YEAR BY YEAR
POEMS

Lynne Sachs

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INTRODUCTION

Year by Year collects the fifty poems that inspired Lynne Sachs’ 2017 feature-length hybrid documentary, Tip of My Tongue. This new book is indeed a good place to be when approaching/admiring Lynne’s film, which wears her lifelong devotion to poetry on its sleeve. Or, better put, onscreen: these poems appear throughout the film in their early drafts – no less than in the author’s cursive handwriting, seemingly in medias res of being made, replete with strikethroughs and erasures. And these versions recur at key points to underscore, connect, and “detourne” the unfolding testimonies of the poet/filmmaker’s collaborators. They also serve as texts for voice-over performed by actors in addition to Lynne herself, troubling the authority of a fixed omniscient speaker. This allows the viewer to experience hearing the poems read in plural registers – a sound choice for such a diverse and collaborative documentary. But their cinematic presence is fleeting at best.

Lynne’s book gives us the opportunity to encounter the basis for Tip of My Tongue in its original form: as poems on the page. The poems proceed chronologically, composed in blank verse and prose that remember the poet/filmmaker’s seminal experience during the years (1961–2011) ascribed to their titles. Given Lynne’s background in documentary, it should come as no surprise to see her poems bear qualities of reportage, equal parts diary and television broadcast/news headline. While Tip of My Tongue directly engages with major social upheavals and progressive movements in the late twentieth century and early aughts, the poems in Year by Year curiously refrain from it. The present publication signals a generosity to further connect the viewer of her films to her work on the page, where all her ideas for cinema first appear. Together Year by Year and Tip of My Tongue become a portrait of an artist learning to probe how long of a time and how much of the world it takes to become young.

Paolo Javier, former Queens Poet Laureate and author of Court of the Dragon
1963

Bob Dylan is a pretty good businessman. My father would like to be as good, or even better. He would also very much like to be as good a bohemian. Being a bohemian businessman is not a bad thing to be. The best of all possible worlds as they say. Bob calls his business “The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan” and for this reason I don’t think my father will ever be as successful as Bob. There is no The in front of his name.

1964

My mother and father are fighting on the other side of the door. I lick the window next to my bed and pretend to taste the stars.

1965

Gravelly roughness on my tongue
lingering smell of burning toast
my father in the kitchen cooking breakfast
for the first time.

And for dinner, the inverted arrival of a brother. A royal caesarean. Saddle oxfords, long pants, zippered coats and rain boots.

Mom at the wheel,
we barely feel a shift in speed
change in temperature
absence of the man who made the toast.
She pushes hard on the gas.

Husband elsewhere with another
in full color, imprecise.
Bob Dylan is a pretty good businessman. My father would like to be as good, or even better. He would also very much like to be as good a bohemian. Being a bohemian businessman is not a bad thing to be. The best of all possible worlds, as they say.

Bob calls his business "The Free-wheelin' Bob Dylan," and for this reason I don't think my father will ever be as successful as Bob. There is no The in front of my father's name. And no one seems to know if Bob is a good dad. He keeps a tight lid on history.

Vietnam War
Great Society

1964

Thinking back affords me to hear things that didn't happen.

The volume tool and the sound waves always and
pulling at my body three years old body

Without noise or words, or the quiet closing of a door
by my mother and father, I detect silver oranges of
alone, stark, shiny that weighed the skin of
be allowed furtive puny.

Porous and ubiquitous membrane of domestic
bliss, pores, holes, openings, so many that my
mother running breathless cannot close each one
1966

Droopless daffodils.
A blind newborn pig in my arms
aroma of Nanny’s hairspray.
Our grandfather’s farm.
My fingers slide across
my mother’s childhood desk.
I imagine touching her teenage shoulders.
Her French verbs.
Her *Scarlet Letter*.
I tiptoe across her soft-pink bedroom
then slide down the stairs, and forward
in time.
Six months later,
Christmas morning in the grand room at the back of the house.
A temporary forest of red and green.
All of the cousins watching Wiley,
a Black man in our Jewish home
delivering gifts, one pogo stick
or pretty dress or pair of stilts after the other.
1967

I'm draped across the Monkey Bars
high above the school playground
clinging for dear life
telling myself I must jump farther than far enough
to clear the rung.

Toes curled around the edge of the swimming pool
prone    ready    stance
I propel myself like a rocket
and feel a surge of water pass my brow.

Enter A.D.   After Dive.

Nobody told me it was the Summer of Love.
Didn't know it themselves until it was over.

1968

To me, she is a Japanese girl
and a 19-year-old woman –
Miyumi is living with us this summer.
My friend and also my mother's,
two in one or split down the middle?

I watch her long, smooth, black hair.
Her fingers shape a swan from a sheet of square paper.

On my seventh birthday
we all take a ride on Daddy’s boat.
Hairy men and bikinied ladies float
on the Mississippi
marijuana smoke
six packs bobbing in the water
noisy indiscretions.
Miyumi folds her birds and lets them fly
into the brown, foamy water.

Mom tells us that two Black garbage men had
nowhere to go to hide from the rain.
So they took a rest inside a truck
in a parking lot
and were crushed
like the garbage
just like that.

A few days later
all the Black garbage men in Memphis
decide to stop picking up the trash.
They’re on a strike she says.

The mayor calls for a 7 o’clock curfew.
It’s summertime but everyone has to stay inside.
No more catching fireflies and putting them in pickle jars.

I think I hear the sound of the gun that shoots King.
Close the window!
Turn on the AC!
Such a noisy machine.
I can’t hear a thing.

Neighborhood teenagers sneak cigarettes in the park
and Miyumi wonders if she’s landed in a war zone.
1969

Our telephone rings.
Neil Armstrong on the line.
He knows I stole the Earth’s only moon.
“Give it back,” he says.
I watch him step across the lunar landscape.
I thought we could be friends.
He turns to look at all of us
(from the moon)

I am the only one who sees his sadness.

1970

Terrariums are the thing.
I have one on my bedroom window sill.
Water droplets and ferns
moist fecund soil
small green umbrellas shading
hobbits and fairies.
Oxygen in.
Carbon dioxide out.
A complete system.
Vietnam behind
another glass
in the den
slightly louder than the sound of my parents arguing.
Punishment for being nine and
not going to sleep.
At sleepaway camp where I can barely sleep.
If only I could put my thoughts in my torment, suspended with...woody floral fragility, terms of the primordial remnants of a nature.
A child's introduction to the begin.
Screaming through my clean dirt running through fingers.
A piece of earth protected by glass.
Gemlike transparency.
I am here us safe for others to see.
Peter, Susan, Edward, and Lucy went away.
I am not instead of sleep, they walked through the closet, doors found Narnia, and maybe my name was sleep, will it become my Narnia, a place to go, simply on the other side, but private.

Not running to an elsewhere but from.
The younger ones were running to.
But the older ones were leaving, going from escaping.
They order food, the Blitz, the war, the danger.
I am Susan, alas, and my sister and brother are Edward and Lucy.

I am a from, they are still are to our West, is it another universe, or inside a box in the den hardly threatens me.
But I hear my mother and father fighting for the first time and I know they will clear.
I know even if they don't. So smart I am the punishment on for being smart and not being able to sleep.
Yesterday I was
a triangle, all one piece
a wholeness between my elbows
and the nape of my neck.

Today I am a horse irritated by her constraints.
The bridle arrives
creating divisions
areas of artificial mystique
a separation of space
between my arm
and my breast.

Tonight I dream a boy
and want to touch him
his mouth
meeting of lips
richly anticipated but quickly over.

We girls gather inside the coat closet –
our clandestine spin-the-bottle playground.
Holding ourselves in a rapturous game
of hide and seek.