



"The whole universe is humming. The job of the poet is to hear that hum."

Poetry: The Practice of Infinite Inwardness

*Li-Young Lee was born in 1957 in Jakarta, Indonesia. He came to the United States in 1964 with his parents, Chinese exiles who were fleeing further persecution in Indonesia. His poetry has won numerous awards, including the Lamont Poetry Prize in 1990, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and a Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship. His most recent book, *The Winged Seed*, explores his family's past and their possible futures.*

After hearing Li-Young Lee read his work and lecture on poetry as a way of advancing human consciousness, we met in the patio room of Mimi's Cafe in Northridge. It was very fitting that hanging on the back wall was a copy of Van Gogh's, "Irises," because during his lecture Li-Young brought up the point of many artists being considered crazy when they were in fact seeing things that the rest of humanity was not yet capable of seeing. He used Vincent Van Gogh's work as a specific example. With the din of a busy dinner crowd around us, we sat down under the visage of a single white iris in a sea of blue irises and attempted to affix language to the numinous.

NR: Before getting into larger issues, I wanted to ask you some questions about craft. I was once told during a writing workshop that young poets "suffer repetition." In your work repetition works as a lyrical element and as an accumulator. For instance, in your poem, "The Cleaving," the word *eat* is repeated, but each time it

comes back it brings with it an added bit of meaning. Early in your career were you ever accused of or criticized for not being concise?

LYL: No. I was very lucky. I had some very good teachers who were very encouraging, Gerald Stern and Ed Ochester when I was at PITT, Anthony Piccione at SUNY, Richard Shelton and John Emerson at University of Arizona. All of them saw writing as coming to terms with interiority, how faithful you were to that, how exact you were to that, how pure you were to that. Very seldom did we ever address poems as if they were artifacts. Things have changed. I'm guessing. Of course there was the, "well we should cut a few words here," but never a sense of dissecting the poem.

Repetition for me is essential. I remember thinking I would like to write a poem using just one word. One word. How many ways could I modulate that? To my mind I was writing mantra, trying to hear that inner vibration. For me the endeavor has nothing at all to do with making culture. It has to do with something a little more immediate, a little more urgent than that.

NR: I guess the essence of this question is, "as a young writer was there anything you were criticized for?" What I'm hearing is that your teachers met your level of seriousness.

LYL: Yes, and I learned my seriousness from them. I was serious, but they were more serious. They said to me, "Are you serious? Then get to work."

I'm a beginning poet by the way. That's how I see myself, or I would quit.

NR: You have said that English seems like a mystical language to you because of its "slippery nature."

It also seems in English we sometimes trivialize something by naming it. How then do we “write from the soul” without trivializing our spirituality?

LYL: I never experienced that naming something was trivializing it. I always thought that naming something was blessing it. Could you imagine a child not having a name?

NR: I guess I’m asking about things that are labeled abstract. How do you make what you’re writing not sound like a Hallmark card, because the minute you put the word *love* on the page, people tend to gloss over it.

LYL: That has to do with our own rigors about that word and what we mean by it. Ultimately the whole poem names the value. For instance Theodore Roethke’s poem, “The Waking,” names a value. The value it names doesn’t have another name. You can’t say, “I read ‘The Waking’ and that poem names mystery.” No. It names something more complex because the whole poem is a name.

I have a poem about braiding my wife’s hair. If someone were to say, “That poem is about love,” well, that’s true, but it’s about death too. The poem names a value, but that value would not exist unless I named it. The value is something deeper, more complex, something we name because it’s beyond our grasp.

A name isn’t a word. It’s something you hear with your stomach and you say *ah ha*. In Zen they say there’s a deep *ah ha*. You hear the poem and you say, “Ah ha, I heard the name.”

Think of one of your own poems. It names a value that you can’t name in any other way except by writing that poem. Hopefully you can’t even paraphrase that poem because if you can, write the paraphrase. The value that poem names can’t exist, except that you named it with your poem. So we create value in the universe.

NR: But it seems sometimes there's this enticing desire to define something so we can file it away, dispense with it, and I worry about that. That's why those words—love, God, family—seem to have assumptions that go with them, and I think the challenge in writing is to meet those assumptions and push the reader to go beyond.

LYL: It means for me that I push myself. In a way all poems are overheard conversations between you and your soul. I've never written poems to convince a reader of anything. Poems are dialogues. I've always tried to use the most intimate voice I could hear. The world feels infinitely intimate to me. Flowers feel intimate to me. Tea feels intimate to me. Everything feels intimate to me.

When I was a kid and I used to walk through the world, everything knew my name. A bird would call and I would look up. I may have lost that for a couple of years but it feels that way to me now, again. It's that intimacy between me and the universe that I want to hear.

When I try to hear that intimate voice, I realize I'm not talking to anyone except the most secret part of me, which happens to be the most secret part of all of us. So when I'm trying to hear that most secret part there's a rigor there because I know for me to speak convincingly about love or anything else—to speak to that most secret part—I *have* to be really rigorous. I can't allow any extra stuff.

NR: You achieve an incredible amount of intimacy in your poems, especially when you write about your wife and children. Is there no boundary between your family life, your writing life, your teaching life? Do you view this as just one whole?

LYL: I think there are boundaries but I do see that what I'm trying to do is integrate everything, so that raising

children teaches me about writing poetry, and writing poetry teaches me about raising children. After all it is one life. If I want to compartmentalize it, fracture it, fragment it, then that's what I end up with. We get who we are. That's the gift. I don't want to be that. I want to be an integrated whole.

NR: It seems in this society that we are encouraged to have separate lives. To go home at night and not have to think about the people we work with, that seems to be the goal.

LYL: That comes out of ignorance of our real identity. It's sad to me that we live in ignorance, that we've forgotten who we are. There's always more going on than we see.

In this situation here it looks like there's a person talking to a person. On one level there is. On a deeper level, all our actions and words are a dialogue with the universe. The quality of attention with which we do things, all of that is finally a dialogue we're having with our true identity, which is the universe.

If I'm cooking a meal and I think, "I'm cooking this meal for my kid," well, yes that is what I'm doing. If I think, "I need to hurry up and cook this so I can get to my writing," that's one dialogue. There's another dialogue where I say, "Wait a minute. I'm part of the universe. He's part of the universe. What am I doing?" With that thought the whole experience is different. The effects are different. The repercussions are different.

If my dialogue is constantly vertical instead of horizontal, then my actions become spacious, large, whole...

NR: Vital?

LYL: Yes, vital. See, we create value when we make poetry. If we realize that our poetry is a dialogue with the

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great universe then we're creating a different value than when we're writing to be published or to vent anger. Not that any of those things are bad, but they just don't create as much value in the world.

NR: That's interesting because in a lot of the writing workshops I've been to people talk about writing as release. My inclination is to say, "Release what?"

LYL: It might be true that it's release, but it's dangerous because what are they releasing?

NR: Well, that's what I wonder because if you've got yourself all bundled up in these separate compartments and you feel like you're going to explode, why are you going to come to the page and do it all over me?

LYL: Exactly. I think a lot of times we forget that when we write, we're reproducing consciousness in a reader. What we write another person reads and it gets recorded into their head.

Artists are the most vital people in the world. I believe that. What we do is vital. So when we reproduce consciousness we have to examine the consciousness we're accessing. The consciousness Emily Dickinson reproduced on the page was a very high, evolved form of consciousness. When she reproduced that she created a lot of value, even though she was never read in her lifetime, never recognized. What she did for the human race was incredible. I think she and Walt Whitman are more important than Abe Lincoln. He functioned in the horizontal realm, the realm of things that have already passed. They were functioning in the future. They were speaking vertically. They did more for this country than Abraham Lincoln because if we could just agree that there is one mind, then they forwarded that one mind much farther than Lincoln.

NR: It seems to get the collective body of humanity to come to that agreement is a long road.

LYL: Earth itself is teaching us there is one mind. All of this garbage we're putting out called culture, the stuff our kids are looking at, we're gonna get the bill for that. The earth is already giving us a bill by saying, "Look, whatever you put into me, you eat. What made you think you were separate?" People are dying from viruses, mad cow disease. Whatever we put into the cow we eat. What made us think we could get away with this stuff? You can't point to the planet and say, "That's not my body."

So too, whatever we put out as consciousness is out there. It comes back.

NR: Is this where the infinite kicks in because if I step back and look at humanity as a whole that I'm part of, then I can step back and look at the planet as a whole that I'm part of, and from that point I can keep stepping back into a larger and larger realm?

LYL: Precisely. Things get very large.

NR: Would you like to keep discussing this or should we tackle something like metaphor?

LYL: What is metaphor? The Greeks used to think metaphor is actually the presence of gods. Metaphor is an instance in which we are seeing two things together that are unlike.

NR: An unlike likeness?

LYL: Yes. The Greeks said there's the presence of a god there because we're seeing those two things wed. We see

it as a literary device. It's not. What is it, a bag of tricks we practice?

NR: I think sometimes as a student we learn about writing as if we were dealing with a bunch of tricks or tools. Here's a hammer, here's some nails, go build a house.

LYL: No, don't think of it that way.

NR: You have spoken of your mistrust of narrative, of the "historical" aspect assigned to it, yet you wrote *The Winged Seed* with great detail. Did you use the format of a prose poem (interior monologue) because you did not mean for the reader to take the specific details as factual?

LYL: What I was trying to do in that book was find a form that was spacious. We usually think in a lyric poem that the lyric is small, as opposed to narrative which is large. I was trying to find a lyric form that was big enough to contain the narrative. By lyric I mean something that is manifold because it doesn't just have the trajectory of a story. I wanted to find a lyric form that was large enough to contain all kinds of things.

I was trying to hear a story that was larger than my personal story.

NR: Is this an example where you were looking for a format to match the infinite nature of what you were writing about?

LYL: Right, and the infinite nature of our existence. You know, in Hawaii you can go see those big lava flows that

give birth to the islands. They look like a huge mouths with hot lava pouring out. A mile down the road from that you can see where the lava has hardened into patterns. That mouth where that lava is coming out, that's poetry. The reason it's intimate is because it's speaking about you. It's talking about the specific details of you, but in this huge voice. It's talking about things that are specific to me too, but still in this huge voice. When it gets out to where it's hardened into these swirls and patterns, that's religion. That's culture. To me, culture and religion are fossilized poetry. I don't care about culture, about the canon. I just want to hear the voice.

NR: It's interesting that you mention religion and culture together. I have thought that religion was the practical application of faith, a sort of "how to" which sometimes falls short because instructions are only good for the time at which they're written.

LYL: I should say formal religion, because the practice of art is religion. It's *religio*, "linked," to our first nature, our first identity, which is God. That's who we are. Art reminds us of who we are. Art reminds us that we are infinite.

NR: In a way that religion doesn't?

LYL: Well, the problem with formal religion is it externalizes God. It makes God out there, separate from you. In art—for instance when you read Whitman—that huge voice is the voice of the universe. That's universe/mind. When you read Whitman, you're hearing universe/mind. That means we are God. It doesn't externalize. It says God is here, in us. We are one.

NR: Your father though, was a minister. He had a formal religious background. Was there a conflict?

LYL: Oh yes, of course. He would say that what I'm saying is sacrilegious. However, how can anything be outside of me? The only reality is an interior reality. All of this, this body, is a late report of what was first in me.

NR: In previous interviews you've talked about reading your father's Bible and seeing his footnotes—particularly in the Song of Songs—about his struggle to find connectedness.

LYL: It was hand to hand combat for him with what God was, who God was, where God was hiding. He never rested. It was a constant search for him, as it is for me. The minute I feel an ease, the minute I think I experience my true identity, I suddenly experience God as an other.

NR: You wrote in *The Winged Seed* about spending Saturdays helping your father transcribe his sermons for Sundays. Did you experience his conflict then, first hand?

LYL: Yes, it was a little scary to be that close to his mind.

NR: You wrote that it made you dream of him.

LYL: He was kind of a scary person to be around sometimes.

NR: Fathers are that way. I've got one. Your initial sense of the divine though, was handed down from your father.

LYL: Part of me, the Asian in me, wants to say that I was his son because we both had the same concerns. A Taoist would believe that I was born to the man who was my father because his concerns were my concerns. In a way that would be easy to explain who I am. It feels older to me though. I remember when I was a kid, a really young kid, walking around and feeling that the world was just charged with numinousness, and that I was an integral part of it. I don't think I only got that from him. I think I also got that from something inside of me that is genuinely me.

NR: Let's back up a little bit so we can talk about the subject of prayer. In light of what you said about poetry and religion, would you go so far as to say that writing is prayer?

LYL: Yes. Writing is prayer because the orientation of writing is not toward an outside audience. For me, writing enhances or strengthens the connection with an interior audience. The orientation of prayer is not out, but in, infinitely in. It's communion. I think we're too obsessed with the idea of an exterior audience. I'm writing for an interior audience.

NR: There is a contemplative spirit that comes through when you read to an audience. When you're writing the poem though, you say you're not considering the audience you might some day stand in front of.

LYL: No, I don't.

NR: Sometimes we hear of the "influences" on a writer's work. You speak of the influence of Chinese heritage and of the desire to write universally, or free from

gender, race and ethnicity. Do you feel a conflict?

LYL: I only feel a conflict because I inhabit this body which happens to be male and Asian, and I end up running into things like racism. More and more though I feel like I keep saying the same thing, because there is only one thing to say. Who are we? Where can we find out who we are? If you look at Christianity, we're sinners. That's not who we are. When you read Whitman, that's closer to who we are. When you read Dickinson, that's closer to who we are. All that spaciousness in Dickinson's poems, all that room, that's who we are. We are that spaciousness. The expansiveness, the passion in Whitman, that's who we are. The passion in Van Gogh, that's who we are. The fervor in Beethoven, that's who we are.

When people were hearing Beethoven's late work—his contemporaries—they were saying he'd gone mad. Beethoven was deaf, so what was he listening to? He must have been listening to an inner vibration. His contemporaries said he went mad. He did go mad, but that's his greatest work, when he heard that inner vibration and not the music other people were writing. He wasn't synthesizing the canon anymore. His conversation, his dialogue, wasn't with the culture anymore. It was totally interior. That's who we are.

NR: If you had a time machine and you went ahead a hundred years from today, and you went into a bookstore and found yourself in an anthology under "Chinese-American Poets," would you shake your head and say, "They didn't get it yet?"

LYL: Yes, for many reasons. Not mainly because they didn't get it about me, but because people would still be thinking in those terms.

—Luisa Villani

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