

"mother deluxe" from  
li young lee's behind  
my eyes: using a card  
game metaphor to...



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Famous Romantic era poet Percy Shelley once noted that " a poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds". In his 2008 poetry anthology *Behind My Eyes*, IndoChinese-American author Li Young Lee sings thirty nine different poems talking about themes ranging from the metaphorical merit of an apple to the role religion played throughout various stages of his life. One of these themes focused on life experience with civil conflict and ultimately being a refugee and finding asylum in the United States. One such poem is " Mother Deluxe", in which Lee writes twelve stanzas that grapple with the events that make up his life experience. At face value, this poem appears to be about Lee and his mother playing a card game called " Memories from the 20th Century", but, upon closer examination, the card game and its elements appear to reveal a deeper meaning.

In this poem, Lee uses the metaphor of life being like a card game to come to terms with significant events in his life. Accompanying his extended metaphor is a consistent air of satire, with him satirizing his life. This begins with the title where Lee alludes to the fact that he is playing the " deluxe edition" of the game, jabbing at both his life and, to a lesser extent, card game culture in the sense that he's poking fun at the commercialization of card games with the term deluxe. The satirization of his life's experiences continues throughout the poem. On the first line of the poem, Lee begins with a single quoted phrase: " We can't stay where we are, and we don't know where else to go,". Only in the second stanza does the reader understand the meaning behind this phrase when Lee notes that the phrase was the first card his mother deals in a deluxe edition of a game called "

Memories from the 20th Century". Given the name of the game that Lee and his mother are playing and the cards they are being dealt, it seems reasonable to suggest that, at some point during Lee's life, he and his mother were placed in a situation where they couldn't stay where they were, nor did they have any idea where to go. This playing card theme continues with the third stanza with inclusion of the following card titles: " Dead Baby" " Mystery Bundles" and " Cleansing by Sacrifice". Continuing with the earlier interpretation of the cards referring to life events experienced by Lee, the first one, " Dead Baby", suggests that his family had, at some point, had a baby who died. The meaning of the second and third one are a little harder to identify. " Mystery Bundles", another card title, most probably refers to another situation that the family experienced; the specific details of this event doesn't really spell too many implications for the meaning of the poem as the pattern of the card's titles being experiences seen by the family has already been established.

" Cleansing by Sacrifice", like its aforementioned predecessor, only continues the pattern. Its meaning might refer to either the situation of ethnic-cleansing that took place during Lee's lifetime, probably an allusion to his refugee past, or a religious sacrificial, organic or otherwise, undertaking that the family had to endure to cleanse themselves of something, perhaps even the " dead baby" or the " mystery bundles". Following the first three stanzas, Lee offers more information about this game he keeps describing by saying that all players are given " seven cards apiece" with the object of not dying. The specific choice of seven cards probably represents a biblical allusion to the most significant biblical number: seven. In a biblical context,

seven represents completeness so Lee, by structuring the metaphorical game to include seven cards, notes that all lives require seven of these events to reach a proverbial completeness. Following this information about the game, Lee gives us more card names. The first card, "Exodus", could refer to either the noun meaning a mass emigration or be an allusion to the biblical text wherein the Israelites leave Egypt for Canaan. Taking Lee's refugee experience into context and the fact that he's describing a game titled "Memories from the 20th Century", it could be reasonably inferred that he and his family reasonably experienced some form of an exodus. Furthermore, Lee's extensive religious background could signify a dual meaning within the card title. The second card in this set, "Eyes Snatched Away", refers to an occurrence in which Lee's family had their vision, of an event abruptly taken from them. Specifically, the word "snatched" indicates that their vision, inferred from the word "eyes", was taken from the family. The final card in this particular list is called "Superstition at the Side of the Road", signifying that, at some point, the Lee family experienced superstition (either directed towards them or from them) on the side of some road. Following these three card names, Lee further describes the game by saying that "all cards are good or bad depending on how you play them". This, coupled with idea seen a few lines later that says "no card possesses inherent value", brings about the idea that these cards represent life experiences thrown at a person and what they make of them accumulates into what becomes their life - anyone can take a situation and play them differently. Thus, no card is inherently good nor bad, but how a person plays them makes all the difference.

Following this revelation, Lee gives us two more card names: " Defeated by Wings", and " Eating Forbidden Blood". These card names are both very cryptic and offer little for deduction, but, when compared to poems later in the anthology, wings represent a false promise of freedom, but still feature tethered limitations. The true meaning of " Eating Forbidden Blood", however, is unintelligible from the poem. After these two card names, Lee notes that " no card possess inherent value", once again suggesting that these experiences become positive or negative not from the experiences themselves but how a person responds. Next, Lee gives us three final card names: " Among the Lepers", " Burial by the Solo River", and " The Extracted Oil". These final card names, although cryptic, also seem to be occurrences that the family experienced throughout their lives; furthermore, the actual meaning of the cards do not seem that important as the pattern has already been established. After the final series of cards, Lee notes more details about the game. First, he notes that " every player begins in bondage", potentially to their superiors like parents, and the institutions tasked with raising them. Second, Lee notes that " every player eventually dies", which only furthers the connection of this metaphorical game to human life as all human beings eventually die, just like the players of the game. Lastly, he notes that " everybody plays whether they know or don't know they're playing", implying that everyone who is alive (still assuming the metaphor of this game being life is intact) will receive seven life experiences whether they like it or not, and some might not even be aware of it. In the next stanza, Lee begins to abandon the metaphor that carried the beginning of his poem in favor of a discussion on larger themes. He opens this stanza by hypothesizing that " Maybe [life] isn't a game" with a degree of certainty, <https://assignbuster.com/mother-deluxe-from-li-young-lees-behind-my-eyes-using-a-card-game-metaphor-to-come-to-terms-with-life-experience/>

because of his use of a period rather than a question mark, suggesting a higher degree of certainty. He then posits that " maybe it's the World Evening News". This line circles back to Lee's own refugee experience and sardonically helps him come to terms with his own life experiences as he wonders if the cards he's been dealt are equivalent to a news program (that typically reports global conflict), suggesting that his own life has been rife with him being caught in conflict.

In the next stanza, Lee hypothesizes that " maybe this time I'll rescue my mother", suggesting that Lee inwardly places blame on himself for a negative occurrence that befell his mother that he thinks he could've prevented. This is corroborated with the next line when Lee states that "[he] can't tell if [he] thought that or if she said it", suggesting that Lee even thinks his mother might agree with his own appraisal of the occurrence. In the following stanza, Lee continues this theme of pondering with the hypothesis that " maybe this isn't the news" and " maybe this is a dream God is having". Lee then expresses personal feelings by stating " somebody should wake Him", suggesting that a potential cure for his suffering is to terminate the dream. Secondly, his use of the word " should" implies that someone with the capability to wake God has a moral obligation to do so. In the final stanza, Lee shifts the poem to an address to his mother. In the first line, Lee addresses his mother with various adjectives describing a boat when saying " good boat, first boat, old boat, Mother". His use of boats to describe his mother harkens to a primordial reality in which a mother is considered a vessel that carries her child. Thus, a mother, under this paradigm, would constitute a child's first boat. In the next line, Lee expands

this boat metaphor by stating that "[his] first night with you lasted nine months", suggesting his time within the womb. He ends the poem by saying that his second night with his mother "is the rest of [his] life", implying that the connection between him and his mother doesn't end with his birth. If connected with the idea that earlier Lee feels guilt for something that happened to his mother, it might be possible that this second night could be the guilt Lee feels; another thing worth noting is the fact that Lee states that the second night together is Lee's life, not his mother - implying that, even after his mother's statistically first death, the connection between mother and son will continue.

The poem "Mother Deluxe" represents an intriguing method for author Li Young Lee to come to terms with his own life experiences, especially his stint as a victim of persecution and refugee. He approaches his life experiences safely ensconced in the 21st century through the lens of a metaphorical card game he calls "Memories from the 20th Century". In reducing the adversity he's faced, he not only interrogates his role in his own life and the lives of others, but he also layers an element of rear-facing satire to those events that were, by virtue of this game, dealt randomly towards him. This particular poem joins a section of the total anthology devoted to coming to terms with his experiences and making proverbial lemonade out of the lemons life has given him. In this sense, "Mother Deluxe", represents a simplification of years of his life condensed into an evening of cards played with his mother, yet also an opportunity to note the lack of control Lee has had over the events that have shaped his life.