
*First Will and Testament*, the first collection of poetry by Indian poet and scholar Debasish Lahiri, touches on themes and topics that celebrated poet Tanure Ojiade appropriately describes in the preface to this collection as ‘the human condition’ (5). Lahiri, who teaches in the Department of English at Lal Baba College in India, has previously published his poetry and creative writings in various international journals. The poems in this collection are comprehensive and eclectic in addressing a large array of human concerns; the miracle of birth, the loneliness of death, love and loss, hope and sorrow, reflections on nature, and contemplations on art and the craft of writing. Accordingly, the seventy-three poems in this collection are divided into seven sections. The poems also have a broad scope in their invocation of diverse historical eras, geographies, and bodies of folklore, which gives the collection a comprehensive and all-encompassing feel. These poems speak to anyone and everyone; they cross geographical, historical, and cultural boundaries, and address universal questions and concerns. Lahiri’s genius lies in his ability to bring a variety of significant themes together. This is beautifully achieved in ‘Aurora Mortalis’ where he weaves the unsettling presence of death into the creative process of writing:

The pen
Pushes suppliant hands of papyrus
Away,
As mere things are born into this world.
Now the fugitive ink
Between folds of leather
Is all a-tremble with the tang
Of death. (20)

Here, as elsewhere in this collection, Lahiri’s strongest skill is his ability to render startling concrete images which appeal to the reader’s senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. The poems consistently surprise in their ability to condense layers of meaning, emotion, and thought into a single concrete image. The picture that ‘Autumn’ paints of the night and the description of summer in ‘Firing Squad’ are telling examples of this stunning use of sensual imagery:

At the ripening of the evening’s violet
Into the black juice
Of night
That stains the moon’s old dentures. (23)

Summer was like my coffee going cold,
Too tepid for a swallow’s roosting dream. (30)

Lahiri’s penchant for crafting short poems that centre on sharp images places him in the Modernist poetic tradition, and even calls to mind the tightly wrought poems of the Imagist poets. True to what Ojiade identifies as Lahiri’s ‘classical modernist impulse’ (6), each poem is honed to evoke the strongest response in the tersest possible way, abstaining from verbose descriptions. The result is poetry that is compact, concise, and sharply focused. Despite the
Modernist tendencies in his style of writing, Lahiri is also adept at looking back for inspiration, infusing his poems with classical influences. This classical Latin influence appears in the epigraphs to the first two sections of ‘Three Labours,’ taken from Virgil’s *Aeneid.* The second half of ‘A Dog-Night’s Day,’ in its choice of Latinate diction and the allusion to Horace, is also a telling example of this Latin influence:

The horror of staying,  
Of always staying,  
Stalks Horace inside his sabine word.

In every dead afterlife of the dogs,  
A peroration of the perished (21)

Horace is only one of various eminent personages that Lahiri invokes in this collection, alongside Van Gogh, Descartes, Beethoven, F. J. Haydn, Handel, and Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber von Biber. These figures come from different countries and diverse historical eras, and each is representative of a distinct area of human knowledge and culture. Lahiri’s reference to them, therefore, emphasises the eclectic nature of his poetic skill and expands the scope of its inclusivity.

There is a Romantic streak in some of the poems in this collection, especially in the third section entitled ‘Along Came a Writer …’ The more personal tone of the poems in this section, as well as the intimate references to the writing ‘I’ and the reading ‘you,’ provide a different reading experience than that of the other sections. Lahiri is exceptionally adroit at employing repetition to great poetic effect in this collection. His flair for sustaining a repetition of word, phrase, or image throughout a poem and deftly manipulating it to great poetic and emotive effect is demonstrated in these lines from ‘Home’:

In my house  
Everything deserves to pass away,  
Being my house,  
Because everything passes away. (31)

The second half of ‘By the Sea I’ contains my favourite lines from the collection. It is unique and avoids the streak of sentimentality of description that sometimes appears in the other poems. The juxtaposition of the speaker’s detached voice with the overtones of divinity present in nature creates what I believe are some of the strongest lines in the collection:

You see a sky  
That some painter used to wipe  
His used brushes,  
The masterpiece being elsewhere. (46)

*First Will and Testament* is a promising start to what will surely be a successful poetic career for Debasish Lahiri. His poetry speaks of timeless and universal issues of the human condition in a novel and fascinating way while paying homage to tradition.

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