



# POETRY FOUNDATION

[Home](#) > [Poems & Poets](#) > [Browse Poems](#) > [Persimmons](#)

## Persimmons

BY LI-YOUNG LEE

In sixth grade Mrs. Walker  
slapped the back of my head  
and made me stand in the corner  
for not knowing the difference  
between *persimmon* and *precision*.

How to choose

persimmons. This is precision.  
Ripe ones are soft and brown-spotted.  
Sniff the bottoms. The sweet one  
will be fragrant. How to eat:  
put the knife away, lay down newspaper.  
Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat.  
Chew the skin, suck it,  
and swallow. Now, eat  
the meat of the fruit,  
so sweet,  
all of it, to the heart.

Donna undresses, her stomach is white.

In the yard, dewy and shivering  
with crickets, we lie naked,  
face-up, face-down.

I teach her Chinese.

Cricket: *chui chui*. Dew: I've forgotten.

Naked: I've forgotten.

*Ni, wo*: you and me.

I part her legs,  
remember to tell her  
she is beautiful as the moon.

Other words

that got me into trouble were

*fight* and *fright*, *wren* and *yarn*.

Fight was what I did when I was frightened,

Fright was what I felt when I was fighting.

Wrens are small, plain birds,

yarn is what one knits with.

Wrens are soft as yarn.

My mother made birds out of yarn.

I loved to watch her tie the stuff;

a bird, a rabbit, a wee man.

Mrs. Walker brought a persimmon to class

and cut it up

so everyone could taste

a *Chinese apple*. Knowing

it wasn't ripe or sweet, I didn't eat

but watched the other faces.

My mother said every persimmon has a sun

inside, something golden, glowing,

warm as my face.

Once, in the cellar, I found two wrapped in newspaper,  
forgotten and not yet ripe.

I took them and set both on my bedroom windowsill,

where each morning a cardinal

sang, *The sun, the sun*.

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

This year, in the muddy lighting  
of my parents' cellar, I rummage, looking  
for something I lost.  
My father sits on the tired, wooden stairs,  
black cane between his knees,  
hand over hand, gripping the handle.  
He's so happy that I've come home.  
I ask how his eyes are, a stupid question.  
*All gone*, he answers.

Under some blankets, I find a box.  
Inside the box I find three scrolls.  
I sit beside him and untie  
three paintings by my father:  
Hibiscus leaf and a white flower.  
Two cats preening.  
Two persimmons, so full they want to drop from the cloth.

He raises both hands to touch the cloth,  
asks, *Which is this?*

*This is persimmons, Father.*

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

*I painted them hundreds of times  
eyes closed. These I painted blind.  
Some things never leave a person:  
scent of the hair of one you love,  
the texture of persimmons,  
in your palm, the ripe weight.*

Li-Young Lee, "Persimmons" from *Rose*. Copyright © 1986 by Li-Young Lee. Reprinted with the permission of BOA Editions Ltd., [www.boaeditors.org](http://www.boaeditors.org).

Source: *Rose* (BOA Editions Ltd., 1986)

---

## RELATED CONTENT

Discover this poem's context and related poetry, articles, and media.

### POET

Li-Young Lee

### SUBJECTS

Living, Marriage & Companionship, Love, Desire, Heartache & Loss, Activities, Eating & Drinking, School & Learning, Relationships, Family & Ancestors, Home Life, Philosophy

### POETIC TERMS

Free Verse

Report a problem with this poem.

# POETRY

The oldest monthly devoted to verse in the English language.



[June 2016 Table of Contents](#)

[Buy This Issue](#)

[Subscribe to \*Poetry\* Magazine](#)

[Browse All Issues Back to 1912](#)