

Notes on Persimmons by Li-Young Lee: by Dmitry Divov

As a subject of my literary essay, I have chosen 'Persimmons', a poem by Li-Young Lee. Among several poems in the handout our instructor gave to us, this poem attracted me the most. My wife Marina and I discussed it and argued a great deal about its hidden meanings. In the beginning, the poem seemed puzzling. There were several fragments that did not appear to be connected in time and meaning. However, there was a certain harmony and beauty about the poem that captivated us. We tried to understand what stood behind the words. A possible meaning that appeared to me was how superficial and indifferent the world around us can be to the world within us.

Also, an interesting thing happened when we discussed the poem. Neither Marina nor I looked up in the dictionary what a persimmon is. What we had in our minds was some unspecified tropical fruit. Marina said, "This whole verse about choosing and eating the fruit is amazing. It does not matter what a persimmon is, although it must be something very special; just imagine eating, say,...and she names in Russian the fruit; dark-orange, heart-shaped, soft with thin skin, and suddenly I remember that what she means is called persimmon in English. Without alluding to its shape or color, the poet described the fruit so that we imagined it most vividly.

I did not have enough time to get the response from my peers and the Writing Center. I discussed the paper with my teacher, but the final version differs considerably from that draft. Nevertheless, I hope that I did not make many grammatical and punctuation errors in this paper.

It is said that nine tenths of all information around us we perceive through our eyes. In communication among people, language is perhaps even more important. In our fast moving world, people are bound to use simple images and clearly understandable, unambiguous phrases. 'Persimmons' by Li-Young Lee is a poem that tells us how much deeper the world is than it appears to those who perceive it in definite terms.

We often marvel at how children look at the world. Or, rather, how they make up their own world. They fill it with imaginary characters. They even invent their own language. We look at this as a wonder, as something sweet and pure and fascinating. At some point however, we say that the time comes for kids to grow up. We want to prepare children to face the "real" world. This world does not accept vagueness and dreaminess--it uses the hard currency of clear-cut terms.

From the first stanza of the poem, we learn that Mrs. Walker was the poet's teacher in sixth grade:

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.

To Mrs. Walker, the situation is simple. The boy, whose native language is Chinese, does not possess the mental ability to handle English. He confuses the words that, as Mrs. Walker is convinced, have nothing in common; they perhaps have similar sounds, and that is it. But in the boy's mind, the two words are connected in the way that Mrs. Walker is simply not able to see:

How to choose

persimmons. This is precision.

The character of Mrs. Walker may be a generalization of all types of "teachers" that one encounters throughout one's life. This can be a school teacher, an older person, a passerby, or society as a whole. And these "teachers" judge one's personality in simple and clearly defined terms. They do not bother to look deeper to understand what is going on inside the boy's mind. To them, the boy has trouble with words. For the boy, these words go together because of the associations that they evoke:

Other words

That got me into trouble were
fight and fright, wren and yarn.

Fight was what I did when I was frightened,
fright was what I felt when I was fighting.

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.

Who cares to know about these associations? What Mrs. Walker, along with the rest of the pragmatic world, considers a measure of the boy's IQ, is the ability to distinguish between the face values of the words. Can she ever imagine the world within him--how deep it is?

Let us go back for a moment to these words:

How to choose

persimmons. This is precision.

Imagine choosing a piece of fruit with precision. As I say the word, "precision," I see gauges, calipers, and numbers. Can there be any precision in soft fruit, the shape of which is not fixed and ideal, and the color of which is uneven? Yes, says the poet. The shape, the color do not matter--they are attributes, they are what you see. Instead, trust your sense of touch: Ripe ones are soft... Believe your sense of smell: Sniff the bottoms. The sweet one will be fragrant. This is an art; not everyone is talented in it. How to eat. Eating a persimmon cannot be done along with reading a newspaper. It is an act of art in itself. There is no place for the cold and senseless knife:

Put the knife away, lay down the 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.

This is a kind of art unknown to Mrs. Walker. What she brings to class is not a small sun hidden in tender, golden meat. What she cuts up is a lump of nutrients that she calls a Chinese apple. The boy, slapped and ashamed of his "ignorance," knows more about the fruit than the teacher could ever tell her students:

Knowing
it wasn't ripe or sweet, I didn't eat
but watched the other faces.

The boy looks for reaction on his peers' faces. All he sees is probably that the kids are perplexed, maybe even disgusted with the strange fruit. They will never touch the glowing sun inside the fruit or taste its sweet meat. There is no teacher to show to them the beauty of eating a persimmon, let alone the beauty of the world.

As the boy grows up, the difficulties with English words probably disappear. He is a man now; he finds a lover, Donna. She is an American. They speak English, and this language is no longer a problem for the poet. In their intimate minutes, when they lie naked, he teaches Donna Chinese. And then he realizes that, along with the troubles that he used to have a part of his language is gone, too:

I teach her Chinese
Crickets: chiu chiu. Dew: I've forgotten
Naked: I've forgotten.
Ni, wo: you and me.

Then they make love, he remembering to tell Donna that she is as beautiful as the moon. In this scene, filled with intimacy and closeness of lover, I feel some subtle regret. Is the poet losing something?

This year in the muddy lighting
of my parents' cellar, I rummage, looking
for something I lost.

When is that which he lost and is trying to find in his parents' cellar? Is it the sense of a persimmon; something that his blind father still possesses? Or a view of the world that disappears together with this language?

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

His father still can feel it--heaviness and sweetness. He cannot see their shape or color. He knows what they are. Imagine one in your palm. It feels heavy indeed. And tender. His father painted them hundreds of times:

Oh, the feel of the wolftail on the silk
the strength, the tense
precision in the wrist.

The hand rests lightly on the silk. The fingers hold the paintbrush. The paintbrush tip is a sensitive contact; with it, through the tense wrists, the old man feels all he needs to feel to paint the persimmons. He lost his eyesight, but he still can see things. He can still see the world, and his vision goes beyond images and beyond words.

Some things never leave a person:
scent of the hair of one you love,
the texture of persimmons,
in your palm, the ripe weight.

A person can go blind and become shut out of the outside world. The things that stay, go beyond vision. It is the scent, the texture, the weight. The words can be deceiving. The words can be blunt. The feel of a ripe persimmon in your palm will always be with you.

To live in our world, we need to clearly express ourselves. This clarity is expected from us. The vagueness of words is associated with the vagueness of thinking, and that is not accepted in our material, practical world. But the bitter irony is that at times, as soon as something beautiful is put into words, its beauty is lost forever. It may sound paradoxical, but Lee in his poem 'Persimmons' brilliantly uses words to convey the feelings so deep that they elude words. His poem is not a self contained piece of poetry. It is a passage between our and the poet's inner worlds. Knowing that words cannot directly express these feelings, he uses his poetry as a tool to evoke such feelings in us.