

A Reader's Companion

Phyla of Joy

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**For with You is the fountain of life;
in Your light we see light.**

Psalm 36:9

Version Date: January 10, 2012

Contents . . .

Pears for the Reader	3
Yingri	5
Prayer for a Bamboo-Flowering Famine	7
In Praise of Wasps.....	10
Faith by Hearing.....	12
Theories of the Soul.....	14
Phyla of Joy	18
Prayer of Nuptial Flight	20
Acknowledgments.....	22
About the Poet	23
Postscript: My Name	24

Beauty captivates the flesh
in order to obtain permission
to pass right to the soul.

Simone Weil



Pears for the reader of poems . . .

The thing brought into genuineness. -- *Myung Mi Kim*

Dear Reader: With my collection, may I offer you a gift of pears?

Or more specifically, a gift of pear skin 梨皮. *Phyla of Joy* is a gathering of poems from a file of over one hundred. Yes, one hundred or so. I am not boasting, dear reader: I confess not have reached Emily's lifetime oeuvre, for instance, over one thousand poems in forty hand-sewn fascicles. Nor do I aspire to such numbers. For your pleasure, I simply gathered a number of loose poems, arranging them in a harmonious way, I hope.

Why, then, do I begin with "pear skin?"

Of course, I can't resist the pun. First of all, a pear is a type of pome, sister to apples and quinces. There you go, a pome from your poet. Not so coincidentally, my last name and "pear" in Mandarin Chinese are not quite almost one and the same, 李 and 梨, although it would be more interesting if they were. They both share the radical (root) for tree, found at the top of my ideogram, *lee*, and at the bottom of "pear," *li*. In romanized phonetic spelling (transliteration), the two words are homophones with slightly different spellings, *lee* and *li*. Or *lee* and *lee*. In Mandarin Chinese, my last name is pronounced with the third tone, while pear takes the second tone.

A poet and her pome: who can resist the paranomastic fun?

As you review the contents of my third book, you'll notice "Pear-Skin Zisha" is the second poem of this collection. The phrase "yixing zisha" refers to a type of clay from the city of Yixing in China. The clay is fired at high temperatures and left unglazed, the composition of teapots whose dark "zisha" color, what I compare to the black-violet of California mission figs, gives its name to the teapot. "Pear skin" is another way we describe the dark, russet appearance of the pottery. "Melon" is a sister *yixing* teapot which mixes *zisha* with other clays.

As an avid tea-drinker, what I love about *yixing zisha* is its earthy beauty and utility.

After several brewings, the tea begins to season the porous clay with flavor, so we say that *yixing zisha* brews its own tea. Although the *zisha* teapots don't dazzle like celadon-glazed, jade-hued porcelain vessels, their powerful character is radiant in their own right.

Dear reader, these poems are brewed for you.

I've seasoned the lines with minerals isolated out of a humble existence, fired in the stone-kiln of life, and carved by words. This is my russet-colored gift of pear skin *zisha* to you: all its fragments in a whole vessel, unglazed yet patterned, cut and blended to create this book for poetry lovers, *Phyla of Joy*.

Peace upon your life,

Karen

Santa Ana, California

When I opened the door
I found the vine leaves
speaking among themselves . . .

Denise Levertov



Yingri: Thoughts on the First Poem

As light might bend. – *Myung Mi Kim*

**Inside me there is a bridge, or the beams of a house,
and an old ground swell beneath a garden boat.**

**Outside, on an acre of snow,
a winter sun, blinding.**

Yingri. This is a short poem I wrote over ten years ago. I confess not remembering its point of origin, although I recognize the poem refers to a garden boat, perhaps like those I saw in my New England childhood, where an acre of snow was not a rarity, a retired fishing boat might be found in a garden as a planter of sorts, and a winter sun blinds us with its brilliance on a clear, post-blizzard day.

My original intention is a faint memory. Since composing this poem years ago, drawing upon images over three decades old, I've crossed many bridges, lived in a couple houses propped up by beams, and strolled over ground swells in frozen New England winters. Those images of my childhood, which I took for granted at the time – winter sun, old ground swell, garden boat – summoned a moment of nostalgia after I moved to California.

Reader, what do you think this poem is about, or where did it come from? A wintry childhood remembrance? Could I have written this poem if I hadn't moved to California – would I miss those frozen ground swells and acres of snow? Do I miss them? Do the lines echo classical nature poems from my Taiwanese heritage, which includes Chinese and Japanese literary influences? Did I write it during a heat wave in Santa Ana, wishing for a cold winter sun when the electric Santa Ana winds rose?

The title, “Yingri,” is one word in English and two words in Chinese Mandarin. The second ideogram, “ri,” means “sun.” This might be the only thing I distinctly remember choosing from the poem's inception. “Ying,” on the other hand, could also refer to 影 as shadow; 映 to reflect, mirror or shine; 鷹 eagle or 迎 welcome. I might rule out “eagle” and “welcome,” since those ideograms do not ring a bell. 影 “shadow” and 映 “to reflect,

mirror or shine” are distinct possibilities, but which one... or both? Perhaps I should abide in peace with the ambiguity, resting in its elusive valence.

Writing Interlude

Ponder your inside-outside worlds.

1. Consider three concrete objects *inside* you.
2. Consider three concrete objects *outside* you.
3. List abstract concepts you associate with #1 and #2.

Study your lists, balancing concreteness with abstraction.

Write a poem using #1, #2, and #3 in various combinations.

There are two ways
of spreading light:
to be the candle
or the mirror that reflects it.
Edith Wharton



Prayer for a Bamboo-Flowering Famine

Every half century, the synchronous flowering of bamboo causes famine in parts of India.

May we blossom every fifty years
without afflicting the people.

May our seed-pods nourish rodents
who roam our groves

without rebuking lands with famine.
May sweet potatoes and rice save us.

May ginger and turmeric flourish
to the bitter distaste of rats

while tresses of bamboo flowers
changeling white wasps

load the groves with seed
in rare perennial synchrony.

May our sisters flower en masse
hundreds of square miles apart

in the pale night. May our shoots
pray a silent vision of healing,

our rhizome-laden memories:
Yes, we share our hunger

only once on this earth, my love.
Let us bless our fruit and multiply.



Prayer for a Bamboo-Flowering Famine. Via a news report, I learned that every half decade or so, bamboo forests in parts of India bloom simultaneously. Scientists aren't quite sure what causes bamboo covering thousands of forest acres to decide, "let's all bloom at once," independent of weather patterns. It's surmised the bamboo might talk to each other through their rhizomes.

The synchronous flowering of bamboo gives rise to famine as rodents devour bamboo-fruit, "seed-pods." The rodent populations multiply rapidly, destroying local crops raised by village farmers, resulting in famine. A solution to halting this famine cycle is planting crops that rodents don't like, such as turmeric and ginger root, especially in the years when the bamboo is expected to flower en masse.

In writing this poem, I was contemplating the plight of the bamboo and how a feast for one group of living creatures resulted disastrously in famine for another. I turned this "feast–famine" question around in my head for a while, thinking about the intricate matrix of biodiversity and our environmental interdependence. Alas, we are not creatures of photosynthesis, and neither are our vehicles yet. If only our human civilizations, like bamboo, could run purely on water and light. We would solve our smog emission problems instantly, for one. Cars and chloroplasts, though, are worlds apart, and running on photosynthesis is a dream for the latter, although there's always solar power....

Pondering the feast-famine question, I received no new answers to ancient problems. Why should one group eat so much when another group eats so little? What does the bamboo forest know about the years of synchronous flowering? Silence. I started to hear the multitudinous voices of the bamboo raised in the wind. Walking through a bamboo grove is an experience of peaceful contentment. I can't imagine what walking through a bamboo forest would be: otherworldly green. Is there enough space for a woman to walk through such an ecosystem without cutting thickets of bamboo, slaying trees to create one path for one curious visitor?

The bamboo don't ask questions, as we do of God. We ask God why we suffer and how we can obtain peace, why we are born, and why we shouldn't be. The bamboo simply exist, and wish to do neither harm nor good, but are simply good in their existence as they live out their fates without volition or praise. If the bamboo could raise their wind-voices in a forest of prayer, maybe this poem might express some of their perspectives. My

imagination is limited by the anthropocentric in nature, however, as is the presumption in personifying the bamboo. The poem ends with a modulation of the bamboo's chorus of voices into the poet's voice, or you might call it my voice in this poem, addressing love for you, the reader.

Writing Interlude

Imagine yourself as a form of life other than human.

1. What are the trials of your life?
2. What are the joys? To whom do you bear witness?
3. How would you pray, if you could?

Everything is blooming most recklessly.

Rainer Maria Rilke



In Praise of Wasps: A Historical Woman

for Hazel Ying Lee, first Chinese American woman pilot

**Men who refused
to classify us as military
spurned our capacity to fly.
Christening with our names,
they secretly feared
the slender body, slim abdomen,
well-developed wings,
and often formidable sting.
Women's Airforce Service Pilots,
we transported military aircraft,
flew the open Stearman,
survived the wreckage,
manned the horsepower,
and embraced the swept-back wing.**



In Praise of Wasps. I would love to be Hazel Ying Lee for a moment, even one hour. This remarkable woman was an aviator ~ a woman pilot ~ and a Chinese American who was courageous on a new frontier, fighting for social equity in the Air Force. I first came across her name while reading Judy Yung’s *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (University of California Press, 1995). “Wasp” is an acronym for “Women’s Airforce Service Pilots,” a select group which transported military aircraft and tested flight-damaged plans during World War II.

While she was an active pilot in the 1930’s and 1940’s, Hazel Ying Lee was often barred from joining regular aviation programs, including employment in an equal capacity as white men. Although the Women’s Airforce Service Pilots received the same flight-school training as male pilots, the government refused to classify the Wasps as “military.” Although the Wasps had an excellent flying record and fewer accidents than the male pilots, the latter group successfully lobbied to have the Wasps disbanded prior to the end of the war.

If Hazel Ying Lee were alive today, would she be an engineer? Astronaut? A poet?

Writing Interlude

Write about a historical “first” man or woman.

1. What was remarkable about his or her achievement?
2. Make a list of words you associate with #1.

Write lines integrating your ideas and images.
Choose a tone & form suitable for your tribute.

Find ecstasy in life;
the mere sense of living
is joy enough.

Emily Dickinson



Faith by Hearing: Forwards & Backwards

The slender evidence... *Denise Levertov*

Phosphorescent hum
inherited only from mothers
passes from woman to woman,
source of fires paired and housed
by *ch'uang*, the ideogram for window,
studying books by the light of fireflies,
yin ch'uang, the light organ's inner cells,
filling the cochlear night with heard radiance:
yin ch'uang, the light organ's inner cells,
studying books by the light of fireflies,
by *ch'uang*, the ideogram for window,
source of fires paired and housed
passed from woman to woman,
inherited only from mothers
phosphorescent hum.



Faith by Hearing. As an exercise assigned to myself, I wrote a series of “forwards-backwards” poems that may be read simply as such, forwards and backwards, with minor variations in punctuation but not in the word order for each line. I think of each poem as a having a crescendo and a decrescendo, visualized by the advancing and retreating shape. Other sister-poems from this series appear under the titles “Dream of Ink-Brush Calligraphy” and “Hyacinth Sea Room” in *Phyla of Joy*. Another forwards-backwards poem appears early in my second book-length collection, *Ardor*, starting with the word, “lightness.”

In “Faith by Hearing,” I was toying with a couple of ideas and images: our mitochondrial DNA is traceable through maternal lineage since paternal mitochondrial DNA disintegrates after fertilization. In my mind’s eye, the matrilineal mitochondria glowed in a series of windows, cell to cell, fireflies in our ancestral mothers. *Ch’uang* is window and *yin ch’uang* is the light of fireflies. There’s a specific phrase in Mandarin Chinese, too, *studying by the light of fireflies*.

“Faith by hearing” refers to a line in the apostle Paul’s epistle to the Romans: “So, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17, *New King James Version*). These words lend texture to the synaesthesia in the poem, “soft phosphorescent hum,” what faith might sound like, I imagined, as a “heard radiance.” Of course, the apostle also refers to hearing the word of God as a way to build up one’s faith. I turned this line of scripture over and over in my inner ear: faith, hearing, word, God.

Writing Interlude

A forwards-backwards poem of your own.

1. Start with an image that draws your attention.
2. Write lines you associate with the image.
3. Tinker with syntax, word order, and punctuation until the poem flows meaningfully and musically, forwards... and backwards.

Faith is the substance
of things hoped for,
the evidence of things unseen.
Hebrews 11:1



Theories of the Soul: Things We Love

A true friend is one soul in two bodies. -- Aristotle

**Kant says, transcendental
idealism. In Aquinas,**

**we exist apart from bodies
but only on Thursdays**

**when his famous ox
flies by the window**

**wiser at Cologne
where Albertus Magnus,**

**his real name, appoints
Aquinas to *magister studentium*,**

**master of students. Aquinas
is petrified but says yes.**

**He feels his soul
sailing out of his head**

**floating near the roof
where a blue ox wings by.**

**On Wednesday, two bodies
are one soul**

**waking at sunrise
thanks to the pineal gland**



of Descartes, who thinks
this node in the brain

is a tiny sugar cone
or salted peanut,

the seat of the soul
while Aristotle points

to the chopping ax
as a teleology

as if the ax were a living,
breathing person

which it isn't.
Heraclitus, air and fire

while Aquinas objects, no
not an ax but ox.

If you're a bird or soul
I am only one mile

from the sea. If you
are a soul in two bodies

life is more complex
and we must labor

twice the field of sorrow
after sleep, bath, and a glass

as Aquinas whispers, *the things*
we love tell us who we are.



Theories of the Soul. Ah, the word “soul.” What do we know about our souls, or even souls in general, not only our own? “Soul” typed in the on-line *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* brings up an array of Western theories, ranging from early Ephesian philosophers like Heraclitus, who thought our souls were composed of air and fire, to Medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas (to whom the last two italicized lines of the poem are gratefully credited), scared silly when appointed *magister studentium*, and even René Descartes (yes, of the Cartesian coordinate system, and “cogito ergo sum: *I think, therefore I am*”) who thought the soul set up its humble abode in the pineal gland. (We now know the pineal gland, about the size of a peanut in the brain, produces the hormone, melatonin, which regulates sleep. As Gertrude Stein said, there’s no one there *there*.)

Although we cannot prove our souls exist by empirical means, i.e. in a petri dish, seismograph, or test tube, this “unseen” quality approaches the very nature of faith, transcending rational and empirical parameters. “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen,” says the apostle in his epistle to the Hebrews in chapter 11, verse 1. How do we gather empirical evidence for love or gravity? Yet few of us would deny either one exists, though we can’t see love in an atom-smasher. We believe that forces of gravity exist, and theologians often point out that few skeptics would jump from a cliff to prove it doesn’t, for which I’m grateful. Now, in these illustrations, we are even closer to the nature of faith.

What we have is a body, and what we are is a soul, as Clive Staples Lewis suggests: “You don’t have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body.” We cast off the body when we leave earth, or we receive new bodies transformed, our souls therein. The apostle writes a blessing (benediction) to the Thessalonians, mentioning spirit, soul, and body: “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord” (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Does your soul pass light? What is in a soul... or who? Faith is not a myth, and God is a living Spirit we can see through souls. Women philosophers like Edith Stein and Simone Weil have much to say on this subject, as well, and I hope to write more about these topics soon.

What do the things we love say about our souls?

Writing Interlude

Our Souls & Things We Love

What do the things you love say about you?

Love is the beauty of the soul.

Saint Augustine



Phyla of Joy

for Kundiman, with love

Yesterday

**the lines of our hands
delivered**

**new oleander, writing
a river boat in the field,**

chairs and red leaves.

Our new lava

**serves the fellowship
of today and century.**



One summer, I had the privilege of serving as a faculty member at the Kundiman Asian American Poetry Retreat. Although reclusive by nature, I flew across the country to participate in a thriving community, and in the midst of the last gathering, shouted to my new acquaintances: “You are the new lava of American poetry!”

New language, new voices, and new lava: Although I grew up in Massachusetts, I spent a few years of my girlhood in Hawaii, where a live volcano on the Big Island occasionally fumed and, now and then, belched fire and lava. We visited the volcano on a day when the crater ~ a burned out, ash-gray landscape, almost lunar, and ringed by silver sword plants ~ steamed with quiet danger and beauty, potential for new landscape.

At Kundiman, faculty are invited to write new poems along with the fellows, so I wrote three new ones. One was composed on the back of the map I handed to my cab driver. The second was a form of closed verse based on word-repetitions. This one, “Phyla of Joy,” assembles found language from the biographies of Kundiman personnel, a tribute to the vision of community surprised by joy, the special Kundi-love, as we call it, arising from our collaborative family of poets ~ poets of today and poets for the centuries.

Why “phyla,” then? Why choose the taxonomic classification after kingdom and before class, the proliferation of the Animal Kingdom into Arthropods, Chordates, and Echinoderms? Of the Plant Kingdom into Mosses, Ferns, Cycads, Flowers, and Ginkgo? In my imagination, what John refers to as “the fullness of joy” (John 15:11) comes from God’s joy as our strength, the word of God living in us, and the filling of the Holy Spirit in us. It comes from the spirit of life, which is love and imparts life in all its myriad forms, marine zooplankton to Tibetan zebus, all for which I’m grateful: the natural world in its splendid proliferation.

The landscape of newness arises from the belly of the earth, our molten core. Li Po wrote “His Dream of Skyland” for the monastic mountain, Tiantai Peak. Shelley was mesmerized by sublime Mont Blanc. I carry the green hillocks and granite quarries of Massachusetts, the camel-colored ranges of California, and in a distant girlhood, live Kilauea and her sleeping sisters on the archipelago. After the iron and stone cool, sea birds and wind sow seeds, and rain wears the porous volcanic rock into soil. One aspect of a poet’s labor is the ceaseless work of rain. We receive it for cleansing and renewal, eroding the barren stone into fertile soil, so that the ashen, fire-destroyed earth ~ as the world might’ve appeared on its birthday, as the water under the sky-vault of Genesis was gathered to one place ~ might hold root.

It’s a risk, but poets have courage.

Writing Interlude

The nature of joy and three poems.

1. What are the differences between joy and happiness?
2. Write a tribute using found language related to a subject of praise.
3. Where is the mountain or volcano (metaphor interpreted as you wish) in your life?



Prayer of Nuptial Flight: Ant Flying Day

Love makes your soul crawl out from its hiding place. – Zora Neale Hurston

**The open river is thin as a poplar;
flower sellers lower their prices.**

**Certain insects sprout only once a year.
Shutting their wings, they stagger to the oil lamps.**

**Flaming down rainless mountains,
the summer has opened to the foehn wind:**

an accidental lightness occurs.

Prayer of Nuptial Flight. Once a year, on ant-flying day, male ants sprout wings and mate with the queen. I witnessed the staggering flight of these males one summer evening in Berkeley, California. A tragedy. Shortly after mating, the little male ants lose their wings, while the queen keeps hers a while longer until she digs a new colony for her soon-to-be offspring. In the end, everyone loses his or her wings, even the queen. The male ants die a thousand little deaths. After moving to southern California, I've witnessed many flying termites, but none quite as vulnerable and bewildered as those ants I saw one night in the East Bay: short-lived, new-winged, seeking the ant queen's fancy, then shedding wings, the very image of mortal ephemera.

Sometimes, after a poem is published, I wonder where the poem would've traveled if it had continued to grow, unraveling more lines of text like a queen ant and her brood. What if, in this poem, we sprouted wings once a year, could fly to seek our soul-mates (if such a thing as "soul-mate" exists), and find wedded bliss, even for a moment? What would testing our new wings be like, and whom might we find in our moonlit flight? What would it be like to shed our wings, and possibly our lives, shortly thereafter? Perhaps, for a fleeting moment, we would actually bear the full moon on the pulse of our scapulae, shouldering a brightness vast as midnight: in tragic ecstasy, noon would become night and vice versa while our mortality, at once, would blind us as our souls face the God of heaven and earth.

Writing Interlude

Where a poem might fly.

Where would this poem fly if you continued writing it?

Where would you fly once a year, if you could?

To whom would you fly?



Workers need poetry more than bread.

They need that their life should be a poem.

They need some light from eternity.

Simone Weil

Acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following journals, where a number of the poems in this Reader's Companion first appeared, some in slightly altered form.

Beloit Poetry Journal: "Faith by Hearing"

Ellipsis: "Yingri"

Mochila Review: "Prayer of Nuptial Flight" (as "Aperta: Serrata")

Poetry: "Prayer for a Bamboo-Flowering Famine" and "Theories of the Soul"

Prairie Schooner: "In Praise of Wasps" (as "Wasp")



About the Poet

Karen An-hwei Lee is the author of *Phyla of Joy*, (Tupelo Press, 2012), *Ardor* (Tupelo Press, 2008), *In Medias Res* (Sarabande Books, 2004), and a chapbook, *God's One Hundred Promises* (Swan Scythe Press, 2002). The recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Grant, the Norma Farber First Book Award from the Poetry Society of America, and the Kathryn A. Morton Prize for Poetry, Lee has worked as a florist's assistant, mended books in a rare-book archive, grown tissue cultures in a medical lab, read to children in a family literacy program, and taught music lessons as therapy for mental health patients. She currently lives and teaches in southern California, where she is a novice harpist.

The world where I look for you
is a world open
to other worlds without name,
a world where you are not,
where I look for you.

Edmond Jabès



Postscript: My Name

From time to time, when I am asked about my middle name, An-hwei, it's usually one of two questions or both: "What is it?" and "What does it mean?" An-hwei is Mandarin Chinese for peace ("an" is pronounced the way it looks) and fragrant orchid ("hwei" is pronounced as the PRC's pinyin "hui," sounding like "hway"), specifically, the *Coumarouna odorata*; related phrases are *huiyu* or jade orchid and *jinghui* or serene orchid.

So, my name is Karen Peace Fragrant Orchid Lee.

I value peace, but frankly, as a girl I sometimes felt ambivalent about being named after a pretty flower, implying one is fragrant, delicate, herbal, and easily trampled. Sometimes I wished my middle name meant "woman who is pure dynamite – watch out!" or "woman who leads revolutions – salute her!" Or how about "woman who utters earth-shaking prophecy in a world that considers her, alas, a fragrant plant – huzzah!" However, a professor in college once reassured me that serenity is a revolution in itself. And what's wrong with fragrant orchids, after all, with their various healing or medicinal properties? Additionally, the "hwei" in my middle name comes from the "hwei" in my grandmother's name.

My grandmother's ideogram *hwei* is favor, graciousness, or a gift from above. A location in our ancestral Fujian province is called *hwei an*, the same *an* I have and *hwei* my grandmother has in her name. My mother added crosses over my grandmother's ideogram to signify a female root, so I am proud to inherit *hwei* in addition to peace.

Orchids, besides, can thrive under adverse conditions, and are in fact quite strong. I also discovered in my adult years that the *Coumarouna odorata* is also known as the tonka or *tonqua* bean tree – bearing wrinkled black-skinned pods with an intense vanilla perfume -- which grows in South America. Moreover, it is no wee plant. It can grow to over a hundred feet high; the bean pods may grow to over two feet long. Terrible misfortune to be knocked on the head with a giant pod while one is passing casually underneath the tree! I have no idea how the etymology of my name hopscotched from orchids to tonka bean trees, but I consulted several dictionaries which confirmed these definitions, citing either *species of fragrant orchid* or *Coumarouna odorata*. So, is the tonka bean tree a type of orchid? Vanilla,

after all, is a genus of orchid. Mischievously, I rather enjoy the idea of a hundred-foot tall orchid with giant black-skinned pods big enough to conk unsuspecting folks on the head, like rolling pins or mailing tubes falling out of the sky.

One fourth of my name remains a mystery perhaps you will unravel.

(Dear reader, I will also say to you, *sotto voce*: What *Karen* means, with its etymological Greek root *Aikaterina*, if you will, is a whole other story, and I'll save *Lee* for a rainy day.)

Love doesn't sit there like a stone.
It has to be made, like bread;
remade all of the time, made new.

Ursula K. LeGuin

