

Folly

In the Doria Pamphili garden,⁹
most of the granite niches are empty,
the male gods have lost their genitals,
and the Great Mother, Hera,¹ has no head.

Something has gone awry
in the artificial lake.
Burrowing deep into the black banks
enclosed by wire mesh,
families of nutria² are eradicating—
with webbed hind feet,
blunt muzzled heads
and long orange incisors—
Pope Innocent X's pleasure garden's
eco-system.

Gothic as the unconscious,
the heavy tapered bodies
root along the irrigation ditches,
making their way in a criminal trot
toward the swans, whose handsome,
ecclesiastical wings open out
obliviously.

Each day I come back.
The sky is Della Robbia blue.³
As I rise to my feet,
a swan—immaculate
and self-possessed as the ambulance
bearing my half-dead Mother—
grasps into the depths
and tears a weed up,
dripping like a chandelier,
while paddling behind are the derelict rodents,
hankering—with big sleepy eyes,
suggesting something like matrimonial bliss,
and plush gray fur,
undulating like the coat my mother wore—
to hunt the grass-shrouded
cygnet eggs and gut
their bloody embryos.

9. Roman garden commissioned in the mid-seventeenth century by Pope Innocent X and now part of Rome's largest public park.
1. In Greek mythology, wife of Zeus and queen of the gods.
2. Aquatic rodent native to South America and

considered a pest in parts of North America and Europe.
3. Color associated with the glaze Florentine terracotta of Luca Della Robbia (c. 1400-1482) used and applied to his terra cotta sculptures.

1998

Childlessness

For many years I wanted a child
though I knew it would only illuminate life
for a time, like a star on a tree, I believed
that happiness would at last assert itself,
like a bird in a dirty cage, calling me,
ambassador of flesh, out of the rough
locked ward of sex.

Outstretched on my spool-bed,
I am like a groom, alternately seeking fusion
with another and resisting engulfment by it.
A son's love for his mother is like a river
dividing the continent to reach the sea:
I believed that once. When you died, Mother,
I was alone at last. And then you came back,
dismal and greedy like the sea, to reclaim me.

Style of bed with ribbed bedposts.

1998

LI-YOUNG LEE
b. 1957

Born on August 19, 1957, to Chinese parents in Jakarta, Indonesia, Li-Young Lee is one of the preeminent poets of the East Asian diaspora in the United States. His father had been a personal physician to Communist leader Mao Tse-tung in China, before moving with his family to Indonesia, Hong Kong, Macao, and Japan, finally settling, in 1964, in a small town in western Pennsylvania, where he became a Presbyterian minister. Li-Young Lee said in an interview published in 1995 that his family's migrant experience, though "an outward manifestation of a homelessness that people in general feel," is responsible for his intense "feeling of disconnection and dislocation." As a child, Lee learned from his father Chinese poetry of the Tang Dynasty, as well as psalms and poems in the King James Bible. Having grown up between Mandarin Chinese and English, Lee explores through his poetry the tensions and ambiguities of his biculturalism: "You live / a while in two worlds / at once" ("My Indigo").

The painful experience of being in between languages as an immigrant child is the subject of one of Lee's best-known poems. "Persimmons" tells the story of a young Chinese immigrant slapped by a schoolteacher for being unable to differentiate the sounds of "persimmon" and "precision." Imperfectly grounded in English as a child, the adult speaker, likewise unable to remember some Chinese words, is completely at home in neither language. Lee's early sense of linguistic estrangement can be seen, paradoxically, in his powerful attachment to the sounds and textures of English words. His poetic language is richly sensuous. Lee savors the phonemic resources of English, almost eroticizing words and their relationships. In an exemplary line, Lee revels in consonance and alliteration: a hornet in a rotten pear "spun crazy, glazed in slow, glist-

tening juice" ("Eating Alone"). Studding his poems with pellucid visual images (a splinter is "a silver tear, a tiny flame" in "The Gift"), Lee evokes the smell, the feel and the taste of an often ethnically specific experience (the steamed trout with ginger in "Eating Together").

Although Lee's work bears the imprint of his Chinese background, it should not be exoticized. It descends from the American confessional poetry of Theodore Roethlis and Sylvia Plath, and from the Deep Image poetry of James Wright and Philip Levine. It is written in free—if strongly cadenced—verse, sometimes cleverly enjambed ("How to choose/persimmons. This is precision"). Emotionally charged, rooted in childhood experience, the poems narrate simple stories. Lee's father plays the dominant role as figure of ambivalence, associated in "The Gift" and other poems with tenderness and love, and yet with discipline and pain. Squarely in the Romantic tradition, many of the poems drink at the well of early memory, relying on images and dreams to recover feelings from the past. John Keats, Walt Whitman, and Rainer Maria Rilke are among Lee's formative influences.

Lee was educated at the Universities of Pittsburgh (B.A., 1979) and Arizona (1979–80) and the State University of New York College at Brockport (1980–81). He has taught at various universities, including Northwestern University and the University of Iowa. He lives with his family in Chicago.

The Gift

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 silver 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.

1986

Persimmons

In sixth grade Mrs. Walker
slapped the back of my head
and made me stand in the corner
for not knowing the difference
between *persimmon* and *precision*.
How to choose

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persimmons. This is precision.
Ripe ones are soft and brown-spotted.
Sniff the bottoms. The sweet one
will be fragrant. How to eat:
put the knife away, lay down newspaper.
Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat.
Chew the skin, suck it,
and swallow. Now, eat
the meat of the fruit,
so sweet,
all of it, to the heart.

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Donna undresses, her stomach is white.
In the yard, dewy and shivering
with crickets, we lie naked,
face-up, face-down.
I teach her Chinese.
Crickets: *chuu chuu*. Dew: I've forgotten.
Naked: I've forgotten.
Ni, wo: you and me.
I part her legs,
remember to tell her
she is beautiful as the moon.

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Other words
that got me into trouble were
fight and *fright*, *wren* and *yarn*.
Fright was what I did when I was frightened,
fright was what I felt when I was fighting.

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Wrens are small, plain birds,
yarn is what one knits with.
Wrens are soft as yarn.
My mother made birds out of yarn.
I loved to watch her tie the stuff,
a bird, a rabbit, a wee man.

Mrs. Walker brought a persimmon to class
and cut it up
so everyone could taste
a *Chinese apple*. Knowing
it wasn't ripe or sweet, I didn't eat
but watched the other faces.

My mother said every persimmon has a sun
inside, something golden, glowing,
warm as my face.

Once, in the cellar, I found two wrapped in newspaper,
forgotten and not yet ripe.
I took them and set both on my bedroom windowsill,
where each morning a cardinal
sang, *The sun, the sun*.

Finally understanding
he was going blind,
my father sat up all one night
waiting for a song, a ghost.
I gave him the persimmons,
swelled, heavy as sadness,
and sweet as love.

This year, in the muddy lighting
of my parents' cellar, I rummage, looking
for something I lost.
My father sits on the tired, wooden stairs,
black cane between his knees,
hand over hand, gripping the handle.

He's so happy that I've come home.
I ask how his eyes are, a stupid question.
All gone, he answers.

Under some blankets, I find a box.
Inside the box I find three scrolls.
I sit beside him and untie
three paintings by my father:
Hibiscus leaf and a white flower.
Two cats preening.
Two persimmons, so full they want to drop from the cloth.

He raises both hands to touch the cloth,
asks, *Which is this?*

This is persimmons, Father.

*Oh, the feel of the wolfail on the silk,¹
the strength, the tense
precision in the wrist.
I painted them hundreds of times
eyes closed. These I painted blind.
Some things never leave a person:
scent of the hair of one you love,
the texture of persimmons,
in your palm, the ripe weight.*

Eating Alone

I've pulled the last of the year's young onions.
The garden is bare now. The ground is cold,
brown and old. What is left of the day flames
in the maples at the corner of my
eye. I turn, a cardinal vanishes.
By the cellar door, I wash the onions,
then drink from the icy metal spigot.

Once, years back, I walked beside my father
among the windfall pears. I can't recall
our words. We may have strolled in silence. But
I still see him bend that way—left hand braced
on knee, creaky—to lift and hold to my
eye a rotten pear. In it, a hornet
spun crazily, glazed in slow, glistening juice.

It was my father I saw this morning
waving to me from the trees. I almost
called to him, until I came close enough
to see the shovel, leaning where I had
left it, in the flickering, deep green shade.

White rice steaming, almost done. Sweet green peas
fried in onions. Shrimp braised in sesame
oil and garlic. And my own loneliness.
What more could I, a young man, want.

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.

Pillow

There's nothing I can't find under there.
Voices in the trees, the missing pages
of the sea.

Everything but sleep.

And night is a river bridging
the speaking and the listening banks,
a fortress, undefended and inviolate.

There's nothing that won't fit under it:
fountains clogged with mud and leaves,
the houses of my childhood.

And night begins when my mother's fingers
let go of the thread
they've been tying and untying
to touch toward our fraying story's hem.

Night is the shadow of my father's hands
setting the clock for resurrection.

Or is it the clock unraveled, the numbers flown?
There's nothing that hasn't found home there:
discarded wings, lost shoes, a broken alphabet.

Everything but sleep. And night begins
with the first beheading
of the jasmine, its captive fragrance
rid at last of burial clothes.

2001

SHERMAN ALEXIE
b. 1966

Though widely known as a gifted novelist and screenwriter, Sherman Alexie began his literary career as a poet and has regularly published volumes of poetry. A "registered" (in the bureaucratic jargon) Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, Alexie is a master of the trickster aesthetic. Wily and poker-faced, he dons rhetorical guises with cunning force. Occasionally a clenched fist is visible behind his characteristic curtain of irony. The Native American speaker in the poem "On the Amtrak from Boston to New York City" listens and nods cordially to a well-meaning white woman, as she, smiling, reads the landscape outside in terms of a "history" that is exclusively white, effacing thousands of years of Native American experience. Never revealed to his fellow passenger, the anger is all the more effectively presented in the poem, as in "Evolution" and "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel," smoldering behind a facade of agreeable good cheer.

Many of Alexie's poems explore the collision and tension between the perspectives of Native and white Americans. Tricksters must know the dominant as well as their own culture if they are to manipulate appearances effectively. "[I]t's hard to live in both worlds," Alexie remarked in a 1998 interview. "But I'm always doing it, it's part of who I am. It's actually a strength. . . . I know a lot more about white people than white people know about Indians." In the surreal world of "Tourists," Alexie imaginatively juxtaposes popular American cultural icons with reservation life. As he put it in another 1998 interview, his poetry is "always about the image, and about the connection, often, of very disparate, contradictory images."

If the ironic conjunction of antagonistic cultural perspectives is one of the key features of Alexie's work, another is narrative momentum. Alexie repeatedly refers to the "strong narrative drive" in his poetry. He shows little interest in lyric density or syntactic and lexical complexity. But his ear for colloquial speech, his feel for incremental repetition, and his eye for telling incongruity help him build narrative tension toward an ultimate climax. His brilliance as a storyteller has helped Alexie repeatedly win poetry slams, such as the Taos Poetry Circus World Heavyweight Championship in 1998, 1999, and 2000.

Born on October 7, 1966, Alexie grew up in Wellpinit, a town in a Spokane reservation in eastern Washington. Diagnosed with hydrocephalus, a large amount of cerebrospinal fluid in the cranial cavity, he was expected to die or at least to suffer from severe mental retardation after brain surgery at six months. Teased as "The Globe" for his enlarged skull in childhood, he retreated to the library, where he devoured books. He was educated at Gonzaga University in Spokane (1985–87) and Washington State University in Pullman (B.A., 1991). He lives in Seattle.