The Cleaving

Li-Young Lee, 1957

He gossips like my grandmother, this man

with my face, and I could stand

amused all afternoon

in the Hon Kee Grocery,

amid hanging meats he

chops: roast pork cut

from a hog hung

by nose and shoulders,

her entire skin burnt

crisp, flesh I know

to be sweet,

her shining

face grinning

up at ducks

dangling single file,

each pierced by black

hooks through breast, bill,

and steaming from a hole

stitched shut at the ass,

I step to the counter, recite,

and he, without even slightly

varying the rhythm of his current confession or harangue,

scribbles my order on a greasy receipt,

and chops it up quick.

Such a sorrowful Chinese face,

nomad, Gobi, Northern

in its boniness

clear from the high

warlike forehead

to the sheer edge of the jaw.

He could be my brother, but finer,

and, except for his left forearm, which is engorged,

sinewy from his daily grip and

wield of a two-pound tool,

he’s delicate, narrow-

waisted, his frame

so slight a lover, some

rough other

might break it down

its smooth, oily length.

In his light-handed calligraphy

on receipts and in his

moodiness, he is

a Southerner from a river-province;

suited for scholarship, his face poised

above an open book, he’d mumble

his favorite passages.

He could be my grandfather;

come to America to get a Western education

in 1917, but too homesick to study,

he sits in the park all day, reading poems

and writing letters to his mother.

He lops the head off, chops

the neck of the duck

into six, slits

the body

open, groin

to breast, and drains

the scalding juices,

then quarters the carcass

with two fast hacks of the cleaver,

old blade that has worn

into the surface of the round

foot-thick chop-block

a scoop that cradles precisely the curved steel.

The head, flung from the body, opens

down the middle where the butcher

cleanly halved it between

the eyes, and I

see, foetal-crouched

inside the skull, the homunculus,

gray brain grainy

to eat.

Did this animal, after all, at the moment

its neck broke,

image the way his executioner

shrinks from his own death?

Is this how

I, too, recoil from my day?

See how this shape

hordes itself, see how

little it is.

See its grease on the blade.

Is this how I’ll be found

when judgement is passed, when names

are called, when crimes are tallied?

This is also how I looked before I tore my mother open.

Is this how I presided over my century, is this how

I regarded the murders?

This is also how I prayed.

Was it me in the Other

I prayed to when I prayed?

This too was how I slept, clutching my wife.

Was it me in the other I loved

when I loved another?

The butcher sees me eye this delicacy.

With a finger, he picks it

out of the skull-cradle

and offers it to me.

I take it gingerly between my fingers

and suck it down.

I eat my man.

The noise the body makes

when the body meets

the soul over the soul’s ocean and penumbra

is the old sound of up-and-down, in-and-out,

a lump of muscle chug-chugging blood

into the ear; a lover’s

heart-shaped tongue;

flesh rocking flesh until flesh comes;

the butcher working

at his block and blade to marry their shapes

by violence and time;

an engine crossing,

re-crossing salt water, hauling

immigrants and the junk

of the poor. These

are the faces I love, the bodies

and scents of bodies

for which I long

in various ways, at various times,

thirteen gathered around the redwood,

happy, talkative, voracious

at day’s end,

eager to eat

four kinds of meat

prepared four different ways,

numerous plates and bowls of rice and vegetables,

each made by distinct affections

and brought to table by many hands.

Brothers and sisters by blood and design,

who sit in separate bodies of varied shapes,

we constitute a many-membered

body of love.

In a world of shapes

of my desires, each one here

is a shape of one of my desires, and each

is known to me and dear by virtue

of each one’s unique corruption

of those texts, the face, the body:

that jut jaw

to gnash tendon;

that wide nose to meet the blows

a face like that invites;

those long eyes closing on the seen;

those thick lips

to suck the meat of animals

or recite 300 poems of the T’ang;

these teeth to bite my monosyllables;

these cheekbones to make

those syllables sing the soul.

Puffed or sunken

according to the life,

dark or light according

to the birth, straight

or humped, whole, manqué, quasi, each pleases, verging

on utter grotesquery.

All are beautiful by variety.

The soul too

is a debasement

of a text, but, thus, it

acquires salience, although a

human salience, but

inimitable, and, hence, memorable.

God is the text.

The soul is a corruption

and a mnemonic.

A bright moment,

I hold up an old head

from the sea and admire the haughty

down-curved mouth

that seems to disdain

all the eyes are blind to,

including me, the eater.

Whole unto itself, complete

without me, yet its

shape complements the shape of my mind.

I take it as text and evidence

of the world’s love for me,

and I feel urged to utterance,

urged to read the body of the world, urged

to say it

in human terms,

my reading a kind of eating, my eating

a kind of reading,

my saying a diminishment, my noise

a love-in-answer.

What is it in me would

devour the world to utter it?

What is it in me will not let

the world be, would eat

not just this fish,

but the one who killed it,

the butcher who cleaned it.

I would eat the way he

squats, the way he

reaches into the plastic tubs

and pulls out a fish, clubs it, takes it

to the sink, guts it, drops it on the weighing pan.

I would eat that thrash

and plunge of the watery body

in the water, that liquid violence

between the man’s hands,

I would eat

the gutless twitching on the scales,

three pounds of dumb

nerve and pulse, I would eat it all

to utter it.

The deaths at the sinks, those bodies prepared

for eating, I would eat,

and the standing deaths

at the counters, in the aisles,

the walking deaths in the streets,

the death-far-from-home, the death-

in-a-strange-land, these Chinatown

deaths, these American deaths.

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.

And I would eat Emerson, his transparent soul, his

soporific transcendence.

I would eat this head,

glazed in pepper-speckled sauce,

the cooked eyes opaque in their sockets.

I bring it to my mouth and--

the way I was taught, the way I’ve watched

others before me do--

with a stiff tongue lick out

the cheek-meat and the meat

over the armored jaw, my eating,

its sensual, salient nowness,

punctuating the void

from which such hunger springs and to which it proceeds.

And what

is this

I excavate

with my mouth?

What is this

plated, ribbed, hinged

architecture, this carp head,

but one more

articulation of a single nothing

severally manifested?

What is my eating,

rapt as it is,

but another

shape of going,

my immaculate expiration?

O, nothing is so

steadfast it won’t go

the way the body goes.

The body goes.

The body’s grave,

so serious

in its dying,

arduous as martyrs

in that task and as

glorious. It goes

empty always

and announces its going

by spasms and groans, farts and sweats.

What I thought were the arms

aching cleave, were the knees trembling leave.

What I thought were the muscles

insisting resist, persist, exist,

were the pores

hissing mist and waste.

What I thought was the body humming reside, reside,

was the body sighing revise, revise.

O, the murderous deletions, the keening

down to nothing, the cleaving.

All of the body’s revisions end

in death.

All of the body’s revisions end.

Bodies eating bodies, heads eating heads,

we are nothing eating nothing,

and though we feast,

are filled, overfilled,

we go famished.

We gang the doors of death.

That is, out deaths are fed

that we may continue our daily dying,

our bodies going

down, while the plates-soon-empty

are passed around, that true

direction of our true prayers,

while the butcher spells

his message, manifold,

in the mortal air.

He coaxes, cleaves, brings change

before our very eyes, and at every

moment of our being.

As we eat we’re eaten.

Else what is this

violence, this salt, this

passion, this heaven?

I thought the soul an airy thing.

I did not know the soul

is cleaved so that the soul might be restored.

Live wood hewn,

its sap springs from a sticky wound.

No seed, no egg has he

whose business calls for an axe.

In the trade of my soul’s shaping,

he traffics in hews and hacks.

No easy thing, violence.

One of its names? Change. Change

resides in the embrace

of the effaced and the effacer,

in the covenant of the opened and the opener;

the axe accomplishes it on the soul’s axis.

What then may I do

but cleave to what cleaves me.

I kiss the blade and eat my meat.

I thank the wielder and receive,

while terror spirits

my change, sorrow also.

The terror the butcher

scripts in the unhealed

air, the sorrow of his Shang

dynasty face,

African face with slit eyes. He is

my sister, this

beautiful Bedouin, this Shulamite,

keeper of sabbaths, diviner

of holy texts, this dark

dancer, this Jew, this Asian, this one

with the Cambodian face, Vietnamese face, this Chinese

I daily face,

this immigrant,

this man with my own face.