

Chinatsu Nakanishi

## Roots

“I want to be a bird,” everybody must have thought so once. Li-Young Lee’s prose poem, “One Human Hand,” is about remembrance of his father, who immigrated with his family to the United States from Asia. Lee wrote it because he could understand his father’s feelings about being an immigrant in a foreign land when Lee became an adult.

Lee’s father is a Chinese from Indonesia. When Lee was a child, his father would show him the scrolls which he’d brought over from China. They are brush paintings of birds on silk. His best beloved paintings are one is a crane standing alone, and the other one is a shrike perched at the tip alone. Beside, Lee’s father hung many other scrolls on the walls all over his house. If wind breezed, the scroll’s silk bodies danced and their bones knocked against the walls as if they were real bird. Also, his father painted birds by himself. He probably wanted to fly back to Asia like the birds. Through these paintings, Lee understands what his father wanted to teach his son is to have pride and inner strength to being Asian in a non-Asian country.

When Lee was a child, he did not understand why his father showed him the scrolls, or why he painted the bird pictures. However, when Lee became a father, he can understand the reason his father did so. The paintings are symbol of Lee’s father’s soul. One of the paintings

which his father showed him is a crane that is standing alone but has a “fierce eyes” (Lee 201). It looks lonely but actually has a strong will. In Asia, a crane is a symbol of nobility It shows us Asian pride. Another painting which Lee’s father showed him is a strike, “surviving, last carrier of seed and stones” (Lee 201). It is perched at the tip of a thin branch. It has a place where it can stay, but it is not completely settled. Also, it has a family to feed. The strike is another symbol of Lee’s father who had a family to feed. He must have seen himself on these birds. Lee’s father is an immigrant to the United States, a completely different place from Asia, especially for people of his generation. Sometimes, Lee’s father must have missed Asia, felt loneliness like the crane, and he had a family to feed like the strike. Also, Lee understands his father’s feelings from what his father painted. As he painted, Lee’s father swept his brush across sheets of rice paper “his arm [was] moving up and down to [as if] be fifying” (Lee 201). His arm, “one human hand,” which is a title of this poem, looked like a flying bird. He said to Lee he painted the birds, “To make you see flying in a standing body” (Lee 201). “Flying in a standing body” is a contrasting image. The birds, which Lee’s father painted, are standing, not flying. But, they have a will to fly as Lee’s father had a will to succeed.

I have sympathy for Lee’s father because I fled Japan and living in the U.S. In Japan, I was divorced and no job. I came to the U.S. to get the English skills I need to find a better job in

Japan. Since I came here, I have missed Japan a lot. I am thirty-four year old, I am an adult.

Although, here, America, I feel I have no power because I cannot anything by myself. I feel as if

I am a deaf, mute, and blind child. I want to fly back to Japan like birds that Lee's father drew,

but, I cannot do so until I get some skills to survive. I am desperate like Lee's father.

Overall in his poem, Lee shows us the loneliness and the pride of an immigrant. Lee understands his father's loneliness as an immigrant. He has same feelings of his father He writes, "I daily face,! This immigrant, / this man with my own face" (Lee 1990).

Lee's father was very proud of being Asian. We cannot change our roots like him. Now, Lee is proud of being Asian and of being his father's son. Through this poem and American life, I learned to have pride of my own root and being individual. It is part of my strength. Opposite to Japan, America consists of immigrants who have so many different backgrounds. It has diversity American cultures are based on individualism. We need to have our own character and opinion. I believe that it is the best way to be happy regardless of where we live. Also, I believe that Lee's father must have flown freely like a bird in his mind, because he had these strengths.