

Online Fiction: Interview with Tien-Yi Lee



Welcome to November, friends, and to the latest installment of our web exclusive series. It's so nice to see you here. This month, we present Tien-Yi Lee's "[Penetration](#)"—and we couldn't be more thrilled. It's a challenging piece, about damage irrevocable and endured, but rewarding, too, and very, very beautiful. It's one of those stories that stills the world for a moment, and leaves you, we hope, in the hush of something complicated and new.

You'll find "Penetration" on the [ASF website](#), and you can read more from Tien-Yi in our interview, below.

MO: Tell us about the genesis of "Penetration." Where did the idea for the story come from and what kind of evolution did it go through to get to us?

TL: This story was stitched together from a number of different pieces:

1. I was taking a flash fiction class and the prompt was, "Write about sex. . ." That's where the initial image of Sulie and Jack originated.
2. I have one of those over-the-door hooks on my bedroom closet, and whenever I hang my jeans there to dry, it creeps me out, especially if I wake up in the middle of the night. I always thought a roomful of drying jeans would be a great image to use in a story. For "Penetration," it seemed like the perfect symbol of disembodiment.
3. I had a friend in high school who loved asking questions like, "What would you do if you only had 24 hours to live?" (Yes, sex was her answer.)
4. I had written down a bunch of notes for another piece, where an engaged couple is swapping stories about their former lovers. I was trying to think of absolute secrets—things that a person

would never tell someone else, no matter how close. Sinjin Seymour seemed like one of those secrets.

5. Who hasn't thought about digging out the hair dryer?

6. I liked the title "Penetration" and wanted the story to earn it. In order to do this, I needed the events in Sulie's childhood to affect her throughout her life. I wanted her to be a successful adult—smart, thoughtful—because she was clearly those things as a child. But in spite of her resilience, there are still certain elements from her past she can't escape. The story formed around this premise.

MO: This is a challenging story. It's beautiful and so skillfully crafted, but difficult, too, because of the subject matter it deals with. You take readers into some pretty dark territory. Did this feel risky to you?

TL: Absolutely. Writing this story made me feel really uncomfortable, particularly when I added in that last section. I've found that readers (especially the ones who know you personally) tend to assume that you write from your own life, so that made it feel more risky, too.

MO: What writers or stories do you admire for the risks they take?

TL: I admired Miranda July's story collection (*No One Belongs Here More Than You*) for the quirkiness of her characters and their situations. A great imagination is hard to come by. Chris Adrian writes a lot about sick kids, and I admire how he is often able to veer into the fantastic without losing the heart and humanness of the story.

I admired Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Her story "Safari" uses an omniscient POV, often switching between multiple characters' POVs in a very tight space, and also ventures into somewhat outlandish plot premises. But it's so skillfully crafted. I thought it was brilliant. She also wrote a story in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, which some may say it's gimmicky. . . but it was a risk, and I found the story unexpectedly moving.

That being said, I tend to read a lot of stories and novels about the mundane, and my favorite short story writer is probably still Raymond Carver. I love simple, beautiful writing.

MO: One thing I love about this piece is its precise sense of chronology. The reader has a sense of history and the passage of time—which is notable in a very short piece like this. Can you talk a little bit about how you constructed this story's timeline and why you felt it was important?

TL: I think this comes back to the title again. I thought it was important to see the impact of the events in Sulie's childhood throughout her life.

MO: What are you working on now? Where else can we find your work?

TL: I'm working on a short story collection. I'm hoping it will be linked, but we'll see. In the past couple of years, my work has been published in the *Southern Review*, the *Gettysburg Review*, and the *Missouri Review*.