

The Gift

By Li-Young Lee

To pull the metal splinter from my palm
my father recited a story in a low voice.
I watched his lovely face and not the blade.
Before the story ended, he'd removed
the iron sliver I thought I'd die from.

I can't remember the tale,
but hear his voice still, a well
of dark water, a prayer.
And I recall his hands,
two measures of tenderness
he laid against my face,
the flames of discipline
he raised above my head.

Had you entered that afternoon
you would have thought you saw a man
planting something in a boy's palm,
a silver tear, a tiny flame.
Had you followed that boy
you would have arrived here,
where I bend over my wife's right hand.

Look how I shave her thumbnail down
so carefully she feels no pain.
Watch as I lift the splinter out.
I was seven when my father
took my hand like this,
and I did not hold that shard
between my fingers and think,
Metal that will bury me,
christen it Little Assassin,
Ore Going Deep for My Heart.
And I did not lift up my wound and cry,
Death visited here!
I did what a child does
when he's given something to keep.
I kissed my father.

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The son of a personal physician of Mao Zedong, Li-Young Lee was born in Jakarta, Indonesia, to Chinese parents. After fleeing the country, the family settled in the United States in 1964. Li-Young Lee's mother came from a noble family, with her grandfather serving as the first president of the Republic of China. Upon arriving in the U.S., Lee's father became a Presbyterian minister in Pennsylvania. Lee's poetry is filled with vivid imagery and creates an atmosphere of silence, much like the poems of China's classical poets. His work often fades from reality into dream worlds, and is punctuated with an attention to the senses.