding poem, "Magic," all about:

maybe I should dream of nothing maybe that's it nothing
like a golden green angel like night sky oh the angel says
don't say like say nothing is a golden green angel nothing
is night sky nothing is dream

snow
blowing

smell of
wood smoke

snow
blows

Thoreau wrote, "All perception of truth is an analogy." Joseph Lease's *Testify* is an investigation and proof of this recognition—a book in which all truths, all pains, all energies reflect and rejoin with one another. All of a piece, the connections between the self and the society, the self and the world, the self and the self, have rarely been explored so bravely or presented so movingly. Lease's book echoes with honesty and difficulty.