Li-Young Lee's "Persimmons"

Li-Young Lee’s "Persimmons" presents a second-generation Asian American’s quiet analysis of his own experience between two cultures. The speaker returns with gentle persistence throughout to two words, "persimmon" and "precision," and by poem's end, these two words resonate with representative significance for a son who has managed to recover specific values from his fading heritage.

The adult speaker begins with the painful memory of being "slapped" by his sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Walker, and told to stand in the corner "for not knowing the difference / between persimmon and precision." But the reader understands that the sixth grader's misperception may have as much to do with pronunciation as denotation; the boy can handle the difference in meaning between these two words quite nimbly: "How to choose / persimmons. This is precision." Lee then describes quite precisely how to choose, peel and cut the perfect persimmon, then "eat / the meat of the fruit, / so sweet, / all of it, to the heart."

This careful, respectful treatment of the fruit and its connection to "the heart" are echoed later in the speaker's loving evocation of his parents, and in the repeated association of them with the rich warmth of persimmons. The speaker first suggests, perhaps shamefacedly, his detachment from his parents and their culture by embodying the source of his distraction in the figure of Donna, a white girl (or woman) with whom he lies naked in the grass. The speaker's faltering attempts to teach Donna Chinese hint at the fading power of his parents' culture and its values. Lee suggests in this scene that the speaker's attraction to white America has involved a prostitution of sorts of his heritage; as he "part(s) her legs," he further exoticizes himself by "remember(ing) to tell her / that she is as beautiful as the moon."

The speaker's early struggles with similar sounding words ("fright and fight, wren and yarn") continue to suggest his childhood difficulties: "Fight was what I did when I was frightened, / fright was what I felt when I was fighting." The distinction between wren and yarn leads by association to a warm memory, that of watching his mother tying yarn into "a bird, a rabbit, a wee man." Precision is the focus here; the mother's precise handiwork immediately contrasts with another description of the insensitive Mrs. Walker, who clearly did not know how to choose persimmons precisely.

The speaker remembers the day Mrs. Walker brought a persimmon to class, and instead of peeling it, "cut it up / so everyone could taste / a Chinese apple." Aside from the impropriety of using a knife, Mrs. Walker was also imprecise in her choice of an unripened persimmon, and in calling it a "Chinese apple." In giving it this name, she also committed the insensitive blunder of connecting the odd fruit with the speaker, the Chinese boy in class. The scene expands into the image of an Asian American child who declined the offerer because he knew "it wasn't ripe or sweet," and instead "watched the other faces." Unripened persimmons are extremely sour and astringent, and Lee has sketched in enough of the outlines of this scene to suggest those childish faces scrunching up and turning to the quiet Chinese boy who eats such strange, terrible food at home.

Ripe persimmons continue to gain positive associations as the speaker next recalls his
mother's observation that "every persimmon has a sun / inside, something golden, glowing, / warm as my face." The fruit forms a link with his father when the speaker gives him two "forgotten" persimmons, "swelled, heavy as sadness, / and sweet as love." In the "muddy lighting" of his parents' cellar, with his father sitting on the stairs, the adult speaker's search throughout the poem for something meaningful from his past is more overtly suggested: "I rummage, looking / for something I lost." He finds three rolled-up paintings by his now blind father. As the father reaches to touch a rendering of "Two persimmons, so full they want to drop from the cloth," he remembers "the strength, the tense / precision in the wrist" required to paint them. For both speaker and reader the search has ended. The speaker has recovered two qualities embodied in and demonstrated by his parents that he has found so lacking in American culture: the rich, full warmth of his parents' love, figured in persimmons, and their precise, caring ways, represented by their respective crafts. The poem ends with the father's remark that "some things never leave a person," and indeed, as in so much of Lee's loving, precisely crafted poetry, this work reaches into the murky depths of memory to salvage cherishable characteristics of his parents and their culture.

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