



On Joseph Lease's *Broken World*

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Review of *Broken World*

by Joseph Lease.

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In "After Language Poetry: Innovation and Its Theoretical Discontents," Marjorie Perloff comments that theorists are less concerned with "making it new" than in finding truths "to establish the ways in which individual texts speak for their culture." As established in *Human Rights*, Joseph Lease unquestionably remains in *serious* dialogue with our lives in his newest collection *Broken World*. Though not a self-proclaimed mouthpiece for our culture, it is *Broken World's* sheer diversity of observation and objectivity, its candor in pointing out that "history has to live with what was here," and it is *Broken World's* "differentness," its complication of subjectivity, in such lines as "Simon says, don't let yourself care / Simon says, / you can't stop caring," that provides both newness and cultural relevance.

The opening poem "Ghosts" situates the poet not in a position of asserting himself as an isolated subject, but as a poet interested in the world around him when his speaker utters: "the word for dawn / is *others* / the word for light / is *freefall*." Here, the poet and persona are not self-enclosed; rather, they are both engaged in the act of communing with the world and with *others*. If the word for "dawn / is *others*," then *otherness* provides a beginning, an immanence, and an arrival of something perpetually new yet tied to the

passing of our lives. Likewise, if “the word for hand / is *others*” and “the word for dawn / is *sister*,” then it’s through physical presence and our relation to *others*, the persona seems to suggest, that’s crucial to our understanding ourselves. In this poem and elsewhere, Joseph Lease complicates subjectivity.

Calling attention to this meditation once again, “Broken World” (For James Assatly) begins by considering the loss of a friend and the “brightness” his life made available to the world:

faith and rain
brightness falls

blank as glass
brightness falls

until he

cant' bend
light anymore.

Though the light of the friend’s life becomes “blank” and descends into darkness, it is “darkness” and “light” that propels the poem forward. Illustrating the power elucidating one’s life has on the speaking subject, Lease writes: “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.” Despite this uncertainty, we bear witness to this life and what it suggests: the process of our own becoming is just as poignant. In fact, Assatly’s becoming in this poem is so poignant that his presence even in his absence is worth celebrating and defending. Here, Lease writes: “You are with me / and I shatter / everyone who/ hates you.” As these two selves shatter, they comeingle.

By the second section, the poem accrues urgency and ethical tension. It does so by mirroring the kind of accumulation central to masculinity and capitalism. Commenting on life, Lease calls into question the notions of *man*, *husband*, and *father* unfettered by those

qualities that define what makes a life meaningful. Though sterner in tone, Lease writes: "The NASDAQ moves in my face. I'm wired to / my greasy self-portrait. Every day in every way. America / equals ghost [...] Nothing is here. It's all one big strip / mall. We have a Ponderosa." Aside from this scene of inescapable capitalism and gentrification, the poem suggests that our richness exists not in the goods we horde but in the relationships we cultivate.

What follows in the third section, which is lyrically complicated yet beautiful in its negative capability, is a return to the first section's meditation centered again on the subject of the poem:

faith and rain
brightness falls

blank as glass
brightness falls

Won't be the magic
lantern or dancer.
Won't be despite
the fullness of time,
the other three magic ones.
Won't be a year. Won't be a song.
Won't be a beginning.
Won't be forward.
Won't be on the way.
Won't be a dreary prison.
Won't be the month of May.

In this excerpt, negation works to detail the lack of participation of a life, but it also critiques the "prison" of signification. Even though Lease may not be alluding to Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, which argues "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see / So long lives this,

and this gives life to thee,” seeing and bearing witness to the beauty not only in the subject but also the world is important. In the end, the very meditation of the possibilities of what this life could’ve been, what life is, and what it can be, suggests the import of *a life* and its contribution to the world.

Critiquing further the import of our worldly contributions, the third sequence of “Free Again,” which is part of Lease’s beautifully energetic series, opens “The elegies are taking off their clothes—” to which the persona replies that “I’m just trying to make a night or a cathedral or a pine—I’m just trying to / make a midsummer night—.” Here, the qualities of grief and sorrow akin to the elegy acknowledge the persona’s desire to build the world (night), the institution (cathedral), the landscape (a pine), and the clime (a midsummer night). But this is a world built anew.

As “Free Again” unfolds, the persona asserts “Your life / begins now. Will you look at your mother and say, ‘How could / you be part of America—.’” With this observation the persona moves the notion of silence forward from the previous sequence, when he suggests: “we need to know why voices fall apart—.” Being part of America, a part of its institution, thus, requires that one wield one’s voice not as a weapon but as an agent of change. As such, the persona concedes: “we did so many things wrong—.” Nevertheless, by the end of *Broken World*, Lease’s collection seems to suggest, as Édouard Glissant suggests in *Poetics of Relation*: “Sometimes by taking up the problems of the Other, it is possible to find oneself.”

If possible, then, the persona’s summative remarks, “I have an indomitable will to win—like true love, I / conquer all / ... / I was a ghost, you were the only one / who could hear me,” seem to comment on how such a vision takes shape, how vision moves beyond the play of signification of language to effect a perspective uniquely *new* to our time, to our concerns, and to our need for personal and worldly repair. In a word, Lease provides this complexity of investigation and critique by exploring and complicating the lyric. And he does so by exteriorizing the perceptive life of the persona.

In the poem "Prayer, Broken Off," Lease's persona echoes Rilke's in the *Duino Elegies* and in so doing further comments on the difficulties of living *in* the world rather than transcending it. Lease writes:

If I cried out,
Who among the angelic orders would
Slap my face,

Here, engaging in a deep meditation on language and voice, Lease's speaker acknowledges: "I can't stop / Wanting the voice that will come—." What makes this dramatic tension so palpable, so relevant to our lives, is echoed in the second section: "Simon says you haven't done enough, / Simon says you don't care enough, Simon / says, you can't stop caring—." Calling attention to the child's game *Simon Says*, where the spirit of the command and not the action is the point, Lease refigures desire once again. Whereas the speaker desired the voice that would allow for transcendence, now the voice commands his action. Of course, inaction is possible, but this is likewise the meaning of the poem, the poem's negative exposure, the commentary that the repair of the world exists not outside itself or outside us but within us and our actions.

Through this folding and unfolding of the world, so that it might expose the problems of our daily lives and how our indifference is a contributing factor, Lease moves through the poetry and poetics of the past to effect a *new poetry*—a poetry that is astonishingly arresting, that is as beautiful as it is interested in beauty, that is as reflective, critical, and revelatory of our times as it is equally hopeful of them.