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## Haunted by the Father: The Poetry of Li-Young Lee

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# Haunted by the Father: The Poetry of Li-Young Lee

## **Abstract**

"In Lee's poetry I find myself sharing the experience of being a lost son in a father's world."

Posting about Li-Young Lee's poetry from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/haunted-by-the-father-the-poetry-of-li-young-lee/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, Li-Young Lee, fathers, sons, memory

## **Disciplines**

Christianity | Poetry

## **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

# Haunted by the Father: The Poetry of Li-Young Lee

 [all in allthings.org/haunted-by-the-father-the-poetry-of-li-young-lee/](https://allthings.org/haunted-by-the-father-the-poetry-of-li-young-lee/)

April 20, 2017

Howard Schaap

I'm haunted by the ghost of Li-Young Lee's father. He's there, in Lee's poetry, tromping around upstairs or reading aloud so we can't sleep. He lingers by the pear trees at the corner of our vision and in the stories we tell and the words we speak.

Yes, I know I said "we." Li-Young Lee's poetry is intimate. It draws us into the poet's consciousness in a way that few poets are able to do. In Lee's poetry I find myself sharing the experience of being a lost son in a father's world.

The imagery in Lee's poetry is clean and spare. This contrasts with Lee's relationship with language—across the two languages he knows, Lee often finds words slippery and imprecise. Then again, combination words and images give us access to Lee's poems in the sweet land of memory.

The poem "Eating Alone" is a case in point.<sup>1</sup> The poem opens with clean, quicksilver imagery.

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.

A few images stand out in this stanza: the cold spigot, the flames of the cardinal. The garden, by contrast, is simply described, even abstract or even vague ("bare," "cold,/ brown and old"). Even the most vibrant thing in the stanza, the flaming cardinal, is more of a presence than actually seen. Beauty, we might say, is often missed at the fringes of our vision.

These garden images sprout a memory in the speaker of the poem, presumably Lee himself. "Once, years back," he remembers,

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 a knee, creaky—to lift and hold to my  
eye a rotten pear. In it, a hornet  
spun crazily, glazed in slow, glistening juice.

In this memory, the father in infirmity of age is very much still the teacher, even a wonder-conjurer; Lee cannot so much as tend the garden without his presence being there. In much of Lee's poetry, memory is not a category of mind, it's the landscape we inhabit. In this poem, memory and landscape fuse in the next stanza:

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.

I don't think this scene is just a son in grief, palpably missing his father. The father's presence is stronger than that. It's a haunting of sorts, though I think it's more accurate to say that the very landscape is indelibly marked by his father's presence, even though his father has passed.

The final stanza further complicates this landscape of memory:

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.

Food usually suggests intimacy, and so this scene suggests absence. Certainly, we *can* read this stanza as *Star Wars*-like resolution: Dad's still with me in the traditions before me. However, the fact that Lee's own loneliness is part of the simple feast he sits down to suggests something much more profound and complex. Loneliness, if we'll take the time to learn its discipline, can be its own sort of feast. Paying attention—to the things before us as well as to the landscape of memory—produces a simple feast for the young man willing to sit down, brave the solitude, and eat.

This is what poetry does for us all.

Let me pair a second poem with "Eating Alone," since studying one poem is like claiming a one-hit wonder is high art. "Mnemonic" is a poem about a mnemonic device—like the words you make up for your kids when they study tests to help them remember—TRIK-D and SCROFUS and thinks like that.

"Mnemonic" seemingly begins with a pair of cause and effect truisms followed by a prayer:

I was tired. So I lay down.  
My lids grew heavy. So I slept.  
Slender memory, stay with me.

Once again Lee takes us into the landscape of memory, this time by invoking it directly. Stanza two gives us an image to hold onto in a poem that will be equally as much about language as it is about things. However, the image of this poem, a sweater, also leads us towards Lee's father's story, which includes political exile from both China and Indonesia on the way to settling finally in U.S. Lee remembers,

I was cold once. So my father took off his blue sweater.  
He wrapped me in it, and I never gave it back.  
It is the sweater he wore to America,  
this one, which I've grown into, whose sleeves are too long,  
whose elbows have thinned, who outlives its rightful owner.  
Flamboyant blue in daylight, poor blue by daylight,  
It is black in the folds.

Again, Lee's world is marked by his father; he is literally dressed in that world—though, as is often true of a younger generation, despite the physical achievement of reaching adulthood, the adult world we've grown into never quite fits. This is where the mnemonic come in. If the sweater is the device that conjures Lee's father, it's also nothing like the mnemonics that his father used; as such, the sweater also reminds Lee of his inadequacy. Lee reflects,

A serious man who devised complex systems of numbers and rhymes  
to aid him in remembering, a man who forgot nothing, my father  
would be ashamed of me.  
Not because I'm forgetful,  
but because there is no order

to my memory, a heap  
of details, uncatalogued, illogical.

For instance:

God was lonely. So he made me.  
My father loved me. So he spanked me.  
It hurt him to do so. He did it daily.

Lee's mnemonic is also a bridge back to the cause-and-effect lines from earlier in the poem, and it's this world especially—the thought world of the father—that the son has a hard time fitting. In fact, Lee must accept paradox, he must live in two worlds, one of loss and one of revelation:

The earth is flat. Those who fall off don't return.  
The earth is round. All things reveal themselves to men only gradually.

What does all this mean for Lee himself? An odd sort of cause and effect:

I won't last. Memory is sweet.  
Even when it's painful, memory is sweet.

Lee finds himself in a landscape that's bigger than he is, the bittersweet landscape of memory.

But the final image Lee returns to his mnemonic, the things of our world which carry all the meaning.

Once I was cold. So my father took off his blue sweater.

This is another thing that poetry does for us all: it carries the meaning of our beautiful, paradoxical, rotten pear world of sweetness that is ultimately a gift from our Father.

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## Footnotes

1. Lee, Li-Young, *Rose*. Rochester, NY: Boa Editions, 1986. [↩](#)