REVIEW

The Twenty-First Century by Jacob Eigen

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According to the dustjacket of *The Twenty-First Century*, which won the American Poetry Review's Honickman First Book Prize in 2024, Jacob Eigen is an American poet, not least by residence. Like certain characters from the novels of Bellow, Eigen "currently lives in Chicago." Eigen is also a thoughtful poet as a set of Socratic questions (What is the human? What is the human soul?) stand behind Eigen's verse, as challenges to be answered. Eigen's poems bear upon human life lived in common, lived in cities, and the human passions and longings felt and lived in relation to others—desire, cruelty, violence, and love. Eigen's verse bears upon human political life, inside and outside of the city. It is thus fitting to consider Eigen's *Twenty-First Century* in a journal situated at the conjuncture of thought, politics, and culture.

The Twenty-First Century is about the shape and the scope of freedom. *The Twenty-First Century* collects twenty-eight poems into three sections of steadily increasing length. Critics have begun to describe Eigen's poetry as "surrealist". The reader of the poems is swung between visions of a post-human future in which hyper-evolved roaches roam and rule the earth (and write poetry) (pp. 3, 47) to the conversations of human lovers asking whether any meaning may persist in the face of and after death (pp. 3, 49). From the first line of the first poem of the collection, Eigen's reader finds herself in the space of dreams. "We were roaches in those days retreating into the walls, dreaming our useless wings might finally transform and allow us to fly" (p. 3). In the second poem, too, Eigen's verse autobiography, "Soul", the soul "falls asleep and dreams of the shimmering/green sheer plastic grass" (p.8). Within these dreams, one perceives "the beetles/hatching from mounds of elephant dung, /the slugs copulating so slowly/they seemed to die on top of each other/as they sank into the rot of the leaves" (p. 20). Eigen's poems in *The Twenty-First Century* are a series of dream-songs, canalizing Berryman through Kafka. For Eigen, the human is sited between the insect and the dream, capable of sighting wondrous beauty and liable to be smushed.

A dream or a dream-song is both placeless and situated. Many of Eigen's dreaming visions are overtly placed at night, "asleep" (p. 8) or "At 2:00 AM" (p. 49). As the collection advances, the singer informs the reader, "We now entered the next phase of the evening" (p. 11). Dreams are so often without country or without nation, individuated to the utmost and diffuse. Yet the para-textual material of Eigen's collection situates the poems and their composition within distinctly American locales, all named by place. The cover of *The Twenty-First Century* features the Queensboro Bridge depicted in bright turquoise seemingly suspended in air and placed upon the canvas, an aerial transit route between waking life and dream as well as the concrete thoroughfare between Manhattan and the outer boroughs. Queens itself is named in the central poems (pp. 23, 24, 34), placing the collection. "These poems were written," Eigen acknowledges,

"in the course of many trips to and from Cambridge, Berkeley, and Vermont, where Louise Glück patiently read them—before taking their author out to dinner to toast the triumph of having discovered a beginning, an ending, or even a single line. She isn't here to see the printed volume, but in a sense she was the first to read it" (p. 53). The collection is dedicated "in memory of Louise" and one hears resonances of the Nobel Laureate's *A Village Life* (2009), a verse meditation on dying and death, phenomena both locally specific and spaceless.

Eigen has a tender and perceptive eye for the brokenness of the world. As a poet, Jacob Eigen is remarkable for the beauty of his words and imagery, for the deep empathy of his heart and verse, and, not least, for his attunement to certain salient aspects of reality which too many of his contemporaries ignore. Amidst the imagery which critics label "surrealist", there is realism in Eigen's verse because he holds a perception of reality within his sights. Eigen is capable of looking up and looking down. Eigen is thereby particularly alert to the callowness and cruelty of the holders of power, whomever they are and wherever they rule. Describing the execution of Boethius in the collection's third section, Eigen writes of "Boethius' Body" that "probably the eyes/the soldiers squeezed from the head/had already deteriorated – along with the brain/that leaked out when they bludgeoned the body to death" (p. 45). At the outset of the second section of the collection, Eigen portrays a holder of power who surveys a city under his sway: "He squinted his eyes and listened. A group of birds rose all at once. A door opened. A whip somewhere stung a horse", yet the holder of power above the city "saw this was just the sound of the prisoners dragging their chains through the sand, on their way to the executions he himself had scheduled for the rising of the sun" (p. 19). For Eigen, there are no bloodless hands in the corridors of power. To change the holders of power may be solely an alteration of executioners, with bloodlust ever to be mistrusted. This leads to an understandable urge to retreat along the path of a nature walk into the library or the museum (p. 48) or to the cozy office of a friend in which the writer's desk awaits (p. 53). Yet what emerges from the writer's desk is at once a song of beauty and perhaps a warning (which may be heard or heeded too late). The reader garners the sense from Eigen's prose poems that the poet would make a fine novelist as well.

Amidst the evening dark, the poet also has a sense of humor. In the verse autobiography at the outset of the collection, the author notes of his "Soul" that "Not much is asked of it" (p. 4). Eigen's poems, at their best, have the richness and resonance of fables. In "The Captain's Parrot", Eigen tells of a songbird who has dutifully learnt the phrases of its master only to fall into neglect and abuse, for "when it uttered them now, the captain gave it a mournful look, or told it to shut up, or even flicked it painfully with a bootlace" (p. 30). The parrot, Eigen writes,

> could only sing what it heard. So it learned to imitate the ocean slapping the flank of the boat, the ice clinking in the captain's glass, and even the snap of the whip that hit it. That was how we found it: in a bad state, living in a cage filled with its own dried feces and shed feathers, with the sounds of the world inside it (p. 30).

Eigen, here and throughout, is not writing solely of songbirds.

The Twenty-First Century is a beautiful book. The themes of the collection are dreams, death, and whether there can be meaning (and beauty) in the face of death. The book is also a meditation on the possibility and impossibility of freedom within the framework of contemporary life. With his dream-songs, Eigen is in accord with Celan that there are still songs to be sung. Indeed, the collection's title poem contends, "it would be many years until the distinction between all languages was erased" (p. 33). Good and thoughtful poems are still being written in American English and Jacob Eigen is writing them.