5-2023

Consuming the World: Poetic Appetite, Memory, and Identity in Li-Young Lee's Food Poems

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Consuming the World: Poetic Appetite, Memory, and Identity in Li-Young Lee's Food Poems

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

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by

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May 2023

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Keywords: Li-Young Lee, poetry, food, memory, nature, individual identity, familial identity

ABSTRACT

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Food is a universal human necessity, yet food often serves more than a biological purpose as it informs individual and communal identities, and even facilitates memory. This thesis explores personal memory, the development of identity, and an almost reverential connection to nature in several food poems by Li-Young Lee in *Rose* (1986) and *Behind My Eyes* (2008). Born in 1957, Lee has been writing poetry since he was young, studying under Gerald Stern in the late 1970s, and he is known for writing sublime, transcendent yet incredibly accessible and expressive poetry. This thesis gives an overview of food studies and establishes food in Lee's poems — principally fruit, shared meals, and lonely meals — as the central image, signifier, or as Roland Barthes might call it, the myth that allows the speaker of these poems to metaphorically fulfill the aphorism, "you are what you eat."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the professors at East Tennessee State University who have helped teach and guide me. Special thanks go to my thesis committee, without whom the completion of this project would not have been possible. Dr. Scott Honeycutt, if not for your YA Literature course and our reading of Daniel Nayeri's *Everything Sad is Untrue* (2020), I doubt that I would have written my thesis about such a fulfilling topic. Thank you for your guidance throughout the writing process. Dr. Isabel Gómez Sobrino and Dr. Jesse Graves, thank you both for your poetic wisdom which helped make this thesis better. Thank you to Fred Sauceman, for agreeing to be an additional reader and for your feedback.

To my friends, thank you for always being there for me. To my family, thank you for your love, constant support throughout my academic career, and so much more. More specifically, thank you to my mom for always indulging me with my favorite foods on my birthday, and for inspiring my love of cooking, baking, and reading. To my dad, for introducing me to the comforts of a warm cup of tea. To my sister, for sharing many adventures with me. To my partner, thank you for your never-ending love, your support of my passions, your tolerance of my academic tangents, and all of the wonderful meals we have shared together.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT 2

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 4

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION 7

Food and Memory in Literature 7

About Li-Young Lee 9

Literature Review: Food and Memory Studies 11

Moving Beyond Necessity: Further Consideration of the Theoretical Importance of Food 16

CHAPTER 2. GROWTH 23

Fellowship and the Macrocosm in “From Blossoms” 26

“The Weight of Sweetness,” The Weight of Memory 29

To the Heart of “Persimmons” and the Heart of Memory and Identity 33

CHAPTER 3. “A VISION OF BEING CONSUMED AND CONSUMING” 40

Mythical Figures and Specters in “Eating Alone” 44

Confronting the Self in “Eating Together” 49

CHAPTER 4. THE APPLE 54

The Senses in “Falling: The Code” 56

The Trilogy of Apple Poems in Behind My Eyes 62

Tentatively Establishing Identity in “The Mother’s Apple” 62

The Maturation of the Apple in “The Father’s Apple” 64

Becoming an Independent Subject in “The Apple Elopes” 66

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION 70

WORKS CITED 73

APPENDIX: Permissions 77

VITA 78

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

"Tell me what you read and write about what you eat, and I shall tell you more about what you are. Tell me how you envision food in stories and poems, memoirs and biographies, films and pictures and fantasies, and we shall begin to understand how you think about your life."

(Sandra M. Gilbert, *The Culinary Imagination: From Myth to Modernity*, 6)

Food and Memory in Literature

Food and memory are perhaps the two most universal phenomena, aside from death, which we, humanity, experience. According to Gitanjali G. Shahani in her introduction to *Food and Literature* (2018), "food is fundamental; we all have to eat it; we eat it together" (9). We may not literally all eat together or always eat meals together yet there is community, and by extension commensality in the consumption of food due to its nature as a universal necessity. In an essay titled "Commensality," David B. Goldstein suggests that "food constitutes a material trace of the biological, ecological, social, and symbolic interactions that link eater, eaten, and the macrocosm that surrounds them" (40). Literature, in much the same way, "has always been concerned with social relationships and with larger webs of connection" (41). When combined, food and literature, or perhaps more precisely food in literature, offer readers a world of connections of both social/communal and personal/individual natures.

Regarding the universality of food and memory, with each separately serving an established purpose, there is nevertheless a deep connection between the two that speaks to the human condition. Food and our memories, whether there is a possession of or lack thereof, act as signifiers of our identities; in some cases, food facilitates memory and, through this facilitation, signifies our individual and communal identities. Food in literature can facilitate personal

memory, allowing us to recall memories that we have subconsciously tied to specific foods, like the infamous madeleines scene in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* or *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913). It can also act as a facilitator of an all-encompassing human experience that, in turn, relates back to shared memory. These two forms of memory, personal and shared, are not wholly unrelated though. For example, universally we all likely have an individual memory of a specific food that reminds us of a specific place, person, event, etc. Personally, when I drink certain types of tea, I am reminded of frigid mornings fly-fishing with my dad when I was a kid and the hot, too-sweet tea — I always put in too much sugar — warming me up after I, inevitably, fell in the water.

Food as a universal experience is so ubiquitous a concept that Socrates himself felt compelled to describe "eating and drinking as nothing more than satisfying a need, like 'itching and scratching or any other simple pleasure or requirement" (David B. Goldstein 39). Yet from life to death, we accumulate traditions in food as much as we accumulate food in traditions, and tradition inherently functions as collective, and even ritualistic, memory. The link between food and memory has been marked throughout literary tradition — despite Socrates' attempts to minimize food's importance and label it as solely a biological necessity — and has been a topic of intrigue for a range of writers like Claude Lévi-Strauss, William Shakespeare, Terry Eagleton, Roland Barthes, Salman Rushdie, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and countless others. Similarly, several poems published by the poet Li-Young Lee — in his collections Rose (1986) and Behind My Eyes (2008), though he has other food-related poems in his other collections — reflect this connection between memory, food, individual, and communal identities. These poems include, though are certainly not limited to: "Eating Alone," "Eating Together," "Falling: The Code," "The Mother's Apple," "The Father's Apple," "The Apple Elopes," "From Blossoms," "The

Weight of Sweetness," and "Persimmons." It is within these poems by Li-Young Lee that this thesis will identify and analyze the connection between food, memory, identity, and nature.

About Li-Young Lee

Li-Young Lee was born on August 19, 1957, in Jakarta, Indonesia to Chinese parents. His maternal grandfather was the first president of the Republic of China, and his father served as a personal physician to Mao before his family left China as political exiles. His family lived in Indonesia, Hong Kong, Macao, and Japan before settling in the United States, in Pennsylvania, in 1964. Lee's father became a Presbyterian minister who would often read Lee poems from the Tang Dynasty along with psalms and proverbs, and is cited by Lee as a source of inspiration. While Lee's father is a consistent presence in Lee's poetry and especially in the collection *Rose*, he passed away in 1980, six years before the publication of the collection. Lee studied at the University of Pittsburgh and later the University of Arizona and the State University of New York College at Brockport. It was at the University of Pittsburgh where he studied under his mentor Gerald Stern, who wrote the Foreword to *Rose*. Lee has since taught at various universities and now lives with his family in Chicago. He has published several collections of poetry, one memoir, and has won numerous awards for his writing, including the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Poetry Award for *Rose* and the Paterson Poetry Prize for *Behind My Eyes* ("Li-Young Lee" 1039-40).

Often categorized as a Chinese American or Asian-American poet, Lee has stated in older interviews that "as a poet, you just want to be known as a poet. You want to be shoulder-to-shoulder with Whitman, Dickinson, and all the other poets. If an artist thinks of himself as an Asian-American artist, if it's a term of empowerment, then we should use it. But if people are

saying, Well, these are the poets, and those are the minority poets— that bothers me" (*Alabaster Jar* 62). Yet, in later interviews, like his 2004 interview with Earl G. Ingersoll and Lee's editor Thom Ward, Lee amends his original statement on being pigeonholed as an Asian-American poet (173). In this later interview, he states that

> as an artist I'm trying to get in touch with something that can't be accounted for by my gender, my race, my ethnicity, my class, my historical moment. Those all figure into it. But the math isn't what we think it is. It isn't like, Oh, you're this gender, you're this race, so you should write this kind of poetry. Poems are unaccountable. They're not accountable by only race or gender or whatever. And you can't account for my personal life by only those specifications.
>
> I'm interested in the nature of reality, and I don't think constantly wondering about my ethnicity can lead me to a firmer grasp of the nature of reality. I think it can up to a point; for instance, I think it's a very important thing to think about racism in terms of projection and transference. It's important to recognize that, but it seems to me that after we recognize that, then there's real work to be done, withdrawing your projections. I think poetry for me is ultimately a mode of withdrawn projection. (173)

With that in mind, in this thesis I will not use the term "Asian-American" to refer to Lee. I will, however, address the clear influence his family and by extension, his family's culture, has had on his poetry while also exploring Lee's claim that "all our experiences are universal. We have to transcend, especially in art what I call trivial aspects of our existence and move on to greater issues" (62). Simultaneously, Lee wants his work to be "something so intimate that it's less than whispered. I would like to reach some sort of anonymous center in me and speak from that center. My imagination tells me that voice from that center would be so intimate it would speak

to everybody. It would be universal" (70). Therefore, while our experiences may look different on a surface level, in this project I hope to open a dialogue with these poems and recognize the transcendent, yet intimately universal that we can all connect with.

Literature Review: Food and Memory Studies

Within food studies and, more specifically, studies of food in literature, many scholars reference Marcel Proust and the madeleines in *Remembrance of Things Past* — as I have also mentioned above — as being a foundational text and scene for the study of food in literature. Another common reference is to Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin and his book *The Physiology of Taste*, originally published in French in 1825. In *The Physiology of Taste* — which is a text filled not only with theoretical contemplations on food and its various and extensive relations to humanity but also personal anecdotes, or memories, of the author — twenty "Aphorisms of the Professor," which "serve as a preamble to [Brillat-Savarin's] work and as a lasting foundation for the science of gastronomy," are listed early in the text (3). Most notable in this sizeable list is number four which reads: "tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are" (3). This aphorism, which is quoted often by others, has been rephrased by Sandra M. Gilbert in her book *The Culinary Imagination: From Myth to Modernity* (2014); a rephrasing which I have used as the epigraph for this introduction with the hope that it might help capture, in part, the intricate links between food and identity, food in literature, and identity in literature and how we as readers might be able to interpret the combined effect of these phenomena. After all, "food plays a huge role in the identities of people everywhere" (Kaplan 151).

Like Brillat-Savarin, Robert Appelbaum has created a list of significant occurrences related to food and the literary works of several philosophers including Jean-Paul Sartre's

Nausea (1938) and Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957). In his essay titled "Existential Disgust and the Food of the Philosopher" (2018), Appelbaum claims that "food, so far as it appears as an object in literary discourse, can be categorized as any number of things — 'things' in the sense of objects of experience, cognition, and inquiry. Six of them seem especially important" (131). The first two "things" are related to food as an object which can interact with the senses; "(1) food can be a material object, among other material objects. (2) Similarly (but this is not exactly the same, since a material object can be observed without being tasted and smelled) it can be an occasion of gustatory and olfactory sensation" (130). The third describes food as "a historical phenomenon" that we observe and watch transform through the creation of "new products and technologies of trade and cookery," along with "recipes, kitchen protocols, and regulations about taste and propriety" (130). Point number four describes food as "a sociocultural phenomenon, at once material and symbolic — material because food is part of the economic life of a society, symbolic because food also *means*; it is inevitably a sign, signifier, or in special cases, as Barthes initially put it, a 'myth'" (130). Likewise, Appelbaum claims in point five that

> food can also be not just a subject of meaning but also the object of a practice, or even of several practices, since cooking is not the same thing as eating, and exchanging food is not the same thing as taking it, or even of buying and selling it, and all these practices are socially regulated. Ritual practice comes under this category, as do social norms concerning such categories as status and habit. (130)

Therefore, in the first five points Appelbaum makes concerning major food occurrences, he notes that these occurrences range from ritual food practices to social food practices, to material and historical aspects of food and how these traits create larger sociocultural identities.

Appelbaum's sixth point — which is separated into parts "6a" and "6b" — concerns the "metaphysical identity of food, which takes at least two antithetical forms" which can be used to discern the varied significances of food references in literature and how these inform personal identities (130). Point "6a" states that "food can be identified as pure nutrition, an element in the dynamic order of being, the being of living (and dying) things" (130). Counter to this, point "6b" argues that "food can be identified as an existent with irreducible qualities over and above its nutritional character; it can be identified as a characteristic or index of an order of being itself" (130-131). The "order of being" Appelbaum describes in "6a," which consists merely of consuming food for continued existence, is discussed in various food studies texts and is present in many food references in literature that do not appear to have greater significance beyond the need for the consumption of food for survival, like in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). In one example, the protagonist Offred is served "the thigh of a chicken, over-cooked … a baked potato, green beans, salad. Canned pears for dessert. It's good enough food, though bland. Healthy food … no coffee or tea though, no alcohol" (Atwood 65). The meal is reduced to biological concerns like the "vitamins and minerals" that are supposed to make the handmaids "worthy vessels" (65). In Sartre's *Nausea*, however, at the climax of the novel — which takes place in a restaurant over dinner — the narrator Roquentin is confronted with a feeling of "nausea" (his being/existence) which causes him to expand his thoughts on the "metaphysical index" as listed in the food phenomenon Appelbaum calls as "6b" (135). According to Appelbaum, "Sartre notes that part of self-awareness is located in the mouth and the gullet" and therefore, "when I choose what to eat and drink, I am producing the 'project' that is myself, that freedom of self-creation out of which I emerge as the sensual, conscious, and self-conscious being that I am, the being I am *for myself*" (139-140). Thus, food in *Nausea*, like in

Remembrance of Things Past — or the purposeful fasting, choosing to not eat which physically and metaphorically diminishes the "project," in Franz Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" (1922) and "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) by Herman Melville — becomes "an index of 'being'" and speaks to a greater connection that humanity — and our emotions, relationships, identity, etc. — has to food beyond its nutritional value (136).

For example, in the foreword to *In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezín* (2006), Michael Berenbaum — director of the United States Holocaust Research Institute — stated that women of Terezín

> who compiled this cookbook… talked of the past; they dared to think of food, to dwell on what they were missing — pots and pans, a kitchen, home, family, guests, meals, entertainment. Therefore, this cookbook compiled by women in Theresienstadt, by starving women in Theresienstadt, must be seen as yet another manifestation of defiance, of a spiritual revolt against the harshness of given conditions. (Silva xvi)

The women of Terezín drew strength merely from the thought of food, because "food is who we are in the deepest sense, and not because it is transformed into blood and bone" (Silva xxvi). These women recognized that we are connected through "our personal gastronomic traditions — what we eat, the foods and foodways we associate with the rituals or childhood, marriage, and parenthood, moments around the table, celebrations" which "are critical components of our identities" (Silva xxvi). Therefore, for the women of Terezín "to recall them in desperate circumstances [was] to reinforce a sense of self and to assist [them] in [their] struggle to preserve it" (Silva xxvi). Despite our varied life experiences, we are all connected by these phenomena. Recipes, specifically, function as a preservation of history, and our reproduction of them, our sharing of them, acts as living memory. The memory of food is not only preserved in cookbooks

but in magazines and various print sources as well. Now, with the internet, we are more connected to the memory of food than we ever have been, with the ability to search for recipes with a few keystrokes.

Li-Young Lee's poetry is known "to be fully engaged in life and memory while building and shaping the self from words" (Lemon). For instance, between "From Blossoms" and "Persimmons," one can trace the life cycle of food, specifically fruit, from its flowering early stages, "from blossom to blossom to / impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom," through its stages of ripeness in "Persimmons" ("From Blossoms," lines 21-22). Correspondingly, as the fruit matures identities and memories mature as well, and these processes are captured by language in his poetry. Through the search to shape the self in connection to nature, Lee follows the Romantic tradition which "turned toward nature and the interior world of feeling," and like other Romantic poets — such as John Keats and William Wordsworth — "found parallels to their own emotional lives in the natural world" ("Romanticism"). Similarly, Lee's poetry, like Deep Image poetry, "posit[s] a connection between the physical and spiritual realms … narrative, focusing on allowing concrete images and experiences to generate poetic meaning" ("Deep Image"). These traditions are demonstrated in the deliberate choices Lee makes within his poetry concerning the use of language, punctuation, and form. For Lee, "a sentence is a measure. But of what? It's a measure of information; it can carry information; it can carry time. You can write two sentences using different words, and they'll carry time differently. It can carry consciousness; it can carry different modes of consciousness," and even memory (*Alabaster Jar* 137). In "Diaspora, Transcendentalism, and Ethnic Gastronomy in the Works of Li-Young Lee," Wenying Xu argues "that food serves as a central place from which Lee speaks, a locus that constructs and defines his sense of reality"

(95). Therefore, while the theme of "shaping the self from words" is generally true for his food poetry and his poetry wholly unrelated to food, exploring memory in Lee's poetry solely through his use of food offers a specific lens for viewing his poetry's sentiments on life, identity, memories, and even death.

Moving Beyond Necessity: Further Consideration of the Theoretical Importance of Food

Roland Barthes asks, "for what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" ("Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption" 21). Just as others have done, Barthes seems to reject the assumption that food only fulfills a biological need. Comparably, in the "Afterword" of *Food and Literature*, Darra Goldstein discusses her work analyzing food in Russian literature and the implications of food within Russian narratives, claiming that "when food is used as a narrative element, it often doubles as shorthand for larger characterizations, whether of individuals or of society at large" (353). While Darra Goldstein is specifically referencing Russian literature, I believe it is possible to apply this concept more broadly to various food narratives, including some depictions of food within poetry. Similarly, David B. Goldstein suggests that "… literary scenes of meals and metaphors of food and drink are usually constructed in order to point beyond and beneath the particular to the symbolic and material foundations of human relations" (43). As demonstrated by these three scholars, and many more, our connection to food extends beyond our basic needs.

Returning to the ideas of Barthes, in *Mythologies*, he seeks to explain various social systems and contemporary myths. In his preface to the 1970 edition of the text, Barthes claims

that he "had just read Saussure and as a result acquired the conviction that by treating 'collective representations' as sign-systems, one might hope to go further than the pious show of unmasking them and account *in detail* for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois, culture into a universal nature" (9). Consequently, the Barthes "myth" "is a mode of signification, a form" (109). Myth "can consist of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity," and more, "all these can serve as support to mythical speech" (110). Essentially, it is a matter of signification, the ability to be signified, to enact a sign, or act as a signifier. Thus, "literature as discourse forms the signifier; and the relation between crisis and discourse defines the work, which is a signification" (114). Myth also has "a double-function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes on us," thus acting as sign, signifier, and signified, or as Barthes labels them: signification, meaning, and concept, respectively (117). Since myth already exists in history, and "in the meaning, a signification is already built, and could very well be self-sufficient if myth did not take hold of it and did not turn it suddenly into an empty parasitical form. The meaning is *already* complete, it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions" (117).

Barthes claims that "wine is felt by the French nation to be a possession which is its very own, just like its three hundred and sixty types of cheeses and its culture" (58). Therefore, according to Barthes, French cultural identity and myth are steeped in their relation to the production of wine, cheeses, and steaks with chips (58-64). Similarly, as he refers to wine as "a totem-drink" he compares it to "the milk of the Dutch cow or the tea ceremonially taken by the British Royal Family" (58). Within these connections, there is a connection made not only to social/cultural identity, there is a connection and division made to nature because "wine is the

sap of the sun and the earth, that its basic state is not the moist but dry, and that on such grounds the substance which is most contrary to it is water," and red wine "has blood, the dense and vital fluid" (58). As Barthes continues his analysis of the importance of wine, he describes various "*gesture*[s]" that are performed when wine is consumed socially, how this consumption varies between countries and how it differs from the consumption of other forms of alcohol (59). Barthes goes so far as to claim that "wine gives thus foundation for a collective morality, within which everything is redeemed: true, excess, misfortunes and crimes are possible with wine, but never viciousness, treachery or baseness; the evil it can generate is in the nature of fate and therefore escapes penalization, it evokes the theatre rather than a basic temperament" (59). Again, this establishes his theory that wine offers communal (French) identity, possesses "collective morality," "provides the basis not only for a morality but also for an environment," is "part of the reason of the state," and is even representative of "French capitalism" and colonialism in Algeria (59-61). Barthes recognizes that food — in this case, a drink, wine — can function as a way for one to recognize a multifaceted identity for one country, in his example it is France. Thus, food (and drink) can operate as identity on a national/state, social, and personal level.

The historical connotations of wine are clear, meaning that the connection to memory on the various levels mentioned above should also be clear. Similarly, he claims "steak is a part of the same sanguine mythology as wine" and "to eat steak rare therefore represents both a nature and a morality" (62). And "like wine, steak is in France a basic element, nationalized even more than socialized … it effects the best possible ratio between economy and efficacy between mythology and its multifarious ways of being consumed" (63). Barthes even partially anthropomorphizes steak, describing it as being "adorned with a supplementary virtue of

elegance, which unites, one feels, succulence and simplicity. Being part of the nation, it follows the index of patriotic values;" similarly, "chips are nostalgic and patriotic like steak" and "are the alimentary sign of Frenchness" (63). While providing specific examples of wine and steak, Barthes establishes food as a myth. Myth is the sign, or food is the myth and therefore the sign which "makes us understand something and it imposes on us" (121; 117). Therefore,

> both language and food offer immediate entry into the sensorium, involving as they do the tongue, the organ of production for language as well as the receptor for food. Words and food engage our senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, mediating our encounters with the material world and allowing us to experience not only the present but to travel via memory or fantasy through space and time. (Darra Goldstein 358)

While Barthes establishes food as a "myth," other scholars have considered the intersections of the senses, with a particular focus on sensations of taste.

In her introduction to the collection of essays featured in *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, Carolyn Korsmeyer notes that, as one of the senses, taste is often overlooked by philosophers, theorists, and religion who seek to "elevate the 'mind' over the 'body'," therefore the sense of taste is frequently reduced to its "functional value" and "the multiple links of taste with physical maintenance frequently lead to neglect or outright derogation of activities associated with tasting and eating" (1-2). Korsmeyer also mentions that "this volume also includes contributions from gastronomers and food writers, poets (liberally quoted by several essays), and other literary artists," drawing a direct connection between literature and food. Remarking on one of these connections, Korsmeyer recalls that "one of the most famous literary reflections on taste is found in Marcel Proust's monumental novel, *The Remembrance of Things Past*" in which

> Proust ponders a very well-known yet enigmatic phenomenon associated with tastes — the fact that they are nearly impossible to describe verbally, and yet they may be vividly recalled by the faintest whiff of a familiar smell or flavor. This gives taste (again in the full 'intersensorial' sense that includes participation of smell) a singular and powerful place in memory. It can be a trigger of bodily recollection, a source of both yearning and solace. (7)

Thus, the doors of memory are unlocked by food and the senses of taste (combined often with smell). This is demonstrated throughout literature, most notably by Proust, but there are several poets who follow this tradition including Li-Young Lee, who have captured magnificently this connection between food and memory.

Likewise, David E. Sutton uses the term "synesthesia" — which he describes "as 'the union of the senses,' or the way that sensory experiences cannot be compartmentalized, but seem, rather, to feed off each other" — to discuss food memories, nostalgia, and identity (both personal and cultural) (305). Sutton describes some "food events" concerning Greek students in England that he witnessed, all related to receiving care packages of food or bringing specific Greek foods back with them, Greek foods with cultural and familial connections which could not be found in British supermarkets (this is in the 1990s) (306-307). He claims that these "food events" are "often experienced in terms of a 'burning desire' that is satiated through a sensory experience evoking a local knowledge … they often explicitly evoke a wholeness, or a fullness in experience" (307). This sense of completeness can be linked by the recollection of memory sparked by specific foods, foods that contain significance to each person. Certain foods may remind several individuals of a cultural memory or may produce singular memories like the madeleines scene in Proust's *The Remembrance of Things Past: Swann's Way*, in which the

narrator alone recalls a vivid childhood memory due to the combined taste of the petite madeleines and lime-flower tea. These nostalgic moments, moments of wholeness, are "triggered by *memory* of taste and smell" (307). Proust's narrator describes this effect, stating:

> But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection. (50-51)

In his words, there are the combined effects of endurance, nostalgia, memory, and emotion, all sparked by the taste and smell of food.

Thus, the term synesthesia can be used when describing the combination of senses and their effects on memory, perhaps most potent the combination of taste and smell and acts as "an aid to memory" (Sutton 314). More specifically, the synesthesia of smell and taste acts as an aid to episodic memory, or memories associated with experience, rather than semantic memory, or memories associated with words and language because the senses of taste and smell are hard to put into words without the reliance of other factors such as physicality (310-315). Concerning synesthesia:

> the union of the senses is not only a metaphor for social wholeness; it is an embodied aspect of creating the experience of the whole. Food is not a random part that recalls the whole to memory. Its synesthetic qualities, when culturally elaborated … are an essential ingredient in ritual and everyday experiences of totality. Food does not simply symbolize social bonds and divisions; it participates in their creation and recreation. (315)

Therefore, theoretical synesthesia combined further with commensality and shared occurrences further establishes the larger web of interconnectedness created by food.

Li-Young Lee's interconnectedness is evident in his first book of poetry *Rose*. Several themes that flourish throughout his career include "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" (Stern 9). All of these themes, and more, combine in his food poetry to transform the occasionally mundane act of eating into something exceptional.

CHAPTER 2. GROWTH

"… Now, eat / the meat of the fruit, / so sweet, / all of it, to the heart."

(Li-Young Lee, "Persimmons," *Rose*, lines 14-17, 17)

The theme of this chapter will focus on growth, specifically the growth of fruit in connection with identity. Thus, I would like to start where all fruit starts, "From Blossoms." According to Zhou Xiaojing in an article on "Inheritance and Invention in Li-Young Lee's Poetry," "Lee employs and develops a major technique which relies on a central image as the organizing principle for both the subject matter and the structure of the poem. This method gives him much freedom in exploring various perspectives in relation to the central image" (117). By recognizing food — in this chapter and chapter four recognizing fruit — as the "central image," and by starting with Lee's poem "From Blossoms," one can trace the coinciding growth of fruit and growth of identity through the formation of memory and relationships into Lee's poem "The Weight of Sweetness" and ending with "Persimmons." All three of these poems are contained in Lee's first poetry collection, *Rose*.

Speaking on the fruit in the poetry of William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, and D. H. Lawrence, Sandra M. Gilbert notes that while the language used by each to describe the fruits in their poem differ aesthetically — plums for Williams, peaches for Eliot and Lawrence — "nonetheless, the three poets are alike in their choice of fruit that is neither divinely forbidden nor magically dangerous but ripe for daily consumption. Nor do they speak of fruit in elevated language, though Lawrence is certainly celebratory" (127-128). Moreover, "their encounters with fruit, while explained to significant others (Williams, after all, tells the story to his presumably sleeping wife), are solitary; they eat alone, rather than at festal boars, and meditate

on food as an object of gastronomic interest" (128). While Li-Young Lee often follows in the Romantic tradition in his poetry, his accessible portrayals of fruit seem to follow more closely with the modernist depictions of fruit that are "neither divinely forbidden nor magically dangerous but ripe for daily consumption" (127-128).

While tracing the life cycle of fruit in this chapter, I will also trace the life cycle of those consuming food through the memories and emotions woven into these poems, from childhood to adulthood and finally, inevitably, to death. Lee often grapples with his father's death throughout his poetry, especially the collection *Rose*, yet openly admitted in an interview

> But things have no materiality; they never have for me. Every time I try to write about a piece of fruit or the body of my father, it disappears under my looking, under my gaze. It literally disappears. There's nothing there; it's all sound, all vibration. I've been looking for many, many years to find a ground, and I guess mind is the ground I've found. Mind is ground. (*Alabaster Jar* 129)

Thus, Lee places significance in the spirituality of his poetry — not necessarily in the traditionally religious sense as we generally understand "spirituality," although in some of his other poetry, there are certainly heavy religious connotations — and in the "mind" because for him, "even the body is spirit" (133). According to C. Nadia Seremetakis, in an essay on "The Breast of Aphrodite,"

> Mnemonic sensory experience implies that the artifact bears within it layered commensal meanings (shared substance and material reciprocities) and histories. It can also be an instrument for mobilizing the perceptual penetration of historical matter. As a sensory form in itself, the artifact can provoke the emergence, the awakening of the layered memories, and thus the senses contained within it. The object invested with sensory

> memory speaks; it provokes recall as a missing, detached yet antiphonic element of the perceiver. The sensory connection between perceiver and artifact completes the latter in an unexpected and nonprescribed fashion because the perceiver is also the recipient of the unintended historical aftereffects of the artifact's presence or absence. (303)

In the poems analyzed in this chapter, the fruit subjects in the poem operate like the "artifacts" described by Seremetakis, the "central image" characterized by Zhou Xiaojing, or the myth devised by Barthes. By looking beyond materiality and establishing the magnitude of the mind in his poetry, Lee has "discovered a dialogue that is so essential to his being, that it is no longer cultural or canonical, but a dialogue with his truest self. His most naked spirit" in conversation with the artifact (food) (*Alabaster Jar* 127).

Similarly, Lee also believes that we are in constant dialogue with the past, not the present and future. This belief, according to Lee, is based on "the Chinese word for the day after tomorrow is *hou*, meaning *behind*, and the word denoting the day before yesterday is actually *chien*, meaning *in front of* … that to a Chinese mind, tomorrow, the future, is behind me, while the past lies in front of me" (original italics, 133). This hierarchy of mind over materiality and past before future, combined with Romantic tradition, allows Lee to "eat … to the heart," to mind, and to memory — as indicated by the epigraph of this chapter — because "the poet's business is to witness the spirit, the invisible, the law" ("Persimmons" lines 14-17; *Alabaster Jar* 136).

In addition to the hierarchy mentioned above, it is important to note the vertical form of the poems in *Rose* because Lee claims that "if you look at the earliest poems in *Rose*, you'll see the vertical assumption. The assumption that the vertical reality was the primary reality and all of this was fading away, just 'stuff' spinning off that more important reality" (*Alabaster Jar* 139).

In this case, this means "spinning off" into the past, "that more important reality" for Lee. Thus, vertical form and the implications of the form described by Lee are important within all of the poems this thesis will analyze.

Fellowship and the Macrocosm in "From Blossoms"

Immediately, upon reading the first lines of "From Blossoms," the reader is transported into a memory of Lee's in which he, and presumably his father, bought a bag of peaches. Radiating saccharinity, Lee reminisces on the blossoms which produced "this brown paper bag of peaches / we bought from the boy / at the bend in the road…," he considers the journey these peaches have taken, a journey which he has joined, and the fruit he will consume *and* be consumed by (lines 2-4). This initial stanza is composed of five lines, all enjambed, forming a single sentence. These enjambed lines combined with the sweet sound of alliteration as Lee combines various words beginning with "b" — such as "brown," "bag," "bought," "boy," and "bend" — with various words beginning with "p," like "paper" and "peaches," all culminate in the "signs painted *Peaches*" (original italics, 2-5). Thus, the poem's first stanza establishes the setting, tone, and peaches as the catalyst for the memories that follow.

In the second stanza, Lee tracks the fruit as they move "from laden boughs, from hands / from sweet fellowship in the bins" (6-7). In the fellowship of the fruit, there is a shared fellowship with the consumer, there is commensality. As mentioned before, David B. Goldstein describes the "eater, eaten, and macrocosm that surrounds them" and further describes commensality as "eating together" and as a "range of relationships that emerge and are reified through the act of eating" (40-41). From the opening stanza of "From Blossoms," there is an implicit sense of commensality because the fruit is bought collectively, "we bought it from the

boy" (italics added, "From Blossoms" line 3). Concurrently, the fruit forms a "sweet fellowship in the bins" (7). Thus, as the fellowship is formed the consumers then become part of the fellowship through the consumption of the fruit and are brought even closer to nature through the sweet "nectar" of the "succulent / peaches" (8-9). Lee claims that with this connection with the "peaches we devour, dusty skin and all, / comes the familiar dust of summer, dust we eat" (9-10). Consequently, this web of connections forms, in part, a "range of relationships" as Goldstein describes that will be fully formed through eating.

As the third stanza progresses, as Lee tracks the fruit, he effectually traces the standard life cycle of the fruit, which he repeats in "The Weight of Sweetness." This cycle flows from blossoms to fruitful and "laden boughs," "from hands" which harvest to the "fellowship in the bins," and into hands which consume (6-7). For the sake of this poem, the cycle ends here with consumption, which is fundamentally one form of death for food, but Lee hints at another type of death in the "dust we eat," which is the state of fruit left unconsumed, left to rot. This notion of dust, of becoming and consuming dust, is heavily reminiscent of the Christian sentiment "dust to dust, ashes to ashes," based on several bible verses which imply that we have come from dust and will return to dust upon death. In "From Blossoms," with the ingestion of "the familiar dust of summer" Lee physically connects to the "macrocosm" Goldstein describes, the fruit metaphorically lives on inside of him, and the memory deepens and multiplies.

After establishing his initial memory in stanza one, and the memory and history of the peaches in stanza two, the memories combine in stanza three as the peaches are eaten and the process of becoming part of the "macrocosm" that Goldstein describes is completed. As we eat, "we take what we love inside" (11). In this poem that is peaches, though I theorize that the consumption of any food we love functions in much the same way regarding memory formation

and recollection. Referring back to Seremetakis, "the perceiver is also the recipient of the unintended historical aftereffects of the artifact's presence or absence" wherein the artifact here is the peach (303). Lee is heartfelt when he insists that "we take what we love inside," as later in the stanza he describes the act of holding "the fruit in our hands, adore it" ("From Blossoms" line 15). The fruit, with its connection to Lee's memories, is simultaneously connected to his love — love of life, love of others, his family, etc. — which will be further demonstrated in "The Weight of Sweetness" and "Persimmons." Essentially, within this adoration of the fruit, Lee is admiring his memories; the peach is a physical, tangible symbol of memory. There is synesthesia, a "union of the senses," in the combination of multiple physical senses such as the palpable weight of the peach combined with the eating and tasting of the peach, which appear "to feed off each other" and act as "an aid to memory" but also an aid to connecting more fully with nature (Sutton 305, 314). Therefore, by consuming the peach, Lee claims that we are able "to carry within us an orchard, to eat / not only the skin, but the shade, / not only the sugar, but the days…" ("From Blossoms" 12-14). Even beyond the greater connection to the location, and the "dust of summer," by consuming the peach Lee consumes the memories of the peach (10). Thus, the eater becomes inextricably linked to the eaten, the world surrounding them, and the passage of time (David B. Goldstein 40). Within the consuming passage of time, found in "the round jubilance of peach," we undergo a range of experiences, experiences which turn into memories as time passes, memories which in turn create and change our identity as they form ("From Blossoms: line 16). We carry our memories within us as we "carry within us an orchard."

As time passes, "there are days we live/ as if death were nowhere / in the background" (17-18). As we consume food — a twofold act consisting of biological preservation through nutrition and indulgence as a signifier of existence — Lee implies that we move

… from joy

to joy to joy, from wing to wing,

from blossom to blossom to

impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom. (19-22)

Thus, as this journey continues, a new connection is formed and new collective memories are established between the eater and the eaten, and "the macrocosm that surrounds them" (David B. Goldstein 40). We are connected "to joy," "to wing," and from "blossom to / impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom" and we turn full circle, fulfilling one life cycle and joining with the nature which surrounds us in a more conscious manner Just as "From Blossoms" begins with sweet memories "from blossoms," it ends with the same "sweet impossible blossoms" ("From Blossoms" lines 1, 19-22).

"The Weight of Sweetness," *The Weight of Memory*

As demonstrated in "From Blossoms," commensality gives way to community and collective memory. Lee formed collective memory with the fruit he bought and consumed with his father, and this becomes even more clear in "The Weight of Sweetness." There is also a further reference to the life cycle of the fruit in which this cycle is more directly connected to those partaking in the fruit. However, unlike the opening lines of "From Blossoms," which are pleasant layers of warmth building to the sweetness of the peaches, "The Weight of Sweetness" begins with a solitary line, a warning that reads: "no easy thing to bear, the weight of sweetness" (line 1). Within the poem, the physical weight of sweetness is associated with "song, wisdom, sadness, joy; sweetness / equals three of any of these gravities" (lines 2-3). Lee mimics the effects of "these gravities" in the content and form of the following stanza with its first three

lines enjambed — literally falling down the page and into each other, "just 'stuff' spinning off that more important reality" — just as the peach they describe (*Alabaster Jar* 139). To demonstrate the formatting of these lines, despite there only being three, this is how they look in print:

> See a peach bend
>
> the branch and strain the stem until
>
> it snaps. ("The Weight of Sweetness" lines 4-6)

The lines "bend" and "snap" down into each other, just as the peach on the branch bends and snaps its stem from the weight. Lee insists that we "hold the [fallen] peach, try the weight, sweetness / and death so round and snug / in your palm" (7-9). Again, the symbol of the peach returns in this poem to embody sweetness, yet it becomes more clearly defined.

In the lines following these, the true identity of the peach becomes clear, "and, so, there is / the weight of memory" (10-11). Like the roundness of the peach described in "From Blossoms," we have come full circle. In "From Blossoms" and "The Weight of Sweetness," the peach is the equivalent of memory, a physical indicator, signifier, or referent of Lee's memories. As Lee describes it, "language is … involved in a state of infinite referral. A flower isn't even a flower; it's a referent for something else. A flower refers to something else; each animal refers to something else. The whole universe keeps referring infinitely back" (*Alabaster Jar* 136). In the Foreword to *Rose*, Gerald Stern argues "that understanding, even accepting, the father is the critical event, the critical 'myth' in Lee's poetry" (9). While this might initially seem to point to Lee's father as the Barthes myth or referent in his poetry instead of food, Barthes claims that "a *complete* image would exclude myth, or at least would compel it to seize only its very completeness … but in general myth prefers to work with poor, incomplete images, where the

meaning is already relieved of its fat, and ready for a signification, such as caricature, pastiches, symbols, [central images], etc. Finally, the motivation is chosen among other possible ones … the store of mythical signifiers is inexhaustible" (*Mythologies* 127). Because the motivation or the mythical signifier or sign — "the duplicity of its signifier, which is at once meaning and form" — is one amongst many, food in literature acts as only one potential mode to explore the function of memory and identity (128). Barthes claims the most dynamic form of reading myth occurs if one focuses "on the mythical signifier as on an inextricable whole made of meaning and form, and [one] receive[s] and ambiguous signification: [we] respond to the constituting mechanism of myth, to its own dynamics, [we] become a reader of *myths* … the reader lives the myth as a story at once true and unreal" (added italics, 128). Consequently, consuming the peach allows Lee to join in the "fellowship in the bins," and "to carry within us an orchard" ("From Blossoms" lines 7, 12). However, as indicated by the opening line of "From Blossoms," "the weight of sweetness… the weight of memory," is "no easy thing to bear."

Despite "the weight of memory" ending the stanza, it is followed by a colon, not a period. This opens the door directly to Lee's memories, two of which he reconstructs in the final two stanzas of the poem. Within the story told in "The Weight of Sweetness," there is a boy and his father, presumably Lee and his father. The first memory is a gentle moment shared between father and son. The vertical form of the poem, combined with enjambed lines, continues as the "windblown, a rain-soaked / bough shakes, showering / the man and the boy" (12-14). They share a "delight[ful]" moment together as "the father lifts from his son's cheek / one green leaf / fallen like a kiss" (15-18). The vertical form is mirrored in the imagery of the fallen rain and leaves, and the sweetness of the memory is, once again, entangled with nature.

In the second memory and the final stanza, the "good boy hugs a bag of peaches / his father has entrusted / to him" while his father "… carries a bagful in each arm" (19-23). The boy, Lee, watches

as his father moves
faster and farther ahead, while his own steps
flag, and his arms grow weak, as he labors
under the weight
of peaches. (25-29)

This moment is significant for several reasons. Because the father is older, he naturally carries more peaches because he has collected more memories as he has aged. Again, for the sake of "From Blossoms" and "The Weight of Sweetness," peaches are the equivalent of memory. Lee, who is younger in this memory, carries fewer peaches, and he struggles under the weight of them without the love and support of his father. In other words, he grows weak under the sudden weight of memory that he must carry when his father passes away. Or, as Lee phrases it, moves "farther ahead." Hence, the poem traces the life cycle of the fruit and the human life cycle through memories of Lee's father; these life cycles are intricately linked.

Lee's father and the peaches which have been separated from their branches and are dying as well, are immortalized in the memories of this poem and "From Blossoms," suspended in the gap between life and death. The peach is not rotten but is separated from the branches of the tree that give it life just as Lee's memories of his father are not lost but merely separated by death from the person whom they are memories of. Both memories — of the peaches and his father — are suspended in time on the page, within the poem. Thinking back to the allusions to death in "From Blossoms," Lee's intentions are even more salient in this poem concerning the

life cycle of fruit and its consumers. He seems to recognize, like Edmund Spenser and numerous others, that "to dy in dust, but you shall live by fame: / my verse your vertues rare shall eternize" (*Amoretti* sonnet 75, lines 10-11). Or, simply put, poetry offers one a chance to create an immortal subject, one that will live on in our minds and in the lines of the poems we read and write. In "The Weight of Sweetness," Lee captures the "song" through poetry, the "wisdom" shared by his father, "sadness" at his father's death and, simultaneously and paradoxically, "joy" in tender memories (line 2). As the sadness and joy dance elegantly around each other, the "weight of sweetness" transforms into "three of any of these gravities" (3).

To the Heart of "Persimmons" *and the Heart of Memory and Identity*

Like much of Lee's poetry, "Persimmons" seems to call back to the confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop, and Adrienne Rich, just to name a few. His poetry, especially "Persimmons," is also reminiscent of Romantic tradition — "many of the poems drink at the well of early memory, relying on images and dreams to recover feelings from the past" — and Deep Image poetry through the connection to central images ("Li-Young Lee" 1040). According to Douglas Basford,

> Lee's poem ["Persimmons"], ultimately about his father's death, adheres to Shelley Wong's formula of the Asian American lyric 'I' as cleaved, 'neither fully dissolved, nor resolved' (Chang 97), with swift motions of self, from baffled pupil to adult forgetting his native language, from self-conscious lover to mischievous student asserting his cultural heritage, from fruit-thief to dutiful son. (249)

Thus, there is a narrative focused on the self, the creation of identity through experience, which is presented in "Persimmons" through a series of memories whose reemergence is sparked by

thoughts of consuming "the meat of the fruit" ("Persimmons" line 15). However, as I will demonstrate in my analysis, these "motions of self" are not "swift," as described above. Some of the memories in "Persimmons" are certainly shorter than others, giving the illusion of swiftness, but in the spaces between memories, the reader is asked to linger, to consider.

"Persimmons" starts with a memory of a classroom, Mrs. Walker's sixth-grade classroom to be specific, and punishment "for not knowing the difference / between persimmon and precision" (1-5). While this is initially considered improper use of language by his teacher, Lee saliently connects the two claiming that "how to choose // persimmons. This is precision" (6-7). This precision demonstrates the wordplay and clarity of expression that Lee utilizes throughout "Persimmons" and is mirrored in the form of the poem as well. Just as the colon at the end of stanza two in "The Weight of Sweetness" opens a door to memory, the stanza break demonstrated in the quote above between stanzas one and two of "Persimmons" operates in a similar manner. From this point forward in the poem Lee precisely details several memories, reminded of all of them by the "soft and brown-spotted" ripe persimmons (8).

Just as he instructs us to "put the knife away, lay down the newspaper. / Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat" of the persimmon, as we read Lee tenderly peels back layers of memories before ending again where he started, with a memory of his father and "the texture of persimmons, / in your palm, the ripe weight" (11-12; original italics, 87-88). Between the stanzas, the memories, we slowly "chew the skin, suck it, / and swallow. Now, eat / the meat of the fruit, / so sweet, / all of it, to the heart" (13-16). In his "Analysis of the Sensation of Tasting" chapter in *The Physiology of Taste* Brillat-Savarin claims "that taste causes sensations of three different kinds: direct, complete, and reflective" (40). The act of eating "to the heart" falls into the third category, the reflective sensation which "is the opinion which one's spirit forms from

the impressions which have been transmitted to it by the mouth" (40). Therefore, just like the peaches in "From Blossoms" and "The Weight of Sweetness," the persimmon allows Lee to get "to the heart" of his identity, to form impressions, through memories he has collected and recalled through consuming the fruit ("Persimmons" line 16). Throughout "Persimmons" there is a continued sense of tenderness, and in the warm silence between stanzas the memories languidly form. Thinking back to his careful instructions which teach us how to peel the persimmon slowly and carefully, the form of the poem mirrors these instructions and asks us to peel back slowly and gently the layers and ruminate on each memory.

Lee writes to the heart of memory — in the poem "Persimmons," the persimmon functions like the peach in "From Blossoms" and "The Weight of Sweetness," therefore the persimmon is the equivalent to memory as well — and by biting "to the heart of the persimmon," eating gives way to a realization of love which inspires the shifts in memories which change with the stanzas. The persimmon, a facet of nature, acts as a means to access his memory and identity. The tenderness of the initial taste of the fruit gives way to intimacy in the following stanza as Lee recounts a loving moment with his wife. The heart of the fruit transforms into the heart of their love as he teaches her Chinese, "*ni*, *wo*: you and me" (original italics, line 25). Here is the first clear establishment of identity, in a memory, depicted by language, and spurred by the consumption of fruit. However, within this memory he also forgets the word for "dew" and "naked," yet "remember[s] to tell her / she is beautiful as the moon" (27-28). Through the combination of remembrance and the forgotten, Basford believes that "the eroticism in 'Persimmons' centers on the gentle compliment of a lover pulled, either by conscience or by love, into a more expansive consciousness … the slippage of cultural memory, [is] coupled so

strongly with eros" (253). Thus, there is pleasure and intimacy in the physical and emotional connection in both the consumption of the fruit and the bond between Lee and his wife.

As Lee remembers to tell her she is beautiful the stanza and memory shift, and Lee considers "other words / that got me into trouble" which are "fight and fright, wren and yarn" ("Persimmons" lines 29-31). There is another marker of identity here, one of a young boy struggling to properly express himself. Lee confesses, "fight was what I did when I was frightened, / fright was what I felt when I was fighting" (32-33). Before this memory can be fully realized, a memory that momentarily interrupts the poem's tenderness, a new memory begins in the same stanza, breaking the cycle the rest of the poem follows of one memory per stanza in order to maintain the tone of the poem, and to address the other confusion of language mentioned at the beginning of the stanza between "wren and yarn" (original italics, 31). Again, Lee effortlessly connects these two terms and states that "wrens are small, plain birds, / yarn is what one knits with. / Wrens are soft as yarn" (34-36). He recalls that his "mother made birds out of yarn. / I loved to watch her tie the stuff" (37-38). With the dual memory of the stanza, we see the intricate weaving of memory performed by Lee which mirrors the weaving of yarn by his mother.

Moving into the next two stanzas, Lee draws our attention back to the heart of the poem and the heart of his memories: the persimmon. We are transported back to another brief memory from Mrs. Walker's classroom, where the other students try a persimmon but, "knowing / it wasn't ripe or sweet," Lee chooses not to eat it (43-44). By clearly drawing attention to this memory in which he chooses not to eat this persimmon, Lee prevents the poem from being overrun by the uncomfortable memories of his childhood. He chooses precision, which allows him to portray "the sweet one," the sweet memories (9). From this point on to the end of the

poem, the persimmon more directly drives the memories, all of which are related to Lee's identity as a son. His mother claims that "every persimmon has a sun / inside, something golden, glowing, warm as my face" (47-48). Here, there is a double entendre, where "sun" means the celestial body of the sun, but reads as "son," like her son Lee. This doubles down on the formation of identity through memory and food; Lee's identity is contained within the heart of the persimmon. Thus, the persimmon symbolizes life and growth which creates a connection to nature, and the physical consumption of the fruit unlocks memory.

The last half of "Persimmons" hails back to the memories in "From Blossoms" and "The Weight of Sweetness," recalling moments shared with his father who, as mentioned before, died in 1980, six years before Rose was published. While his father "sat up all one night / waiting for a song, a ghost," a memory, Lee "gave him the persimmons, / swelled, heavy as sadness, / and sweet as love" (57-60). No longer is the fruit swelled solely with sweetness, like in "The Weight of Sweetness." As "Persimmons" continues to the end, the stanzas offer more memories of Lee with his father, of Lee asking about his father's failing eyesight and his waning health. Lee looks "for something I lost" and "under some blankets, I find a box. / Inside the box I find three scrolls… / three paintings by my father" (23, 70-73). These three paintings depict a "Hibiscus leaf and a white flower. / Two cats preening. / Two persimmons, so full they want to drop from the cloth" (74-76). Upon finding these lost objects — paintings that were done by his father — there is yet another shift in memory, and this time the reader is given insight into the memories of Lee's father.

Even though he can no longer see the painting, Lee's father is able to recall the physical feelings of painting, the "feel of the wolftail on the silk, / the strength, the tense / precision in the

wrist" (original italics, 80-83). Speaking with precision about the persimmons painting, Lee's father says

> these I painted blind.
>
> Some things never leave a person:
>
> the scent of the hair of one you love,
>
> the texture of persimmons,
>
> in your palm, the ripe weight" (original italics, 84-88).

These are the closing lines of the poem, and just as the physical consumption of the persimmon prompted Lee's remembrance of moments long past — and allowed him to consider the establishing memories which form his identity as a husband and lover, and as a son — the physical memory of painting the persimmons and of holding them combined in synesthesia with scent, act as physical reminders/physical memories for Lee's father. The numerous images of persimmons throughout the poem — in various stages of ripeness, forms, and consumption — demonstrate varying moments of communication and even miscommunication, recounted through memory.

With each stanza of "Persimmons" embodying a memory — with the exception of stanza four which contains two memories — Lee has painted numerous memories and moments of tenderness juxtaposed with the uncomfortable moments in Mrs. Walker's sixth-grade classroom and painful memories of fighting and fright. While there are paradoxical memories associated with the persimmon's fruit, all of them serve to create a representation of Lee's identity. The uncomfortable memories establish his uncertainty as a young man whose perceptions have been unfairly challenged. The tender memories which permeate the bulk of the poem — memories that are occasionally imbued with a sense of melancholy and nostalgia — firmly establish his

identity as a caring son and husband, as someone who has opened a "dialogue with [his] truest self. [His] most naked spirit" (Alabaster Jar 127). By likening his memories and his identity to the persimmon, Lee has presented an unhindered interpretation of himself, he has allowed us to "eat / the meat of the fruit, / so sweet, / all of it, to the heart" ("Persimmons" lines 14-17). While "Persimmons" is likely Lee's most well-known and most anthologized poem, he clearly has more food poems to analyze, many of which intensify the themes of melancholy, and nostalgia, along with commensality and "powerful emotional psychic layers in his search" for the "personal, and essential, for him, the poet — the man," his father (Stern 9).

CHAPTER 3. "A VISION OF BEING CONSUMED AND CONSUMING"

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

(Li-Young Lee, "Mnemonic," *Rose*, line 26-27, 66)

A quick Google search of the etymology of the word "consume" yields results that break the word down into its Latin prefix "con," meaning "together" or "altogether," and the Latin suffix "sumere," meaning "take up." When combined, the meaning is something akin to: "to take up (al)together." For Lee, "his devouring all is a way of outgrowing his own limits, a way of meeting the world and letting the world enter him and then emerge from him in his poems" which is heavily reminiscent of the aphorism "you are what you eat," based on Brillat-Savarin's "tell me what you eat and I shall tell you what you are" (Xiaojing 129; Brillat-Savarin 3). Lee's poem "Eating Alone" demonstrates the act of "taking up" from the earth and consuming which is a communal act with nature as demonstrated in Chapter Two. In "Eating Together," this communal act of consuming nature is taken a step further with images of consuming "(al)together" and later being consumed or integrated with nature through death, like the "peaches we devour, dusty skin and all" with which "comes the familiar dust of summer, dust we eat" ("From Blossoms" lines 9-10).

As mentioned in chapter two, the poems in *Rose* follow vertical formatting, with the content of each poem "spinning off that more important reality" (*Alabaster Jar* 139). In this chapter, which will analyze "Eating Alone" and "Eating Together," the two poems parallel each other not only in name but in content and formatting as well and thus transfigure the significance of the vertical formatting. With these two poems, there comes a clearer sense of the interconnectedness between humanity and nature, a connection created through food, the

"macrocosm" described by David B. Goldstein (40). In some instances, within these two poems, the human form is partially indistinguishable from other aspects of nature, blurring the lines as food is consumed.

It has been suggested that in Lee's poetry — especially his poem "The Cleaving," in which he indicates that he "… would devour this race in order to sing it … And I would eat Emerson, his transparent soul, his / soporific transcendence" for Emerson's racist remarks on Chinese features[1] — that "eating is assault, but it is also digestion and assimilation" and "is ultimately about communion" ("The Cleaving" lines 219, 226-27; Partridge 103). This quote, from Jeffery F. L. Partridge in an article largely about Lee's "The Cleaving" called "The Politics of Ethnic Authorship: Li-Young Lee, Emerson, and Whitman at the Banquet Table" and published in 2004, uses the term "assimilation" to demonstrate a growing acceptance of ethnic works, specifically Asian American works in literary circles (105). For the sake of this thesis,

[1] The full section in Lee's "The Cleaving" which refers to Emerson reads, "I would devour this race to sing it / this race that according to Emerson / *managed to preserve to a hair* / *for three or four thousand years* / *the ugliest features in the world.* / I would eat these features, eat / the last three or four thousand years, every hair" ("The Cleaving" lines 217-224). While I was unable to find this exact quote from Emerson, I found several others that indicate a pattern of severely racist remarks. One such remark from Emerson's journals reads, "I think it cannot be maintained by any candid person that the African race have ever occupied or do promise ever to occupy any very high place in the human family. Their present condition is the strongest proof that they cannot. The Irish cannot; the American Indian cannot; the Chinese cannot. Before the energy of the Caucasian race all other races have quailed and done obeisance" (Emerson 152).

however, I will consider a different facet of “assimilation” and “communion” which will further develop a relationship between food and memory, nature and identity, and Goldstein’s “macrocosm” (40). In a 1991 interview with Lee, Anthony Piccione, and Stan Sanvel Rubin — part of which I have quoted for the title of this chapter — they discuss “The Cleaving” and assimilation:

> Rubin: *It's almost a definition of America you're offering, in a way: I suppose multiculturalism, which is much talked about in education and art, really means everyone acknowledging everyone else's otherness, which you do in [the poem] "The City in Which I Love You." Along this line I'd like to come to the final poem, "The Cleaving," in which you come back to your face, opening and closing the book [The City in Which I Love You] with your own face.*
>
> Lee: *The poem was a little terrifying to write because finally in order to see everybody in myself and to see myself in everyone else I had to do violence to myself. I don't think it was transcendent in the way one normally thinks of transcendence. I used to think of transcendence as easy, light, full of wings, or something like that. I realized there's only one kind of transcendence, a kind of violence, because I think living in America is a violent experience, especially if you do feel like the other. And I think assimilation is a violent experience. One of violence's names is change.*
>
> Rubin: *This is literally a very bloody imagery -- butchering -- and it’s an imagery of eating really wonderful food. It's a vision of being consumed and consuming. That seems to me the opposite of transcendence on some level.*
>
> Lee: *Right, but it's also a way of becoming attached to humanity, but it comes through a kind of imminence.*

Rubin: *But you're also accepting death in some way, participating in it.*

Piccione: *How do we end up? Do we win in this, or not?*

Lee: *That's the other thing when I was writing the poem. I came to the realization that poetry isn't pretty or nice. It's very hard, when we talk about being obsessed or consumed.*

Piccione: *In order for the light and sweetness to remain real you have to go here, too.*

Lee: *I think you have to.* (original italics, *Alabaster Jar* 54)

Lee declares that he views assimilation, of a cultural nature, as "a violent experience," and that "one of violence's names is change" (54). In "The Cleaving," this violent process of change appears to be true, given the name of the poem. However, as indicated by the conversation quoted above, there is "light and sweetness" in this process as well. "Eating Alone" and "Eating Together" both address the impacts of death of Lee's father alongside images of consuming. First, in "Eating Alone," there is the dismal and dark, though not necessarily violent, change. Then, in "Eating Together," through a sense of "imminence," "acceptance," and commensality, which can only occur after acknowledging death and darkness, comes "light and sweetness" (54).

While Partridge's description of eating in Lee's poetry suggests that eating is a violent act, he also notes that "in Lee's poetry, cultural eating is not always expressed in violent terms … in his first book of poetry, Rose, Lee exalts the communal and relational significance of eating in a Chinese family" (112-13). Therefore, for Partridge, "in Li-Young Lee's poetry, eating is a cultural activity that enacts familial and ethnic community," and "these poems ["Eating Together" and "Eating Alone"] from Lee's first book of poetry, Rose, contextualize eating as a familial activity fraught with personal (though not just private) significance" (107). As with

Chapter Two, one of the main connections explored in this thesis is the connection between food and memory, and as Partridge suggests, there is a "personal significance" to the act of eating. The two poems in this chapter highlight not only the personal significance for Lee, but also more broadly highlight the familial significance, especially concerning loss. Both "Eating Alone" and "Eating Together" directly reference the loss of Lee's father, and understanding the meaning of both poems is tied to the acknowledgment of that loss. As noted by the epigraph for this chapter, memories, especially memories related to a loved one who has passed on, are incredibly complex because "even when it's painful, memory is sweet" ("Mnemonic" lines 26-27). Also, with "Eating Alone" and "Eating Together" there appears to be a more firm connection between the eater and the eaten which can be tied to Partridge's terms of "assimilation" and "communion." Because "eating for Lee is 'a kind of reading' and a kind of mastering the familiar and the unknown. Eventually, his eating will enable him to give voice to all" (Xiaojing 127). Therefore, the analyses of these poems will be twofold: initially exploring how these poems encapsulate loss more directly than in the poems analyzed in chapter two, but also how these poems — through images of loss in connection with nature — further blur the lines between the consumer and consumed.

Mythical Figures and Specters in "Eating Alone"

Unlike the poems addressed in chapter two — with their numerous enjambed lines and stanzas which gradually lead into each other — Lee's "Eating Alone" has an air of heaviness, with each stanza composed of short sentences and ending with firm periods and no enjambed stanzas. Despite the formatting differences the themes of "Eating Alone" are similar, with its themes of nature, human connection through memory, loss, and, of course, food. According to

Partridge in a short summary, Lee's poem "Eating Alone" "describes his loneliness as he tends to his garden and thinks of his recently deceased father" (Partridge 113). As with several other poems in *Rose*, "Eating Alone" directly addresses the death of his father and the loneliness that Lee feels due to that loss. However, Zhou Xiaojing addresses the meditations on death in *Rose*, specifically Lee's "Always a Rose," and "the possibilities of overcoming death through poetry" — reminiscent of Edmund Spenser's belief that poetry "shall eternize" the subject — and mentions descriptions of "the inevitability of the physical decline and death" in relation to the imagery of the rose (122; Spenser lines 10-11). While Xiaojing specifically speaks to Lee's "Always a Rose," this "inevitability" can be connected to other "central image[s]" that operates "as the organizing principle for both the subject matter and structure of the poem," similar to the Barthes myth which acts as a signifier to generate meaning (117). As with the other examples provided throughout this thesis, I hope to connect the "inevitability of physical decline and death" to the myth (signifier of identity) or the "central image" of food, while also exploring how "the bodily image as indication of the inevitable decay and death … has the possibility of transformation and renewal" or, to use Partridge's words, the possibility of "assimilation" and "communion" (122).

"Eating Alone" is bracketed by an opening stanza with imagery that depicts moments of loneliness and a closing stanza ending with further representations of solitude. Within the two middle stanzas, there is a memory of Lee spending a quiet moment with his father, and Lee's experience with a spectral image of him. The opening images of the poem — images of harvesting "the last of the year's young onions" in a "garden [that] is bare now" where "the ground is cold, / brown and old" — are spoken by a first-person narrator, which continues throughout the poem (lines 1-3). However, despite the melancholic tone, which persists

throughout, there is a sense of promise drawn from the sustenance and signs of life perceived in this first stanza in “the year’s young onions,” “flames / in the maples,” the refreshing “drink from the icy metal spigot” (1, 3-4, 7). As mentioned with the peaches and “the familiar dust of summer, dust we eat” in “From Blossoms,” in food there is life and sustenance, but there is also death (10). “Eating Alone” more precisely connects the relationship between not only food and memory, but food and inevitable death.

Despite the tentatively hopeful images of “young onions” even though they are “the last of the years” pulled from a now bare garden, the intensity of the light as it “flames / in the maples” even though it is “what is left of the day,” and the invigorating “drink from the icy metal spigot” — all images of vibrant nature which continue throughout the poem — there is an underlying foreboding of the inevitability of death, which the narrator of the poem is forced to confront (1-7). Initially, the foreboding in the poem lies in the fleeting quality of the natural world, which we as humans are part of no matter how determinedly we try to separate ourselves from it, but as Lee adds in several images of his father there is a recognition of the fleeting quality of life we experience as well. As previously mentioned, “the garden is bare now. / The ground is cold, / brown and old” and is juxtaposed with the positive images of harvesting and interactions with nature and the flaming colors of the maples (2-3).

Initially, Lee notices as “a cardinal vanishes,” perhaps as a symbol of his father because according to *Farmers’ Almanac*, “it is common folklore that a visit from a cardinal represents a sign from a loved one who has passed” (Mayntz). While the “cardinal vanishes” before Lee can linger on the significance of its presence, in the flashback in stanza two the representations of ephemeral nature are portrayed more directly. While on a walk together, Lee’s father seems fully aware and in tune with the fleeting quality of nature, and bears witness to moments of waning

life that seem to mirror his own declining health. Lee "walked beside my father / among the windfall pears," and like the peaches in "The Weight of Sweetness," the pears in this poem are separated from the branches that sustain them and the "young onions" pulled from the ground, positioning them in a liminal space between flourishing life and rotting death (9). However, as Lee and his father stroll along together, Lee recalls:

> 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. (11-14)

However, unlike the peaches, at least one of these pears is rotting and dying, along with the hornet trapped in the juice. It is within this flashback, which focuses on the physicality of the pear, that there is simultaneously a foreshadowing of the "inevitability of physical decline" (Xiaojing 122). The "mnemonic sensory experience implies that the artifact bears within it layered commensal meanings … and histories … The sensory connection between perceiver and artifact completes the latter in an unexpected and nonprescribed fashion because the perceiver is also the recipient of the unintended historical aftereffects of the artifact's presence or absence" (Seremetakis 303). In these poems, the artifact is the same as the referent, myth/signifier, or central image, all of which inform the subject/being of the poems. Although, in these food poems, Lee's father is as much the artifact as food, and the "historical aftereffects," unintended or not, affect the imagery and tone of these poems, and how the identity of the subject is formed and viewed by the reader. The absence Seremetakis mentions, of Lee's father, becomes clear in the third stanza of "Eating Alone."

While the vanishing cardinal of stanza one seemed to act as a premonition or an early, though not clearly identifiable, reference to the death of his father, stanza three clearly addresses this loss. The stanza reads:

> 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. ("Eating Alone" lines 15-19)

Here there begins the sense of what Partridge calls "assimilation" or "communion" with the larger "macrocosm" as described by Goldstein. Lee sees a ghost of his father in the trees, but one might read this as though Lee's father has become a tree, like a personified object, "waving to [him]." In death, we become one again with nature, "dust to dust…," we are (re)assimilated or brought into communion with the nature that surrounds us. From the start of this poem to the end, the speaker is in direct communication with nature, the sustenance drawn from the land, and the memories attached to the artifacts of the land. Moreover, there is an establishment of identity with nature in this poem, bracketed not only with images of loneliness as mentioned before but also with images of food, starting with "the last of the year's young onions" and ending with an entire stanza dedicated to a meal consumed by loneliness. The final line of the poem follows the description of a traditional meal "and my own loneliness. / What more could I, a young man, want," and ends with a period (22-23). By choosing to close the line with a period instead of a question mark, "the final line's sardonic tone is achieved through the juxtaposing of the poet's father's [supposed] absence from the garden and his implicit absence from the table" (Partridge 113). This is a supposed absence, because while the physical absence of the father is clear, the

poet still senses his presence through memory, causing the father to "work as a mythical figure in Lee's poems" (Stern 9). For Lee, according to Gerald Stern's Foreword to *Rose*, "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" (9). Thus, Lee's father has become a greater figure, a spectral figure of memory. Just as other memories are conjured by food in Lee's food poems, the mythic ghost of Lee's father seems to be as well.

Confronting the Self in "Eating Together"

While "Eating Alone" is separated into distinct stanzas, "Eating Together" is composed of twelve lines and a single stanza, which begins with scenes of cooked food, into living connectedness, and ends with scenes of loss and nature. Partridge notes that "the Chinese meal of rice and steamed fish in 'Eating Together' is a metaphor that combines generational continuity with a sense of familial belonging after the death of the poet's father, and the metaphor is juxtaposed with the loneliness of the meal described in 'Eating Alone'" (107). Because "Eating Together" starts with a similar meal as the one described at the end of "Eating Alone," "Eating Together" seems to be written in a reverse thematical form from "Eating Alone." Likewise, the single stanza formatting of "Eating Together," despite the various scenes depicted in the stanza, adds to the sense of togetherness through its depiction of various scenes carried out in the single stanza, whereas "Eating Alone" heightens the sense of loneliness by dividing various scenes and memories into separate stanzas. Lastly, while "Eating Alone" contains very few enjambed lines and no enjambed stanzas, "Eating Together" contains significantly more enjambed lines,

weaving a tighter narrative structure within the poem and drawing the numerous scenes together into one stanza.

"Eating Together," again, starts with a meal, whereas "Eating Alone" ends with a meal. The meals themselves are remarkably similar and traditional, with both containing rice and onion. David Kaplan claims that "part of who we are can be explained by how our diets evolved … But it is more likely that cooking, not hunting, was the main reason the early humans developed their cognitive and social capacities" (158-159). Likewise, Deborah Lupton claims that "preparing a meal may evoke memories of past events when that meal was prepared and eaten, conjuring up the emotions felt at that time, or the experience may cause one to look forward to the sharing of the meal with another, anticipating an emotional outcome" (320). Therefore, the similar meals in these two poems, and whether they are cooked and eaten alone or together, portray a lot about the "cognitive and social capacities" of the subject and the "emotional outcome of the meals." These similarities and the almost habitual sharing of the food in "Eating Together," with Lee's mother adopting the role of his father, speak to the ritualistic aspects of eating in which ritual functions as another type of shared or collective memory. Despite the similarity in content, the meal in "Eating Together" is a shared meal, as the title of the poem implies, which is crucial to understanding the key differences between the poems and how this affects memory and identity. According to David B. Goldstein,

> many of the relationships that food marks fall under the term 'commensality.' Derived from the Latin *commensalis*, 'with the table,' commensality means eating together. Narrowly, then, commensality refers to the social aspects of the meal. More broadly, however, commensality describes the range of relationships that emerge and are reified through the act of eating. (40-41)

"Eating Together" is a perfect example of commensality and "the range of relationships" caused by commensality because "commensal bonds, like the food one eats, emerge, transform, and vanish to recombine later, both as substance and memory" (50). Likewise, Xiaojing claims that eating suggests a voluntary eagerness to open oneself to new things, a courage to encounter the unknown, and a capacity to absorb all with ease or pain" (128). In "Eating Together," there appears to be both "ease and pain."

As with "Eating Alone," the tone and meaning of "Eating Together" is predicated on the recent loss of Lee's father. However, because Lee is no longer eating alone in this poem, the loss is eased by the presence of

> 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… (lines 5-9)

The easing of the pain of loss through the commensality of the meal is set against the recent loss of Lee's father only "weeks ago." According to Partridge, "the father is still absent, but the community of family around their Chinese meal remembers the father as the conveyor of tradition [communal memory] and, significantly, as no longer alone. In the community of family, the poet is not lonely, and neither is his father. The family continues the tradition of eating together" (113). Despite the absence of his father, in connecting the physical "pleasure of eating" with the "reflective sensation" of the "pleasures of the table," the shared family meal allows Lee to get to a state of eating Brillat- Savarin recognized as the "pleasure of eating, suggesting that

> The truth is that at the end of a well-savored meal both soul and body enjoy a special well-being.
>
> Physically, at the same time that a diner's brain awakens, his face grows animates, his color heightens, his eyes shine, and a gentle warmth creeps over his whole body.
>
> Morally, his spirit grows more perceptive, his imagination flowers, and clever phrases fly to his lips …
>
> … Best of all, every modification which complete sociability has introduced among us can be found assembled around the same table: love, friendship, business, speculation, power, importunity, patronage, ambition, intrigue; and this is why conviviality is a part of everything alive, and why it bears fruits of every flavor. (182-183)

Thus, the communal meal has restorative qualities for both mind and body, as all sustenance does because "in eating we experience a certain special and indefinable well-being, which arises from our instinctive realization that by the very act we perform we are repairing our bodily losses and prolonging our lives" (42-43). In the meal shared with his family, Lee's mind and body are restored and as he grows more perceptive a fuller picture of his father forms at the end of "Eating Together" as compared to the fleeting images of his father in "Eating Alone."

At the end of "Eating Alone," Lee asks a rhetorical question — again, I must note that the final line of "Eating Alone" is only a question in tone because it is not formatted as a question and instead ends with a full stop — concerning his loneliness; yet at the end of "Eating Together," this loneliness is paralleled though the subject has changed:

> … 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. (line 9-12)

Lee is no longer lonely after a meal with his remaining family, and his father is no longer lonely because he has figuratively become one with nature over the course of four lines of poetry which read like a Robert Frost poem. Just as Frost "tends to produce a kind of balance between the natural objects observed and the thoughts and feelings of the observer," Lee produces this same balance (Ghasemi and Mansooji 463). "In Frost's poems one is essentially confronted with an examination of the confrontation between man and the natural world, *which ultimately leads to man confronting himself*" (italics added, 463). This "confrontation between man and the natural world" has been present throughout Lee's poetry thus far, and at each point of confrontation within these poems — usually through the consumption of food — the subject confronts himself. Again, Barthes describes myth as "a double-function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes on us," thus acting as sign, signifier, and signified, or as Barthes labels them: signification, meaning, and concept, respectively (117). Likewise, Lee claims that "a poem doesn't simply transpose being. It also proposes possibilities of being" (*Alabaster Jar* 144-5). Through the food myth/central image in these poems by Lee, in combination with nature, the subject is created or confronts itself.

CHAPTER 4. THE APPLE

"Apples on the trees: I look at them and see all these words on the trees. It's all language."

(Li-Young Lee, *Alabaster Jar*, 138)

As discussed in Chapter Two with the poems "Eating Alone" and "Eating Together," there is a sense of the subject of the poem confronting themselves in nature and in the food they eat. In this chapter — which will cover "Falling: The Code" from *Rose*, and from *Behind My Eyes* "The Mother's Apple," "The Father's Apple," and "The Apple Elopes" — the poems do not "simply transpose being. [They] also propose possibilities of being" (*Alabaster Jar* 144-5). The connection established between the subject, Lee, and land and nature is further blurred, and with these four apple poems there comes an even greater sense of becoming one with nature as Lee metaphorically becomes the apple subject/artifact of the poems. Lee has stated that "the poem, if it's successful, enacts its own making. That's what we mean when we say in the best light, poetry is about poetry. The poem is like a person. You are about your history. You're referential in that you refer to yourself. You're about your parents, where you come from, but you're also about you and a poem is like that" (*Alabaster Jar* 62). The Barthes myth, the signifier, the central image, etc. have been established and built on throughout this thesis and in this chapter — "the confrontation between man and the natural world, *which ultimately leads to man confronting himself*" — the signifier and signified become indistinguishable, the referent refers to itself as Lee claims (italics added, Ghasemi and Mansooji 463). For the apple poem quartet surveyed in this chapter, this blurring of identity between referent and subject is done through apples and language, because according to Lee, "it's all language," and also through the poetic form (*Alabaster Jar* 138).

Looking at the four apple poems in order of publication, starting first with "Falling: The Code" in *Rose*, then, in the order of how they are printed, "The Mother's Apple," "The Father's Apple," and "The Apple Elopes" from *Behind My Eyes*, one can trace the transformation of identity. "Falling: The Code," begins to tentatively establish a closer connection between the subject and nature, allowing Lee to begin to understand more fully his own identity and connection to nature. "The Mother's Apple," "The Father's Apple," and "The Apple Elopes" depict being and identity in the metaphorical state of being an apple, one which blossoms and matures before finally breaking from its branches, eloping, and going off on its own to discover its own path. Therefore, "The Mother's Apple" and "The Father's Apple" are the poems/person Lee describes that are "about your parents, where you come from," and "The Apple Elopes" is "about you" (62).

As established previously, food can function as a myth/signifier. According to Barthes in *Mythologies*, the motivation, the mythical signifier or sign is one amongst many and contains a "duplicity of its signifier, which is at once meaning and form" (128). Barthes claims the most dynamic form of reading myth occurs if one focuses "on the mythical signifier as on an inextricable whole made of meaning and form, and [one] receive[s] an ambiguous signification: [we] respond to the constituting mechanism of myth, to its own dynamics, [we] become a reader of myths … the reader lives the myth as a story at once true and unreal" (128). For the reader, the duplicitous myth of food and its connection to memory is "at once true and unreal," "true" because we are signified by the sign and signifier, by the myth, yet "unreal" because we are not the true signified of the myth, rather the author, the carrier of memory in these poems, is the true signified (128). Despite this, Barthes stated that in truth, myth is a "compromise" and "transforms history into nature" (129).

Lee says that with his poetry, "I'm interested in getting through the personal memories to experience that bigger memory, that significance but also the huge collective of significance. And a lot of that is remembering— remembering what we are. That we're not just our personal history. We're not just who we are in this life span. We're something older. It's in ourselves, our bones" (*Alabaster Jar* 109). Likewise, food is part of this significance, it sustains us biologically and forms our bones, yet "food is who we are in the deepest sense, and not because it is transformed into blood and bone" (Silva xxvi). Gitanjali G. Shahani argues that "in the wake of postmodern tenets that our identities are fragmented and tenuous, food becomes the only remaining *marker of selfhood*. If we write about food on an unprecedented scale, it is to grapple with these changing identities and nostalgically hark back to lost ones" (added italics, 10). Or, as Appelbaum suggests, food is "an index of being itself" (131). The four poems analyzed in this chapter seem to have the most clearly defined metaphors of all of the food poems explored in this thesis. Thus, the transformation described by Barthes and the aphorism "you are what you eat" seems to become increasingly more precise.

The Senses in "Falling: The Code"

This poem is numbered with parts one and two, and while the two parts are thematically related, they are drastically different from each other in form. In print, part one falls on the left page and part two falls on the right so that they are physically separated on the page. Based on the content of each part, presumably part one is "Falling" because of its imagery of falling apples and part two is "The Code" because of the narrative and formal focus on the "syncopated code" created by the sound of the falling apples ("Falling: The Code" line 24). Part one is consistent with the form of most of Lee's poems in *Rose* — though not exactly the same because of course

line counts and line length differ — with two longer stanzas, the first is 10 lines in length and the second is 11 lines. Part two diverges significantly in form when compared to the other poems in *Rose* because it is made up entirely of couplets, five in total. With that in mind, I would like to examine each part in turn so that I can more fully demonstrate the transformation in identity taking place within this poem and then into the other poems that will be analyzed in this chapter.

Part 1. "Falling"

As mentioned above, the first part of this poem portrays apples as they fall from their branches to the ground. While the imagery is rich like Lee's other poems with enjambed lines which mimic the falling of the apples, part one of this poem captures magnificently the sound of the apples as they fall through clever use of language and silence. This narrative poem starts,

> Through the night
> the apples
> outside my window
> one by one let go
> their branches and
> drop to the lawn. (lines 1-6)

With the enjambed lines the lines shift down as the apples "let go" and "drop" (4, 6). Even though the speaker of the poem, Lee, and the reader can likely picture the apples falling, Lee states,

> I can't see, but hear
> the stem-snap, the plummet
> through leaves, then
> the final thump against the ground. (7-10)

Just as the speaker hears “the stem-snap,” the reader does as well in the short and harsh sound of the hyphenated “stem-snap” (8). And again, the line “plummet[s]” as the apple does, “then” a pause in the line — a beat of silence and extra physical space in print in line 9 — as the listener waits for the apples to “thump against the ground” (8-10). As the apple falls to the ground with a “final thump,” one can almost hear the thump in the period that ends the stanza (10).

Stanza two continues to imitate the apples as they fall in the form of the lines, and just as the harsh “stem-snap” and muted “thump” of stanza one emulates the sound of the branches breaking and the apples falling, a rhythm of sounds begins to form in stanza two through additional skillful use of language and silence. The apples continue to fall and one can hear the thud “sometimes two / at once, or one / right after another,” with each one a beat (11-13). However,

> During long moments of silence
> I wait
> and wonder about the bruised bodies,
> the terror of diving through the air… (14-17)

In the silence, as indicated by the empty, caesura-like space following “wait” in line 15, there is a volta, a turning or changing of emotion in Lee and the poem. He is no longer simply listening to the apples fall, but he anthropomorphizes them. While Barthes seems to anthropomorphize the steak myth in *Mythologies*, describing steak as “adorned with a supplementary virtue of elegance,” in this poem Lee identifies the apples’ “bruised bodies” — another harsh-sounding alliterative phrase to match the sound of the physical trauma the fruit endures as it hits the ground — and imparting/projecting onto them a sense of “terror” (*Mythologies* 63; “Falling: The Code” lines 16-17). In anthropomorphizing the apples, by almost recognizing their being or more

precisely by recognizing and projecting his own feelings onto them, Lee comes one step closer to entering into "fellowship" with them, like the peaches' "fellowship in the bins," though this time it might not be a "sweet fellowship" ("From Blossoms" 7).

As mentioned in my analysis of "The Weight of Sweetness" and "From Blossoms," the separation of fruit from its branches begins a slow progression, or procession, towards death and the apples in this poem are no different. However, while Lee did not seem to directly acknowledge the approaching death of the fruit in "From Blossoms" and "The Weight of Sweetness" beyond a connection made to the death of his father in both, Lee directly addresses the fallen fruit in the final lines of stanza two of "Falling." He says,

> … and
> think I'll go tomorrow
> to find the newly fallen, but they
> all look alike lying there
> dewsoaked, disappearing before me. ("Falling: The Code" lines 17-21)

As though he were at a funeral, Lee mourns the death of these apples. Yet in the silence of this funeral — in spite of Lee finally seeing but not hearing the apples, the inverse of "I can't see, but hear" in line 7, either way it is a stalled synesthesia — their image disappears, like the vanishing cardinal in "Eating Alone." In part two of the poem, "The Code," the apples become clearer again as the sound of their falling intensifies and Lee dreams of them rather than waiting to observe their physical bodies in the morning as he does in part one, "Falling."

Part 2. "The Code"

As previously mentioned, part two of this poem is drastically different in form from part one and from most of Lee's other poems in *Rose* because it is constructed of five couplets, which

together form a single sentence. Since I will be closely analyzing the form of this poem because it is crucial for reading the rhythm and tone of this part, I would like to include the entirety of "The Code" here at the beginning of my analysis. It reads:

2.

I lie beneath my window listening
to the sound of apples dropping in

the yard, a syncopated code I long to know,
which continues even as I sleep, and dream I know

the meaning of what I hear, each dull
thud of unseen apple-

body, the earth
falling to earth

once and forever, over
and over. ("Falling: The Code" lines 22-31)

In this part, there are not only enjambed lines but enjambed stanzas, with the spaces between the couplets like the silent space that the apples fall through between the tree and the ground. Unlike the slow tenderness of the transitions in "Persimmons," however, these are quick moments of silence, almost forcing the reader to hold their breath as they wait for the next beat of the poem,

the next thump of an apple. This ties directly into the "syncopated code" that Lee "long[s] to know" (line 25).

Syncopation is typically a term associated with music, especially jazz, and according to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, syncopation is

> the displacement of regular accents associated with given metrical patterns, resulting in a disruption of the listener's expectations and the arousal of a desire for the reestablishment of metric normality; hence the characteristic "forward drive" of highly syncopated music. Syncopation may be effected by accenting normally weak beats in a measure, by resting on a normal accented beat, or by tying over a note to the next measure. ("Syncopation")

Lee "long[s] to know" this code, so he creates this code in the form of the poem by creating strong silences and displaced beats, and by breaking up lines and phrases like the change from lines 27-28, "thud of unseen apple- // body, the earth," for example. As the poem continues, the lines progressively get shorter, pushing that "forward drive," that breathlessness as one waits "for the reestablishment of metric normality," while also catching Lee and the readers in the same paradoxical loop as the fruit, "falling to earth // once and forever, over / and over" ("Syncopation;" "Falling: The Code" lines 29-31).

The final four lines, which paradoxically indicate the falling of the apples as "the earth / falling to earth" both "once and forever," are reminiscent of "the familiar dust of summer, dust we eat" ("Falling: The Code" lines 28-30; "From Blossoms" 10). Again, the separation of the apples from their branches, just like other fruits, begins the cycle of death. In part one, "Falling," Lee seems to keep vigil over the fallen apples, watching as they disappear, but here in part two, with the repetition of "over / and over" and with the emphasis placed on hearing and attempting to understand the code over seeing the "bruised bodies," Lee begins to re-imagine his being in

imagery that will be repeated over and over throughout the trilogy of apple poems in *Behind My Eyes* ("Falling: The Code" 30-1, 16).

The Trilogy of Apple Poems in Behind My Eyes

Tentatively Establishing Identity in "The Mother's Apple"

According to Ghasemi and Mansooji, "in [Robert] Frost's poems," and I argue in "Eating Together" in the previous chapter, "one is essentially confronted with an examination of the confrontation between man and the natural world, *which ultimately leads to man confronting himself*" (italics added, 463). Throughout "Falling: The Code," Lee confronts the natural world, and himself, first through sight and sound, then more effectively through sound alone and the transcription of that sound into poetic form. Leading into "The Mother's Apple," the poem starts with, "I'm my mother's apple and that's that. / My sweetening draws death nearer, it can't be helped" (lines 1-2). Thus, "The Mother's Apple," which contains 23 lines, starts with an establishment of identity.

Within the first line, Lee confronts, albeit broadly, his identity as the metaphorical apple of his mother. In this poem he is his "mother's apple," but while he is drawn to the deaths of the apples in "Falling," here, as the apple, he draws death to himself instead, and unlike the "terror of diving" that is projected onto the apples in "Falling," in "The Mother's Apple," his "bitterness about it is skin deep" ("Falling" line 17; "The Mother's Apple" 3). The poem continues, and Lee attempts to establish his identity more firmly as he considers the words of others versus his own perceptions of himself. He claims, "I'm told I'm a fourfold mystery / like the planet," or like these four apple poems, "but I think more" (4-5). The last part of line five, "but I think more," might be read in two different ways. Either he has been told that he "think[s] more," or he thinks

that he is more than a "fourfold mystery" (4-5). The following two lines seem to indicate the latter, that Lee "think[s] more" because "there are tears inside me I'll never weep / I'm heavy with unimaginable winters" (6-7). Again, his perceptions of himself and his history and memory differ from the perceptions of those who try to form his identity through language. The speaker says,

> And though I'm told
> apples come from apples, I believe
> there must be a star somewhere among my ancestry
> and a bee, a map, a piano, and a shipwreck. (8-11)

Through this confrontation and challenging of his perceived nature, comes the recognition of further, and much more extensive, (ancestral) identity and memory than the diminishing "apples come from apples" (9). However, while the past seems to become clearer, the future of the apple's identity is unclear and Lee is left wondering, "the blossoms give themselves to the wind. Who will I be given to?" (12-13).

There appears to be a shift here in the poem, the narratives being told by others that Lee casually observes and comments on shifts from what he has been told directly — up to this point there are several lines that read "I'm told," or "though I'm told" — to "rumor says, one day all of the iron keys / will spill out of the wind's pockets, / and each key will open a door to a mansion," and the other narrative voices become further removed (4, 8, 14-16). According to Lee, there are five mansions in total, "and one is named *Mind* / … *Abyss* / … *Life* / … *Work* / … *Love*" (17-21). Hence, instead of a "fourfold mystery," Lee was right when he "[thought] more" because life appears to be at least a fivefold mystery (4-5). Yet, until the keys "spill out of the win's pockets," "until then, I'll sit beneath this fragrant lintel, / the falling petals thunderous" (15, 22-3). Just as

in the opening lines if "Code," where Lee lays "beneath my window listening / to the sound of apples dropping in," in this final couplet of "The Mother's Apple," the apple/Lee will sit patiently beneath the tree, observing the changes in themselves and nature. Yet gone are the soft sounds of the soft petals in "From Blossoms" and "The Weight of Sweetness."

The Maturation of the Apple in "The Father's Apple"

Unlike the beginning of "The Mother's Apple," which begins with the assertion of "I'm my mother's apple and that's that," "The Father's Apple" begins with more dialogue that reads, "he says I won't always be an apple" (1). Following this paradoxical countering of "The Mother's Apple" there comes an expansion on the identity founded in "The Mother's Apple," though it still seems incomplete; "descended from a book, / that is my chief end, he says" (2-3). Despite the conflicting expectations stated by Lee's mother and father in the opening lines of these two poems, when the poems are combined with "The Apple Elopes" they demonstrate the maturation of the apple from blossoms to apple, following the life cycle of the fruit as in "From Blossoms," even if the ending state of the fruit is more ambiguous. In "The Mother's Apple," Lee observes as "the blossoms give themselves to the wind" and fall "thunderous" (12, 23). In "The Father's Apple," Lee asks "but where do they keep all those petals? / I wonder," and in his father's response,

> He says they're numbered.
> He says their descent unearths
> a consequent thirst
> and several gaps in my history
> as a falling body,
> whose long-gone steps

led through Egypt and China. (4-11)

There is further recognition in this poem that Lee's understanding of his identity and history is incomplete, there are "several gaps" like the gaps between couplets in "The Code," the gaps at the end of lines as the speaker waits for the apples to hit the ground (8). In spite of the gaps, there is some recognizable history, some personal memory gained in this passage, and in the "long-gone steps / led through Egypt and China" (10-11).

In several interviews, Lee has described the importance of the Book of Exodus, claiming, "the wandering of the children of Israel has profound resonance for me. I don't feel as if those stories are about a primitive tribe in some distant desert. That struggle for belief and faith in the face of humiliation, annihilation, apostasy—all that seems to me really what I go through, what we *all* go through, finally" (*Alabaster Jar* 32). In yet another interview, when speaking on the Book of Exodus, Lee states that for him, "it was somebody telling my story in code. And why was it in code? Because that's a tradition of secrets. In all the books of the Bible there are secrets; that's part of their authority. Poetry's authority also comes from that mystery" (*Alabaster Jar* 76). In "Falling: The Code," the code of the falling apples, apples exiled yet free from their homes in the branches, functions as a mystery or secret that Lee "long[s] to know," and in "The Mother's Apple" and "The Father's Apple," which lead into "The Apple Elopes," there is an endeavor towards the claiming of the elusive narrative story, of history, that will grant the subject authority over their own identity ("Falling: The Code" line 24). It is unclear though, due to the paradoxes of these poems, if this authority over identity can ever be complete because "the burden of the seeds is a mystery" ("The Father's Apple" 14). Nevertheless, "a voice sleeps inside me, he promises / and a reader will come, bringing dawn," and again there is the return of sound,

He throws his voice.

Now the loud sun. Now the deafening moon.

Some nights, when the whole house is asleep,

I sneak out with the pollen. (17-22)

Following the return of sound — "loud" and "deafening" as the "thunderous" petals, "the stem-snaps" and "thump" and "thud" of apples — there is a final couplet, just like "The Mother's Apple" ("The Father's Apple" 20; "The Mother's Apple" 23; "Falling: The Code" 8, 10, 27). The observational subject of the speaker in the final couplet of "The Mother's Apple" is "the falling petals thunderous," whereas in the final couplet of this poem, Lee has moved to the next step of the life cycle of the apple, to pollination ("The Mother's Apple" 23, "The Father's Apple" 22). This demonstrates a maturation of the subject, moving one step closer to independence as the metaphorical apple.

Becoming an Independent Subject in "The Apple Elopes"

Just like part two of "Falling: The Code," "The Apple Elopes" is significantly different in form from most of Lee's other poems. Yet, while "The Mother's Apple" and "The Father's Apple" are similar in form to part one, "Falling," "The Apple Elopes" is like part two, "Code," because it too is made up almost entirely of couplets, with the exception of a solitary line that ends the poem. In "Eating Alone," one of the spectral images of Lee's father stands in the trees, which creates an added depth to this imagery once this trilogy of apple poems is factored in because if Lee is metaphorically an apple, his parents are the tree that he eventually elopes from in "The Apple Elopes."

Like "Code," there are numerous enjambed lines and stanzas which fall down the page, starting with, "counting backward, / I plunge" in the opening couplet ("The Apple Elopes" 1-2). Unlike "The Mother's Apple" and "The Father's Apple," here Lee appears to have gained full

narrative authority, claiming the first two lines, and the rest of the moving action of the poem for himself. Likewise, “The Apple Elopes” contains a similar syncopated rhythm as “Code,” except this time Lee is not listening to the apples as they create the code, he is the apple; he has learned the “syncopated code” that he longed to know” (“Falling: The Code” 24).

As he plunges, and the lines plunge down the page, “toward growing shade / of my ripening,” distantly he hears his

mother asking

from her window, *Have you seen my comb?*

asking from the porch stairs,

Who broke the clock? (original italics, “The Apple Elopes” 5-10)

Lee plunges “past my father warning from the edge / of the yard, *Never tithe in the dark*,” with the “edge” falling on the edge of the line (original italics, 11-12). “Their tones” seem to frustrate Lee, and “live in what’s bitter about me,” but as Lee described in “The Mother’s Apple,” “my bitterness about it is skin deep” because “they mean well” (“The Apple Elopes 13-14, “The Mother’s Apple” 3). Additionally, the original cause for bitterness in “The Mother’s Apple” is because his “sweetening draws death nearer,” but in “Elopes,”

what’s sweet, what’s round and what’s steep,

what’s fragrant and what no one can marry,

me a forgetful flesh

learning the heart’s tables by repetition.

**

me a remembering flesh weeping,

There's no going back!

A drunken flesh laughing, *There's no going back!* ("Mother's" 2; original italics, "Elopes" 15-21).

Finally, Lee has learned "the heart's tables by repetition," he has heard and since participated in the code as

… apple-

body, the earth

falling to earth

once and forever, over

and over. ("Falling: The Code" 27-31).

"Over / and over" he has heard the code and learned by repetition. The bliss of this moment is fleeting — just like the tender memories of his father in the other poems analyzed in this thesis — as all bliss seems to be. In this freedom, and in the final lines of "The Apple Elopes," there is a wistful and, paradoxically, a drunken giddy recognition that "*there's no going back!*" ("Elopes" 19-21). Just as the speaker of Frost's "The Road Not Taken," Lee recognizes that, for better or worse, "*there's no going back*" and either path taken results in a "confrontation between

man and the natural world, *which ultimately leads to man confronting himself*" ("Elopes" 20-1; italics added, Ghasemi and Mansooji 463).

Throughout "Falling: The Code," "The Mother's Apple," "The Father's Apple," and "The Apple Elopes," Lee repeats the imagery of falling blossoms and apples "over / and over," until he is finally able to imagine himself as a solitary apple breaking free from its branches and going off on its own in "The Apple Elopes." By tracing this life cycle and growth "from blossom to blossom / to impossible, to sweet impossible blossom," to commensality and conviviality like the pollination of bees, to "the round jubilance of [fruit]," to "the weight of memory," and finally "toward the growing shade / of my ripening," this thesis has, perhaps, come full circle. In other words, through tracing the life cycle of fruit, starting with a poem that forms a connection between the speaker and fruit blossoms through memory, to a poem that metaphorically shapes identity as an apple, this thesis has tracked the life cycle of fruit in nature as it informs identity and memory.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

"The rose became 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."

(Gerald Stern, "Foreword" to *Rose*, 10)

When asked about what he expects of his readers, Lee responds, "all I ask is that readers are 'soul-awake' … The reader has to be prepared for what gets them. That's all; it's not much. It's not much, but it's an awful lot" (*Alabaster Jar* 27). Being "soul-awake" required me to recognize my own interests and takeaways while reading these poems and for me, that came in the form of food and exploring how food affected the subject but also how it affected me as a reader. The inspiration for this project, the text which first caused me to recognize the connection between food and memory, was Daniel Nayeri's *Everything Sad is Untrue: A True Story* (2020). Later, as I began to investigate this connection further, I discovered Marcel Proust and the infamous madeleines that became foundational to food studies in literature. However, even beyond those two texts and food studies, my personal interest in food is even more intrinsic. Of course, I must recognize that food and nutrition are crucial matters for survival, but my food memories operate beyond that base need and are foundational to who I am as a person. In the Introduction, I mention fly-fishing with my dad and drinking tea to warm up, but I also have extensive memories of my mom teaching me to bake and cook, passing down recipes and techniques from my grandparents that she has accumulated, and taking my little sister out for lunch to our favorite restaurant once I was old enough to drive us there myself. Many of my memories of my family are interconnected with my food memories, and I found this reflected in these food poems by Li-Young Lee.

While Lee's father is a near-constant presence in the collection *Rose*, and an intense presence in some of his other collections, Lee has since talked in interviews about how

> the shedding of this influence of my father is more than changing subjects. Part of me wishes that it were that simple. But for me the writing is so personal that I have to get beyond the figure of this all-knowing, all-powerful, fierce, loving, and all-suffering figure. I have to somehow get beyond that in my own life, in order to continue, in order to achieve my own final shapeliness. Or I'll be forever contending with the existence of these fabricated characteristics of all-powerful, all-knowing, and so on. Part of me has to dismantle that in order to get through it in my own life. I guess I'm doing that in my own writing, too. (*Alabaster Jar* 47).

I believe there is a glimpse of this dismantling in the later poems analyzed in this thesis, particularly "The Apple Elopes." As with much of Lee's writing, this dismantling, this moving away comes an intricate, diverse, and potentially paradoxical set of emotions ranging from a recognition of "a great deal of strength that I got from both my mother and father," to "a grief: while I was moving away from the figure of the father I was also moving away from the last evidence of a life I would never see again— that is, the life of the refugee and the immigrant," and yet Lee admits "to this day, I've been trying to dismantle him and to see him as a man, but every time I try to do that, another thing comes up, and he's this mythic being again" (*Alabaster Jar* 34, 47, 108). Through this complex combination of sentiments, which are unmistakable yet nearly undefinable in Lee's poetry, the "emphasis on memory invites a nostalgic recollection of flavors that may seem more vivid and truer than anything present-day life has to offer" (Korsmeyer 8).

I would like to note again, that the "duplicitous" Barthes myth, which I have equated with food throughout this project, is "at once true and unreal" depending on the perspective (*Mythologies* 128). As a reader of these poems, I recognize a deep connection between food, memory, and identity; but only Lee, as the writer and often the subject of these poems, can truly understand the full significance and intentions behind these poems. As I started this project, I quickly realized that in order to give Lee's poems the proper attention they deserved, I would have to try and carefully balance my analyses of his poems between analyses of form, analyses of content, and my own personal perceptions of the poem which I channeled through my focus on food in his poetry. As Gerald Stern admits in the Foreword to *Rose*, in a statement I wholeheartedly agree with, Lee "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" (10). In Chapters Two and Three, I discovered a wealth of secondary sources to draw from to help aid my analyses of the poems in those chapters, yet for Chapter Four, I found myself at a loss with next to no secondary sources to consult. In spite of this, I decided to go out on a limb, pun fully intended, and attempted to analyze the four enigmatic and reserved apple poems with the hopes that I might add valuable knowledge to the scholarly conversation surrounding Li-Young Lee's poetry. As mentioned before, Lee has several poetry collections, a memoir, and a collection of interviews. Hence, this thesis is by no means a complete exploration of his poetry — nor a complete digestion of his food poetry because he has several other food poems — but it is a detailed reading of some of Lee's magnificent poems which make up only part of all his poetry has to offer. After all, "art is mystery and our critical prose only begins to penetrate it" (Stern 10).

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APPENDIX: Permissions

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