



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.

Li-Young Lee, "The Gift" from *Rose*. Copyright ©1986 by Li-Young Lee. Reprinted with the permission of BOA Editions Ltd., www.boaeditions.org.

Source: *Rose* (BOA Editions Ltd., 1986)

Poet Bio



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.

More By This Poet

Little Father

By Li-Young Lee

I buried my father
in the sky....

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Relationships

From Blossoms

By Li-Young Lee

From blossoms comes
this brown paper bag of peaches...

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Sestina in Prose

By Katharine Coles

It was like climbing a mountain to those of us who'd climbed one. To the others, it was like, I suppose, something else. In other words, we let everybody find her own figure of speech....

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The Heart Shows No Signs

By Ru Freeman

The heart, the surgeon says, does not reveal
the small rifts, the hairline cracks which...

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Dragons

By Devin Johnston

We gathered in a field southwest of town,
several hundred hauling coolers...

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By Ada Limón

I like the lady horses best,
how they make it all look easy,...

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Trace Evidence

By Charif Shanahan

When I say *But mother, Black or not Black,*

Of course you are polyethnic, your look does not change...

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“Un Tintero,” Inkwell

By Desirée Alvarez

Anger is the other person inside
mi garganta, my throat...

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