

# Writing in the Real World



**W**riting about your life can help you discover aspects of yourself you may have forgotten or never realized. The following is an example of personal writing by Li-Young Lee, a poet and author whose works abound with memories from his early life. Lee immigrated to the United States at the age of six. His father, a former official in the Chinese government, was a political prisoner in Indonesia when Lee was born. After Lee's father escaped, the family fled, eventually settling in a Pennsylvania mill town.

The following is an excerpt from Lee's memoirs.



**M**y father slept with his head on a stone wrapped in a piece of white linen I washed once a week. Up until I was nine years old, I napped with him, making myself as small as possible so as not to wake him. I remember how, when he turned over in bed, I made room, wedging myself against the wall, my left arm under my head for a pillow, my legs numb. I lay very quietly while he snored. I lay wide awake against his flesh while he slept with his head on the stone wrapped in the cloth which smelled of his hair, a rich oil. When he died, the stone kept a faintest impression that fit the shape of his head. My mother carried it out, and left it under one of the thirty-six pines that enclosed two sides of the property on which our house stood, the third side the fence where the morning glory climbed. Some days the depression in my father's pillow must fill with rain, just enough to give a cardinal a drink. Or maybe

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somebody has found it by now, has used it as part of a wall, where it fits to another stone shaped like a man's skull. We burned most everything else before selling the house and moving. Out of the heap of his papers, notebooks, manuscripts, photographs, and letters, my sister Fei, almost obligingly, chose one scrapbook of newspaper clippings to keep, which none of us ever looked at after we left Pennsylvania.

Everything else we fed to a roaring fire we'd made in the backyard between two apple trees. While we all stood about the fire, which we kept alive two days and two nights without sleeping, one hot mote shot out and creased my youngest brother's thigh, burning through the cloth of his pants and several layers of skin. His leg owns the scar to this day.

from *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance* by Li-Young Lee

## A Writer's Process

### Prewriting

#### Remembering

To write memoirs, a writer must be able to re-create images and feelings. The simplest event may spark long-forgotten memories. One day, for example, Lee was switching back and forth between English and Chinese as he spoke to his two-week-old niece. Suddenly Lee remembered "the feeling of being inside a language I didn't know."

"Boy, was that a terrible feeling as a child, to hear English being spoken and not understand it at all," Lee says. "But when I had that feeling visited on me again, it felt wonderful, rich, as if it must still be there lodged in me because suddenly it resurfaced."

To capture memories like this one for later exploration, Lee keeps a writer's journal. He says, "My journal helps me remember amazing things that I forgot."

### Drafting/Revising

#### Composing

Lee composed his memoirs by writing in longhand in English. "I've tried a tape recorder, but it doesn't work for me," he says. "When I'm writing longhand, I may write six sentences. As I'm writing the sixth sentence, my peripheral vision will catch something in the first sentence. There's an echoing, a redoubling that doesn't happen when I speak."

Many writers like to organize their work in advance, but not Lee. When he began to write his memoirs, he had "a very firm sense of what the stories were, what the chronology was going to be. And writing it was just a tedium, just drudgery. I kept thinking, 'This is not why I became a writer.'"

The book became much more interesting to Lee when he abandoned his initial organization. Lee says his memoirs begin with "a very concrete,