

Dianne Bilyak

## Interview with Li-Young Lee

*Bradley International Airport, June 21, 2002,  
following Li-Young Lee's appearance as a featured poet  
at The Festival of Arts & Ideas in New Haven, Connecticut.*

**DIANNE BILYAK:** *I noticed last night you spoke less between your poems. Was that a conscious effort or a time constraint?*

**LI-YOUNG LEE:** I think it was unconscious. I kept trying to think of something clever to say, but I couldn't. I felt sad during the reading. I don't know why. I felt really isolated and alone up there. A lot of times, Dianne, I'm up there and I don't feel isolated. I feel very connected; I feel as if we're all on this journey together.

*Are you comfortable when you read, usually?*

Yeah.

*You don't really look up.*

I'm not *that* comfortable. I find comfort knowing that we're all on some sort of big journey, and some fate brought us together. I feel all right about that. Does it seem arrogant not to look up?

*No, it would seem more self-conscious. I was simply wondering if you were nervous at all and if you experience any anxiety about being on stage. It doesn't seem arrogant; it seems focused, focused and self-conscious. Do you decide what you're going to read before you go to a reading?*

No.

*In the past you've stated that you're reading to a "secret audience." It reminds me of the word namaste, a Buddhist term that basically means 'the light within me honors the light within you.' Is that the secret audience, the feeling of this light inside of you trying to reach out?*

Yeah, I like that. *Namaste*, interesting, it's like mutual divinities recognizing each other. That's why I'm a little confused about presence when a person is reading because I feel as if it's the deepest thing in me speaking to the deepest thing in the audience. In a poetry reading if I can remind people of their inner spaciousness, their own inner richness, then I've done my job. But if they walk away thinking, "Oh, he's really smart, he's really interesting," then I've failed.

*There is a sense of combustion in your poems. My friend said after the reading last night, "His poems are like tiny bombs."*

I like that.

*And you mentioned in something I read that lyrical poetry has an explosive quality to it. Did you choose to write lyrically, or is that just the name that is now attached to your writing?*

Yeah, that's the name. I don't even think of it that way, Dianne, I just use it as an expedient. People say, "Oh, that's lyric poetry." But whatever you want to call it, it's speech that is simultaneously world-creating and world-destroying. It just wipes you out, and leaves you kind of quiet. That's what I want.

*You've said about Emily Dickinson that you prefer it when she writes as if she's "up against something she can hardly say." When you're up against that, what compels you to say it and not hold back?*

What makes me want to say it is this intuition I have that it wants to get said, that what keeps it from being said is my own narrowness. My own over-evaluating mind is trying to evaluate some seemingly irrational statement. I hate the fact that my

over-evaluating mind is a kind of tyrant. Sometimes I have to get free of it in order for the poem to say really crazy things.

*Do you edit as you write? Or does the poem just come out?*

Both. Sometimes the poem just comes out, and sometimes after I write the poem I realize there's not enough destiny in it. I'm looking for a kind of fateful language, where something is said and could not have been said in any other way. It's a negotiation between randomness, openness, freedom, and chance, on the one hand, and on the other hand destiny, fate and inevitability. So you're reading along and feeling this poem could go anywhere, but when it's finished you think, "No, it fulfilled itself completely." I think when a poem has the right combination between those two forces the poem is really interesting. So when I revise I revise either toward one or the other because I wasn't attentive enough when I was writing the poem to make those moves.

*What do you feel have been the "fateful" moments of your life and what would you say were more dictated by "chance?"*

I don't know, maybe sometimes it's chance. But looking back it was fate. For instance, meeting Gerry Stern there was something in my belly. I just said, "Oh, this is something." The first poems I read by him I felt as if somehow my destiny and these poems have something to do with each other, somehow I knew that.

*Was it fate or chance that brought you to poetry or poetry to you?*

I'd say that was fate, because my parents recited poetry.

*Do you read fiction?*

You know, I have a hard time with fiction. Because I feel that attention is all we have while we're alive; so every time I read something I feel as if I want an immediate hit, and in fiction it's

kind of like you don't get an immediate hit.

*So you're a poetry junkie now maybe?*

Yeah, that's what it is. I want my hit immediate and with the first line of fiction I just don't get that. I want that experience of the rational and the intellectual and the emotional and the irrational all in one sentence, and you don't get that in fiction. Even the best sentences in fiction, the most beautiful sentences, they tend toward a kind of rationality.

*What was the first book of poems you read?*

The first book of poems that I read was *A Child's Garden of Verses* by Robert Louis Stevenson. I was just blown away. I loved them. And I think I taught myself to read by reading poetry and by writing poetry.

*Have you always been writing?*

I wrote as soon as I started learning the English language. I thought it was just such a kick; I thought it was a really amusing language. My brothers and I used to think it was comical. We didn't know how to speak English, and we used to imitate people who spoke it, I guess much the same way people imitate Chinese, and we thought it was just so funny. But when I started learning it, I started rhyming little words together, and I felt that that was really fun.

*Do you feel it's your dislocation that allows you to tell the truth because you're not where you came from?*

Yes, I do. I think poetic speech is dislocated, and we recognize it because of its strangeness. It's the language of a stranger.

*Poetry seems to be a means for you to strip away the layers of personality and ego—but you're still human. Do you feel you're trying to*

*achieve, maybe in both writing and in life, a sense of being more fully human or less?*

I'd say more. And I do feel, sometimes, as if the work of art is about disillusionment. It disillusion us so we can be more fully human. Any illusion is a narrowing of our full being, it's illusory. We are human but we function within a very narrow bandwidth of what we think is human. André Breton wanted his writing to recover the primordial potentials of the human mind. That's what I want too.

*You've said in other interviews that you're "writing from the soul." When you talk about it from your experience and you're writing from that place, what does that mean to you?*

The soul and the body are the same thing. It just depends on how you cock your head. It's the body in its conscious state. Our bodies are three billion cells a minute dying and being reborn. We're changing, we're kind of fountaining, there's no materiality to apparent materiality. A physicist will tell you a table is 99.99% space. I have an aunt who's a physicist. She told me if you hold your hand up to the sun it is being bombarded by millions of tiny little particles called neutrinos. They're going through your hands but they're not touching them. I asked, "how is that?" and she said it would be like going out at night, taking a tennis ball and throwing it up into the sky. What are the chances, if there were no gravity, of that tennis ball hitting a star? I said, "Well, none?" She said, "Well that's how much space there is in your hand." I'm looking at that and I'm thinking, we're soul; I'm thinking, it's the body speaking.

*So, are you saying that it's all connected, like the ecosystem of the earth, and it's all working together, and maybe the vibration of all that industry is our soul?*

Exactly! You know, Dianne, it reminds me of that place in Hawaii where the lava's being born. The lava's coming out of the island

and it's streaming into the ocean and miles down it hardens into patterns. Those patterns are arthritic, calcified, hardened. In my experience, that's religion. But art and poetry, it seems to me, are standing right at the mouth of that stuff as it's coming out. You don't need a priest, you're a poet, poetry's a natural religion. You're coming up with your own symbols, your own metaphors for spirit and your connection with the universe. You don't necessarily need loaves and fishes or a thirty-two armed bodhisattva. Those are poetic images, and people have decided, "Oh, we're going to worship that one."

*In The Language of Life by Bill Moyers, you said that you're "affirming God with your doubt." Are you still feeling that way, that it's a constant struggle?*

No, I don't think that's true. At this point what I feel is that I need to practice what I believe. I think I've got the belief thing down. I've reviewed it enough times, and now it's the practice. See, Dianne, I believe we can practice poetry in the world, because for instance I was raised doing meditation and my father and my last teacher always said, "Sitting in your room doing meditation, that's just the beginning. You're supposed to bring it out into the world and act it out." So, I don't think that just writing a poem in your room makes any sense. You're supposed to practice poetic consciousness outside too. I think poetry's the highest form of yoga we can do. The word Y-O-G-A means yoke, linking back. The Latin word is *religio*. So anything we do that connects us back to our biggest identity before we narrowed it down, before we decided I'll take this little narrow thing of me, anything that links us back to that is yogic, anything that links us back to that is religious.

*The flow, the chi right, it's coming in, then it's got to go out. So you're a conduit maybe?*

Yeah, yeah, a conduit. So I would say that poetry's an art, it's a very, very deep form of yoga. But if it doesn't help you in your

life, then what I am I doing it for? Because I don't believe the opus is a poem or a book of poems or a great novel or a painting. I think the opus is you, is me, is us, the person, the great work is the person.

*When I worked for scientist Lynn Margulis, we talked about a sea sponge, I believe it's called a Ciona. If you strain and separate it into a bucket of water the tiny particles will form back into a shape. Does writing or reading poetry ever feel that way to you?*

It feels like an adjustment. It's just like yoga. When you do yoga everything gets lined up. You adjust your spine, your organs, all your chakras, and I think that's poetry's highest service. I don't think I'm supposed to do it to make me more famous. I think when one enters an art it's like a form of getting on your knees and saying, "I will be a servant to it." I don't want people to worship me. I want to help people, and I want my work to serve people. I guess I just believe in art being service.

*You've said that you ask yourself, "Is there a word from the Lord?" I've read about this concept of "the word" in both interviews and in your own books. In *The Winged Seed* you say, "This is a story about a word, one word...and dying occurs exactly at that word." Can you develop that concept?*

When I was a kid, I felt as if everything was talking to me. I would walk to school by the river, and it was as if everything knew my name; I mean I literally felt that. I thought, "Oh, okay, then everything is talking, everything is in discourse, everything is in dialogue. There's this Taoist tradition that the world was conceived out of a syllable, and out of that syllable...."

*Is that the om?*

Right. That's the Hindu version. In the Taoist version they say there was an S-U sound, that's the seed, and out of that sound things got more and more differentiated, and everything came

into being. So it seems to me that my intuition as a child, that everything was speech, was pretty accurate. You see, there is a kind of authority in religious systems that have come up with the idea, but on the other hand it has more authority because I experienced it. As I said, physicists now tell us that everything is just a giant vibration, and ultimately at the chemical level everything is made up of electrons and protons. They have no characteristics; it's just a matter of how many electrons are in something that determines the characteristics. But the building blocks themselves have no characteristics. One could say that it's made out of one syllable, but it's just different permutations of that one syllable. A successful poem, when you're finished, is a word. The poem itself is a word. You can't say the word, it took all *those* words to say *that* word, and you feel that "ohhhh" inside yourself. But if you don't feel that, then that poem didn't say anything.

*Where's your inner voice in your body?*

I can't tell. It's somewhere between two inches below my navel and the soles of my feet, somewhere around there.

*How did you handle criticism regarding your work when you were in graduate programs?*

I just handled it; I just weathered it, good and bad. A poem is a projection of the psyche, so when we study a poem we're studying the psyche. If criticism is just about the surface, then it's not very interesting to me. When the criticism wasn't pointing back to my own mind, my own psyche, it didn't make much sense to me. I'd change this line or move that word, but it didn't make as much sense as somebody questioning the ground of that projection.

*Who is your ideal reader, the person you're thinking about while you're writing?*

If the universe were a person, the universe. If the universe could hear, that's who I'm writing to.

*I've read that you feel you're undisciplined, your habits are erratic, and you fear you're unschooled. How did you get this far? Did you have a plan, did you have any ambition...?*

How far am I? I work in a warehouse.

*But you have books of poems, you're speaking at universities and conferences. I'm asking this from a younger poet's point of view. Did you imagine or hope you'd be leading this life? Is that a better way to say it?*

I always hoped that I'd be able to follow the milk and honey. When I was in graduate school I might find some of the classes really boring, but if I was talking to one of the poets who happened to be professors I thought, "This is like milk and honey, and can I just follow?"

*Follow your bliss?*

Yeah, I've been able to. Because I just spent the morning walking around, talking to Gerry Stern. It's like being with an ecstatic all day long. I feel this "wow" and I'm glad this isn't part-time.

*So, this whole lifestyle, the travel, the promotion of your books, offering your work for submission, do you actually seek out those activities? I know you've received grants. What is the business part like for you as an artist?*

You're a little embarrassed about doing it, but you do need the money. I think that kind of ambivalence and ambiguity is the nature of the world. I think you can overdo it. If it gets really boring, than don't do it. I don't know if this is true or not, but I feel if humanity at large needs a particular thing, that thing will come into existence. It seems to me that if our deepest joy makes contact with humanity's deepest needs, then we have a place. But that's not as easy as it sounds, because it means you have to be writing poems from your deepest joy. Where our deepest joy meets the rest of humanity's deepest needs, then you have a readership.

*Do you feel words and language were planted in you when you took dictation from your father in regard to his sermons? Are you a minister in some way?*

Seamus Heaney said a great thing to a young poet: "When you go out, just think you're bringing some good news to people," and that is so minister-like.

*When you write about your family and your experiences, you say "father," you say "mother," you say people's names. Do you ever worry about them seeing it and feeling a certain way or...*

No, I'm shameless. I just don't have that organ.

*Would you say your father is the shadow or the light?*

Maybe both.

*At the same time?*

I don't know, it depends which way I'm facing. Yeah, sometimes that's a tough one.

*And your mother also, how about your mother, is that clear?*

I think she's a depressed personality. So a lot of the things that she says are so pregnant that sometimes a light goes on when she says them. She has a kind of grief, not grievance, that is a steady state for her.

*Book of my Nights is very different from your first two books. Do you feel that?*

I feel it's different but an obvious development.

*Yes, it seems more spacious and resonant; achieving more of the silence I've heard you talk about. Do you feel The Winged Seed was the*

*bridge you had to cross to write it? That you lost the equivalent of some verbal weight?*

Yes, exactly, that's a great way to say it.

*Actually, I found The Winged Seed so painful to read, heartbreaking almost, but it's really a tribute to you. Was it hard to write it?*

It was very hard to write.

*And emotional for you also, and your family, now when they read it. Have they all read it?*

I don't know? I know my wife has.

*Your siblings don't say, "Hey, I read your book."*

I'm almost, you know, "Little Idiot."

*Do you want me to keep that in the interview?*

Sure, yeah. That's my nickname.

*What are their nicknames? Do they have them?*

Yeah, none of them are very good. They're all like "fool," but they're all endearments.

*Your work is often very serious, but there's this lighthearted quality to you in person. Do you like humorous poems...*

Yes.

*Do you ever write them? I just don't see much of that....*

You know what, I'll tell you Dianne, when I'm writing the poem....

*Am I offending you right now? Do you think your poems are very funny and I'm...?*

No, no, no, but I do think there's something funny about me writing the poems. Because when I'm writing them, for me personally the healthiest attitude I take is that the whole fate of the universe depends on whether or not I do this poem, and the whole time I'm laughing at myself because I'm saying this to myself.

*Are you sitting in your house, eating junk food in your underwear, and the kids are running around, and the phone rings and someone's asking you what you want for dinner, and you're thinking, "I'm trying to write this work of art here, don't you people understand?"*

On my birthday my kids gave me a card. They drew a picture of a guy in his bathrobe, in boxer shorts with holes all through them, he's got flies flying around him, he hardly bathes, and he's holding a coffee cup; he's scraggly and scruffy looking, and he's pontificating on the mysteries of the universe. And I have to laugh. I go, "Okay." In fact they gave me a cell phone for my birthday, and my son had put a message on there. I didn't know, but my friend Chard heard it and said, "You've got to listen to that message." So I called the number and it says, "Hello, this is Li-Young Lee. If you want to know about the secrets of the universe, Chinese Kung-Fu, or sweet, sweet lovin', leave a message." So they see how I really am.

*In The Winged Seed, you wrote that you didn't speak from birth to age three. Do you know what your first word or sentence was?*

My mother told me it was a full sentence, something like "It's time to go home now."

*And which home was that?*

Well, we were on the boat leaving Indonesia, and I panicked. I

said, "It's time to go home."

*So for you to speak after so long you must have really wanted to go home....*

Yeah, so maybe that's what poetry is. It's like homesickness, a kind of homesickness.

