

Li-Young Lee

A Hymn to Childhood

Childhood? Which childhood?

The one that didn't last?

The one in which you learned to be afraid
of the boarded-up well in the backyard
and the ladder to the attic?

The one presided over by armed men
in ill-fitting uniforms
strolling the streets and alleys,
while loudspeakers declared a new era,
and the house around you grew bigger,
the rooms farther apart, with more and more
people missing?

The photographs whispered to each other
from their frames in the hallway.
The cooking pots said your name
each time you walked past the kitchen.

And you pretended to be dead with your sister
in games of rescue and abandonment.
You learned to lie still so long
the world seemed a play you viewed from the muffled
safety of a wing. Look! In
run the servants screaming, the soldiers shouting,
turning over the furniture,
smashing your mother's china.

Don't fall asleep.

Each act opens with your mother
reading a letter that makes her weep.
Each act closes with your father fallen
into the hands of Pharaoh.

Which childhood? The one that never ends? O you,
still a child, and slow to grow.

Still talking to God and thinking the snow
falling is the sound of God listening,
and winter is the high-ceilinged house
where God measures with one eye
an ocean wave in octaves and minutes,
and counts on many fingers
all the ways a child learns to say *Me*.

Which childhood?

The one from which you'll never escape? You,
so slow to know
what you know and don't know.
Still thinking you hear low song
in the wind in the eaves,
story in your breathing,
grief in the heard dove at evening,
and plentitude in the unseen bird
tolling at morning. Still slow to tell
memory from imagination, heaven
from here and now,
hell from here and now,
death from childhood, and both of them
from dreaming.