

“You and I, A Likely Objective”: A Review of 回 / Return by Emily Lee Luan

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Emily Lee Luan’s stunning debut poetry collection 回 / RETURN opens with the ancient Chinese glyph for ‘return,’ 回, calligraphed by Luan’s mother. In a style recorded in the Eastern Han Dynasty, the spiral curvature appears distinct against the version simplified circa Cultural Revolution, one square interlocked inside another, 回. Much of Luan’s collection traces the cartography of an immigrant’s desire to recurse to the beginning, scouring for the source of an inexplicable sadness: “When my Sorrow was born, I held it, a dark pearl spit from its shell, and I remembered the salt that had rounded it, centuries ago, before I even had a mouth” (6). Luan’s collection explores the contours of this unknowability, whose faces and forms endure in the void of the past: “When I open my gaze to the past, I see with one eye, as if a hole gone through my skull” (1). The glyph mirrors a diasporic diffusion as it emanates outward in all directions without a center of gravity to stabilize this movement. Luan’s complex reckoning asks us if return is possible, if there is anywhere to return to: “I can’t go back. I was born here” (72), where the second line creates a vortex down the page, convulsing with pain and beauty.

Luan shows a practiced formal control in her ‘reversible poems,’ a palindromic form that allows the reader to traverse the poem forwards and backwards. The form was popularized by Su Hui, a Chinese poet from the 4th century, who wrote poems that could be read forwards, backwards, vertically, horizontally, in circular and lateral motions, yielding thousands of possible readings per poem. Luan’s poem “Reversible Poem in Laughter” begins and ends with the image of a man sinking in the deep end of a swimming pool. In the interior of the poem, the speaker laughs in her sleep. Luan

deftly moves us between these disparate images in a deeply associative manner: “Most men want to be alone except / in the hour of morning when a face dissolves to blue” (60), creating a mirror effect that feels seeing your reflection obscured by the texture of the water as it shimmers. Identity is composed of these projections, always mediated by the surface onto which their image is cast. By experimenting with the spatial temporality of the page, Luan invites us to think about the past and future not as distinct forces, but as contingent horizons that replicate each other infinitely: “It’s easy to meet that in-between, where / the something-like-being lies” (37). Her reversible poems show us a past that is just as murky and inaccessible as the future. Luan’s non-hierarchical approach lets go of the mastery over meaning, making space for her reader’s coexistence inside her forms: “You and I, a likely objective” (37). Her lyric transparency reminds us of the porousness of language, how our reception is what gives the poem signification, how necessary we are to making it live.

In her multi-page narrative poems, Luan’s poetic reconstructions of the past vibrate with grace and lucidity. The ghost of her grandfather appears in many of them, sometimes in memory and other times in flesh, speaking as if still alive. The loss of her grandfather dilates and becomes symbolic for the loss of something greater in history’s impregnable darkness. In one poem, she writes, “I was in Chinatown when the building with the archives burned, but I didn’t see the smoke. That’s where those beautiful archives are, I’d said to my companion, and pointed freely” (36). This act of “pointing freely” strikes me as a gesture that says that the burned archive is everywhere, its ashes circulated through time-space and collective memory. Luan resists the desire to romanticize these ashes: “I should love the revolution, but the revolution killed my grandfather’s father” (7). Her disavowal rings just as true as her severance. While the past is unstable in these reckonings, she grieves the dimensions of time that stay fixed, all those places her poems can never reach. In a passage where she visits her grandfather’s grave, she writes, “Are you okay with being here forever? I asked. I’m not sure I have a choice, he replies, and grasps all ten of his fingers together” (51).

In a sequence of interspersed lyric poems, Luan discusses the contours of her ever-shifting sadness. She illuminates the dimensions of this sadness, attempting to give definition to what is ultimately inexplicable. Sadness becomes alive, mutable and transformed. Can I carry my sadness if it “comes in waves,” “is a refrigerator,” “is luminous,” “is a suitcase,” “knows no bounds,” “is your happiness?” In the acknowledgements, she links her sadness with David Eng and Shinhee Han’s seminal work on racial melancholia and racial dissociation, categories that speak to the specific psychic lives of Asian Americans as they navigate the losses associated with immigration, displacement, and assimilation. “Psychoanalysis is focused on the mother but rarely considers the motherland; it is attuned to family dynamics but rarely thinks about the family of nations,” Eng and Han write. What could be mistaken for a cold elegance becomes reinscribed as a structural hurt. “*Oh, I love you Ling Ling*, the man on the street says to me. / I’ve said it before: I don’t know where I am” (7). The “you” in this poem becomes a nebulous sign detached from the speaker, a misrecognition that dislocates her from reality.

Luan also offers a blueprint for where we should go from here, broadening the horizon of her sorrow. Melancholia is a condition where one is unable to finish mourning a lost object and the object becomes introjected into the ego, relegated to the unconscious realm. Eng and Han ask, what happens if certain losses are, in fact, ungrievable? Luan’s poetry makes me believe that melancholia can be reinscribed as an act of resistance, that there are certain losses that we cannot accept or ever finish mourning. Luan writes, “All emotion feels to me a kind of performance. I am trying to unlearn that now” (35). This unlearning happens in the space of the poem, in the act of transcription. Poetry has the power to make this grief less private, less subterranean. To bring our sadness to the surface is to make it into a collective salve. Luan tells me there is power in naming our psychic afflictions, in using language as an instrument that can excavate this grief. In the final poem, titled “From weeping into weeping,” she writes:

“I’m not
the phoenix in the classic narration of you, rising
from the broken glass and the sun that travels
through it to light this field on fire. I’m the glass—
I have always wanted to be taken
by you, to be made into a lake and reflected,
wildly” (94).

In this beautiful closing poem, Luan reclaims the “you” by inviting us to live inside the floating signifier. This lucent image is one that refuses transformation, instead beckoning us to see the depths of what is already present, already imminent.