

## 'A Barrage of Lilies': On Laurie Lee's *Collected Poems* (Penguin, 2023)

Best known for his trilogy of autobiographical reflections, charting his childhood in rural Gloucestershire, his walk both to and *through* Spain in the 1930s, and his involvement in the International Brigade during the Spanish Civil War, Laurie Lee's poetry occupies a strange position in his writing life. Largely published at the start of his career – his three collections appearing between 1944 and '55 – his reputation as a poet has been eclipsed by his enduring prose. With the recent (and perhaps belated) publication of *Collected Poems*, however, Lee's poetry has another chance to find a proper foothold.

Spearheaded by the poet's daughter, Jessy, this volume reproduces Lee's early collections alongside scattered uncollected works, including snippets from *The Pocket Poets Laurie Lee* (1960) and Penguin's earlier *Selected Poems* (1983), marking the last time – forty years ago – Lee's poems underwent a major reprint. The *Collected* also brings to light a slim bundle of unseen pieces, drawn from the archives of the British Library; often unfinished, these fragments spark with half-remembered slips and glimpses, 'brilliant with chance', revealing Lee's ability to gather images and memories that seem barely related, steadily arranging them, discovering connections.

Several poems touch on Lee's travels, from 'the baking air' of Spain to India and Cyprus, while others detail life in London, where he lived for much of his career. (Don't miss 'Sunken Evening', which bathes the city in an eerie, subaquatic light, complete with 'prawn-blue pigeons' and a fleet of 'crusted lobster-buses'.) Unsurprisingly, however, most poems are rooted in 'the broadened field[s]' of Gloucestershire, particularly the contours of Lee's native Slad valley, with which his writing has become synonymous; born, raised, and buried there, Lee still draws a devoted crowd, if only to the churchyard or the Woolpack Inn, his chosen boozier.

Lee's poems describe the natural world with all the intimacy of someone who has known the same landscape for decades, recording its 'thickets / of many different gestures.' 'The Edge of Day' captures 'The dawn's precise pronouncement', watching 'The mouldering atoms of the dark / Blaze into morning air' with acupunctural exactness. Lee rescues details from the blind spots of experience – 'flower-flecked grasses', 'ice on the rabbit's paw', 'the pigeon's every feather' – emphasising an environment that never ceases to produce moments of beauty, strangeness, and/or transformation. More than anything, the poems record the steady interaction, crash, and influence of one thing with another, the routine chaos and gentle collisions of a world making itself, the 'soft clamour' of constant change.

Lee's nostalgia – for his childhood, for lost loved ones, for the uncorrupted countryside – is hard to ignore. This is a poetry of retrospect, producing an uncanny sense that everything we read has already been filtered through a mesh (even a *fog*) of memory and imagination: this is not quite Gloucestershire, but Gloucestershire remembered in the mind of someone else, heavy with layers of time and palimpsest. In this sense, the environments of Lee's poetry seem almost illusory. Like Hardy's Egdon Heath, Slad ripples with a supernatural magic, 'a village which cast up beasts and spirits as casually as human beings,' notes *Cider with Rosie* (1959).

In 'The Trunks', Lee dwells upon a group of ancient trees, 'the past's green men, / In whose dark boughs our fathers saw / Augurs and spirits'. Elsewhere, his scenes are touched with unreality – odd light, creatures out of time, plants and fields alive with consciousness – a landscape underpinned by folklore. At times, the poems seem to share a secret with the paintings of Paul Nash, whose 'fragile method was to apply to English landscape a form of ancient surrealism,' writes Christopher Neve, 'like a water diviner

or a finder of ley-lines on chalk, who does not actually alter anything but who has some odd quality that enables him to hint at what may be hidden.' (While his paintings of Wittenham Clumps – twin wooded hills in Oxfordshire – or the coastline around Dymchurch, Kent, are better known, Nash was a regular visitor to the Gloucestershire home of Charles and Clare Neilson; his painting, [\*Skylight Landscape\*](#) (1941), shows a landscape from their upstairs window, just a few miles up the road from Slad.)

Lee's finest moments take the form of overwhelmingly precise and musical descriptions of the natural world: 'The evening, the heather, / the unsecretive cuckoo / and butterflies in their disorder'. Edward Thomas comes to mind, particularly the Edward Thomas introduced by Walter de la Mere, who celebrates his 'almost trance-like delight in things natural'. ('This is not a poetry that will drug or intoxicate,' de la Mere continues, 'though it rebuilds reality. It ennobles by simplification.') Even so, Lee's poetry can sometimes lag: repetitive, certainly, at times over-reliant on the same set of motifs – cycles of death and resurrection, for example, 'the sweet earth / [...] foul and full of graves', or else the figuration of the landscape as a human (mostly female) body – to say nothing of Lee's favoured quatrains, which tend to fuse similar poems together. And yet, as de la Mere suggests of Thomas, perhaps these are the by-products of a poet writing something simple, unforced, even *true* about a life and changing landscape. Speaking in 1985, Lee stated his intentions clearly enough: 'I wanted to communicate what I had seen so that others could see it.' For his daughter, Jessy, the poetry 'provides a world where we can dip into and out of something meaningful at any time' – 'the flowers advancing', 'crumbs of soil', 'a barrage of lilies', 'gold-bellied sheep'. 'I only wish that he was still here for us,' she writes, 'to talk about his poems now.'