

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



Eating Together

In the steamer is the trout
seasoned with slivers of ginger,
two sprigs of green onion, and sesame oil.
We shall eat it with rice for lunch,
brothers, sister, my mother who will
taste the sweetest meat of the head,
holding it between her fingers
deftly, the way my father did
weeks ago. Then he lay down
to sleep like a snow-covered road
winding through pines older than him,
without any travelers, and lonely for no one.

Li-Young Lee¹

Reflections

If you are familiar with Christian tradition, then you know already the significance of breaking bread with one another. Communion (“com” means with and “union” means harmony, oneness) is one of the most profound rituals I know to speak of. It is difficult to read this poem without my own personal associations about the Eucharist informing my response. But you certainly don’t have to be a Christian to relate to the image of a family at the table and there’s no overstating that sharing food and drink with those we love is a literal and symbolic gesture of intimacy and unity.

This poem evokes what seems to be a universal wistfulness for what once was. One irony, however, is that while the title claims “togetherness,” we learn that the father is absent; he has “lay down to sleep like a snow-covered road.” We might notice, though, that even though he has presumably died, his absence remains a presence at the table as the speaker remembers the way he held the meat of the trout head in his fingers and imagines him now “winding through pines.../without any travelers, and lonely for no one.”

Defining the terms absence and presence can really send us round and round an intellectual cul-de-sac; both words describe fundamental states of *being* and are almost impossible to define without referencing the word itself. The Oxford English Dictionary defines

¹ “Eating Together” by Li-Young Lee from *Rose*, Boa Editions. Used by permission.

“presence” as “the condition of being present” which—you see?—just sends us right back to where we started. In this poem, Li-Young Lee seems to be up to something when it comes to thinking about this puzzle: the father’s *absence* IS a presence. In this vein, perhaps the poem invites a kind of *via negativa* meditation.

The final phrase of the poem—“lonely for no one”—is particularly rich for me. One possible reading of this might lead us to wonder if it is the father who is lonely for no one, or the snow-covered road. There is a fruitfulness to this ambiguity: I have never considered that a road would or would not be lonely for travelers. Nor have I have ever considered that anyone might be lonely in heaven. Interestingly, sometimes when we speak of heaven, we say that all those who have gone before us are “waiting” for us there. *Waiting*. But to wait implies a kind of anxiety, maybe even a loneliness. Surely, for heaven to be heaven, God would do away with things like waiting. Typically, I think of all that heaven might have to give—the abundance, the infinite, the eternal—but I rarely think of it as what it might *not* have. Young suggests an absence (that word again!) of loneliness.

The tone of the poem interests me because it seems to shift sentence by sentence. The first feels like straightforward narration, a list of what will be consumed at the meal. But the second, a syntactically complex sentence, makes an emotional turn at the line break between “fingers” and “deftly” (lines 7 and 8) because it is only when we read that his mother holds the fish “the way my father did” that we realize there is a sorrow to this poem, a missing person from the table, a loneliness even in togetherness. And the final sentence is a poignant depiction of an imagined life beyond.

We have all probably had the experience of missing someone acutely, profoundly. The French poet Lamartine says that sometimes “only one person is missing, and the whole world seems depopulated.” And sometimes our missing comes at really unexpected times. In this poem, a very particular gesture—the mother’s hands, her fingers holding the fish head—awakens the speaker’s imagination and is, I suspect, the very impetus for the poem itself.

✠About the Poet

The son of Chinese political exiles, Li-Young Lee was born in Djakarta, Indonesia, in 1957. His poetry is often praised for its use of silence and space, and its abilities to engage personal experiences and memories in order to launch investigations of universal truths.



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by Allison Seay, Associate for Religion and the Arts,
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