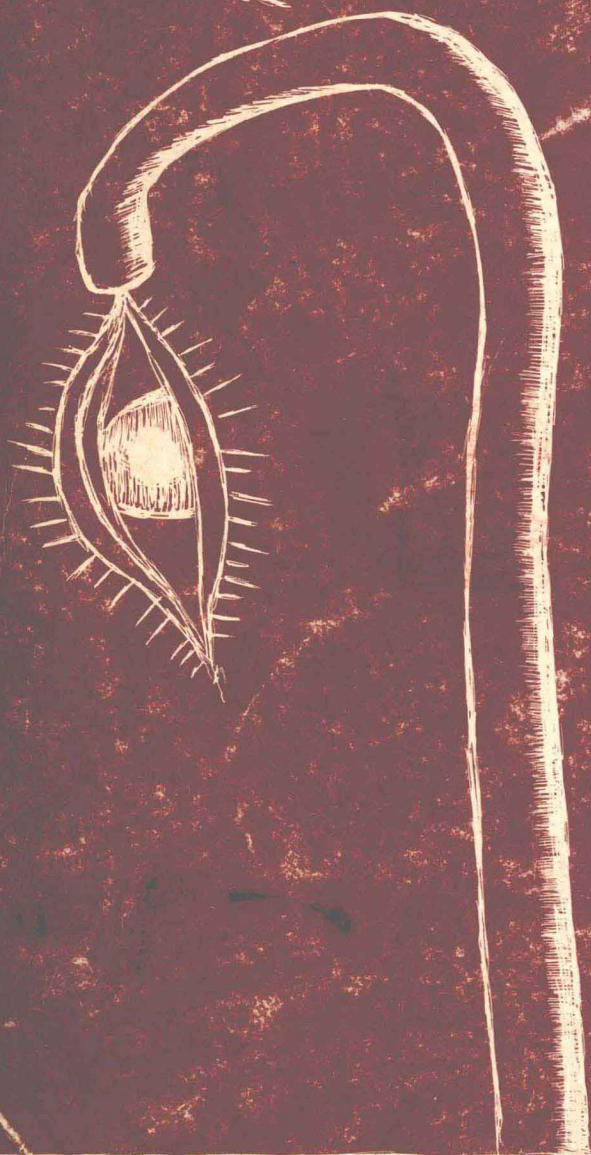


ROSE



POEMS BY LI-YOUNG LEE

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foreword by Gerald Stern



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Some of the poems herein previously appeared in the following publications: *The American Poetry Review*: "Early in the Morning," "Persimmons," "Water," "Dreaming of Hair," "The Gift," "My Indigo," "My Sleeping Loved Ones;" *The Brockport Review*: "Braiding;" *Iowa Review*: "Eating Together;" *Madison Review*: "Irises," "Falling: The Code;" *Missouri State Review*: "Rain Diary," "Eating Alone;" *The Pushcart Prize VIII*: "Persimmons" (reprint); *The Pushcart Prize IX*: "The Gift" (reprint); *The Pushcart Prize XI*: "Eating Together" (reprint).

I would like to mention my indebtedness to my family and my gratitude to the following persons: Bill Heyen, Peter Marchant, Ed Ochester, Tony Piccione, Al Poulin, Mike Servoss, Gerald Stern.

I am grateful to The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and the Illinois Arts Council for grants which aided in the completion of this book.

—L-Y. L.

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For Donna

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FOREWORD

When I first came across Li-Young Lee's poetry I was amazed by the large vision, the deep seriousness and the almost heroic ideal, reminiscent more of John Keats, Rainer Maria Rilke and perhaps Theodore Roethke than William Carlos Williams on the one hand or T.S. Eliot on the other. He was an undergraduate student at the University of Pittsburgh at that time—I think it was 1978 or 79—and I was teaching a workshop in the graduate school, which I allowed him to sign up for. I remember that, with the exception of Lee, the students were writing a fairly low-keyed poem based on specific “domestic” experiences where the “value” of the poem consisted of persuading the reader of the truth—and significance—of the experience. It was fourth, or third, or fifth generation W.C.W. I don't think Li-Young Lee's choice to move in the direction of Rilke *et al.* was based on ignorance of the dominant mode; he was responding to an urge which has nothing or little to do with such political matters. Nor am I saying that he has bypassed or ignored Williams. Rather he has used him in his own way. Indeed there are a number of Lee's poems—“Dreaming of Hair” for instance—which show a direct link to the later Williams, that glorious theory-defying Williams of the last period.

What characterizes Lee's poetry is a certain humility, a kind of cunning, a love of plain speech, a search for wisdom and understanding—but more like a sad than a desperate search—a willingness to let the sublime enter his field of concentration and take over, a devotion to language, a belief in its holiness, a pursuit of certain Chinese ideas, or Chinese memories, without any self-conscious ethnocentricity, and a moving personal search for redemption, which takes the form of understanding and coming to peace with a powerful, stubborn, remote, passionate and loving father. I think, in fact, that understanding, even accepting, the father is the critical event, the critical “myth” in Lee's poetry.

This is not a quaint and literary father-figure he is writing and thinking about. It is a real father, an extraordinary and heroic figure—at least as Lee sees him: personal physician to Mao, medical advisor to Sukarno, political prisoner in an Indonesian swamp and, finally, Presbyterian minister in a tiny western Pennsylvania town, full of rage and mystery and pity, blind and silent at the end. What makes him work as a mythical figure in Lee's poems is that it is a real human being, however converted in Lee's mind, that Lee is searching for, and his search is personal, and essential, for him, the poet—the man. If the father does become mythical, it is partly because of his dramatic, even tragic, life, and it is partly because Lee touches powerful emotional psychic layers in his search. But it is mostly because he has found the language to release those layers. The “father” in contemporary poetry tends to be either a pathetic soul or a bungler or a sweet loser, overwhelmed by the demands of family and culture and workplace. At very best he is a small hero who died early or escaped west or found the bottle and whom the poet, in his or her poem, is forgiving. The father in Lee's poems is nothing like that. He is more godlike. And the poet's job becomes not to benignly or tenderly forgive him, but to withstand him and comprehend him, and variously love and fear him. Maybe Lee—as a poet—is lucky to have had the father he had and the culture he had. Maybe they combine in such a way as to make his own poetry possible. Even unique.

I have tried to discover the art in these poems, to see how one line moves into the next, how one stanza flows into another, how

the energy—and tension—is maintained, why it works better in some poems than in others. He is a difficult poet to analyze. The technique is not only not transparent but there is a certain effortlessness about the writing that disguises the complexity of technique. There is a debt to Whitman, and one to Roethke. Also, I think, to Herbert and Traherne. Among contemporaries, James Wright, Galway Kinnell, and Philip Levine. I sometimes think that technique, particularly in such poets, consists in finding the language that releases—even awakens—feelings, and that the poem as art object is best served by addressing those very feelings, that is, the language of those feelings. This is not to say that technique takes care of itself. It is to reaffirm that art is mystery and our critical prose only begins to penetrate it.

There are poems of Li-Young Lee I return to over and over. I am amazed at their simplicity and their grace and their loveliness. I love “The Gift,” “Dreaming of Hair,” “Eating Alone.” The art of the simple is full of peril. There is such a fine line between the converted and the unconverted. This is such risk. And I’m not sure anyone can explain why the poem sometimes works and sometimes doesn’t. I find myself also admiring the shorter set pieces like “Irises” and “Early in the Morning” and reading with great delight his long poem, “Always a Rose,” which only a poet of true forgetfulness and true vision would be able to bring off. This poem is almost different in kind from the others, partly because of its length, partly because of the disjunct but accumulative sections, and partly because of the concentration on the mystic symbol. The rose becomes not something to stare at, but to consume. The rose, which is history, the past, a “doomed profane flower” to be adored and destroyed. To be eaten. Like the speaker.

I celebrate Li-Young Lee’s fine book of poems. I think we are in the presence of true spirit.

—Gerald Stern

I.