

April 7, 2004 Interview with Li-Young Lee
by, Harbour Winn, Elaine Smokewood, and John McBryde

ES: You're such a wonderful talker, and this morning I just thought I could sit and listen to you for days. And I wondered what kind of listener you are and how you see that relationship between listening and speaking?

LL: My sense is that I do most of the listening when I'm at home. You know my mother told me that when I didn't talk until I was three years old . . . was it three? No, until I was four I didn't low le . . . completely mute, but when the boat pulled out of the harbor I started talking. I don't know, what was your question?

ES: Just listening, speaking, and their relationship.

LL: Oh yeah. I love to listen to my mother tell her stories and I spend a lot of time listening to my kids and stuff. Talking is so hard I think. I don't know.

ES: You do it so beautifully.

LL: Oh thanks. I don't know. I'm just rambling, but I'll be honest with you, you know I have these ideas that I think about all day long and I have these conversations with my dead father and dead teachers and teachers that I still have and conversations with friends who are poets. I don't talk much with people, but when I actually begin to speak publicly like that, I'm always afraid those ideas feel right when I'm thinking them but they may sound crazy when I'm saying them. That makes me nervous, to hear them actually verbalized.

JM: Do you look at the role of the poet as kind of one as guide maybe for the rest of us? We hear that from other poets that have been here, or sense that from them, that you're kind of out on the bow of the boat leading us somewhere we need to go. I guess from that perspective the ideas don't scare some of us but may scare some of us.

LL: Yeah. Yeah, I do see a poet, I don't know if that's what I do at all you know but I do. It has something to do with what we were talking about last night, that the poets relationship to their daimon, when they enact daimonization, the listener or the public, the audience gets to witness that and thereby are witnessing an enhancement, an enlargement, a fulfillment of the complete human inheritance, and by enacting that a poet does a kind of service. So my aspiration would be to write a completely daimonized poetry, because the voice in the poems, it's both my temporal personal voice and yet I hope, if it's successful at all, that it's polyvocal. It's not just me, this temporal person bound now, that somehow the voice in, it's an eternal voice if I'm lucky, a voice that's deeper than just my rational evaluating self, that there are other parts of my psyche that are enacted, that get to be voiced. I think that way, yeah the enactment of the manifestation of that condition is one of the services that I think the poet can do. Does that make sense?

JM: Let me ask my next question and it may answer that. Is a good poem something you do well or something left over because you have done well?

LL: Mmm. I'm not sure . . . I don't know if I understand. When you say leftover...

JM: Is it something you've done well or something leftover because you've done well? In other words the process of creating that or getting to that place, is that more important than what we have left?

LL: Oh I see. I understand. Okay, I love that question. I don't think the opus, the work, is . . . the ultimate work, is not a poem; it's not a book of poems; it's the self that gets made by making that poem. At one point my youngest son and I were talking about art and he said to me, "If I had to become an artist like Michaelangelo I would have to change myself and I would have to become . . . I would have to work on myself. I would have to have such discipline, such passion, and such openness and such rigor. My character would have to change in order to make that kind of artist exactly right. It's the self that gets made. I think the art itself, that's evidence of the thing done. It's evidence of the type of rigor or vision or depth that one tries to live in order to make the work. Does that make any kind of sense?"

JM: Mm hmm.

LL: Yeah I think the real work is self knowledge and the poem is a kind of evidence of that. Yeats talked about that. I don't remember where but he said we make ourselves as we make the poem. Yeah, I was even noticing today at lunch that my head was going around and around like a sort of electron around this poem that I started yesterday evening, and suddenly as it was going around and around trying to figure out what's the problem with that, something happened and I kind of solved the puzzle with that. I can't wait to get back to the hotel and see what I have. It donned on me that that process of posing a problem that I can't quite solve, and trying to solve it, solve it, solve it, and suddenly I understand it... it feels something like: oh I understand myself, and I understand that I did this thing and I got stuck because I was obsessing about certain aspects and I didn't see the open quality of the things and so I have to teach myself about keeping my mind open, so I'm learning about myself. Now the poem that will come out of that, hopefully it will have a life of its own and so on, and it will I hope be able to give hope to other people. I feel really happy that I solved it, like wow I didn't see the couple of openings there, all I saw was this sealed thing and I couldn't find my way back into it. So I'm working on my own psyche all the time.

JM: Have you noticed that these moments come to you unforced or when you're otherwise engaged, or when you're making yourself concentrate on them?

LL: No, I feel like I'm on the job 24 hours a day, even when I'm coming out of sleep. This morning I was lying there coming out of sleep and I could tell that my mind was trying to remember what it was I dreamed, and then it was reaching forward to the poem I wanted to work on, and then I was trying to wonder: was there another poem that I'm trying to write today. So I feel like my whole attitude is listening. I feel like a giant ear sometimes, like the moment I wake up I'm listening for something like a big radar dish and all day long I'm like, trying to pick up signals. Even as I'm falling asleep, I feel like that radar dish is going and going and trying to pick up signals all the time.

HW: As you travel around now and are in New Mexico and Tennessee and Oklahoma City, what do you hope people who here you, who interact with you. . . do you have hopes of how those of us here will remember you, or have had experience with you?

LL: Yeah, it's more like I think what I mentioned this morning. My wish would be that people listening to the poems will somehow have a sense of the richness of their own solitude and their own inner life, and their connection to feeling and depth and meaning and maybe as an after thought think: oh Li-Young helped me think about that. But I hope the first thing is that the person gets a feeling of the richness of their own inner life. I worry that if I give a reading people will think: he's a good writer. That to me feels somehow dead end or bankrupt because there's no future in that. But, if the person walks away and thinks: Wow life is really rich and multilayered and nanofold in significance, and by the way I went to a poetry reading. I almost wish, I don't know, that my work can introduce people to the richness of their own interiority, the richness of their own interior.

HW: I feel like when I've been hearing you it's like I'm hearing you pray.

LL: Well thank you! I do think poetry is a form of prayer for me. It's a form of contemplation. To my mind poetry is one of the supreme yogas. People practice yoga all day long; they put their ankles behind their necks and this and that but to me the practice of a particular type of presence, I'll call it poetic presence, that's the greatest service that a poem can do. It can impart to a listener or reader a sense of that depth of presence, being present to language and silence and meaning and inhabiting that kind of liminal space where meaning gets born. That kind of presence you can take out into the world. Because I do think...I practiced meditation all my life, and early on my father, who was our teacher, said, "You can't just practice in your room." Because you can do that for a while but you have to take it out into the world, and your whole life as to become a meditation. So I feel the same way about poetry. I don't think that when you're done writing you're done. I feel whatever you learn from writing that poem you should take out into the world; you should inhabit that presence all of the time. I think that helps the writing get deeper, and, on the other hand, it helps you be more present as you live. Because the consciousness in a poem, I think that it's a very full form of consciousness that we can take into the world.

HW: This is changing directions, but I'm sure this is a question you get asked all the time. What I really want to ask you I have to say a couple of sentences first. Your father and your relationship with your father, and you said last night that what a poem appears to be about is not necessarily what it's about it's about the speaker. So as I read the poetry, as I read your memoir, I have a sense that simultaneously you're maybe celebrating and also trying to exorcise your father in you. Then I look at you as a father and you have two sons, and so I wonder what the power of your father and your relationship with him was and is. How do you hope you are for your sons? How do you hope you will be for them when they're your age? If that's too personal. . .

LL: No, not at all. My father was such a complicated individual. He was capable of great love and joy, and at the same time he was kind of scary to be around sometimes. He probably needed therapy. I mean after his experience in prison and other things.

Somebody recently read the memoir and said to me, “I’m a psychotherapist and I want to tell you, I deal with these kind of people like your father all the time. They need help. They’re the walking wounded. They’ve been torn from their culture; they’ve been terrorized. They’ve lived through terror. They get plucked onto a foreign country.” She said, “I have a feeling your father never had any therapy.” I don’t know what I think of therapy, but it donned on me; it was like a gift when she said that to me. So he wasn’t just like, occasionally scary to be around. There was some psychological damage maybe. My wish for the kids though is that they know how deeply I love them. Through all my own confused fathering and everything else, I just hope they know how deeply I love them. They’ve said things to my wife, their mother, that have sometimes scared me like: “Baba’s kind of a scary guy.” And I’ve thought: Why am I a scary guy? So that kind of red flag went up. What did I do when I was scary? Was I too . . . ? I don’t know. So that . . . I just thought I had to be careful. I just want them to know that I love them. I wasn’t always sure my father loved me. Sometimes I knew sometimes I didn’t. So I talk to my sons a lot. I call them all the time on the road. I think we have a good relationship. Does that even come near to answering anything?

HW: I think I’m just asking you to talk.

LL: (laughing) Oh, alright.

HW: I suppose a lot of who you are today is your father and how you and he used to relate, and I just wonder what might be the way your son in twenty years would write a book and how they will be thinking of you, and becoming uncle, and becoming who they are.

LL: Yeah, I wonder too and I worry. You know my father, he was so scary sometimes that he would clear his throat and everyone would stop and be like, “whoa.” If everything was quiet we’d go, “okay” and move along. When I was little, to teach us English he would have us read the King James Bible. I remember sitting on his chair on a bunch of books and he would open this big rotten Bible. It was a rotten cover. We would start reading, and he would take these butterscotch candies and he would crack them on the table and open them up. And as we read, he would pop the pieces in our mouths. He called that “sweet learning.” And it was pretty sweet when I think how loving it was. But I also remember sitting there being just terrified to make a mistake. I raised my children doing the meditation my father taught me. And I know in class, when we do it, there is probably a lot more pressure on them than the other students you know. And they used to fall asleep. When they were little, I could hear them snoring. And I never did what my father did. My father would just tap us with a stick and we’d have to wake up. I would just let them sleep, pet their heads and things. And even so, I don’t know why, they seemed to me kind of on . . . I guess that’s the way kids are with their parents.

JM: It may be universal. Have you seen the movie *Smoke Signals*? The Native American movie . . .

LL: No.

JM: There's a voiceover line at the end of that that's just beautiful and this young man is saying, "how do we forgive our fathers?" And it is, it's . . . And it may be more boys to their fathers than it is girls to their fathers, but there's a person there that I guess your entire life you have to measure yourself against maybe. I'm not including this on the interview in any way but it's an interesting conversation to have. That's a good movie.

ES: To what extent would you define poetry as the art of silence? You talked about silence in Emily Dickinson's poetry and in your own poetry. Do you think of poetry as the art of silence?

LL: I do. But not just silence as a kind of not saying anything. Like I said this morning, silence is even more than innuendo or something. I mean . . . I don't know. But I just have this sense that there's a silence of fullness or the silence of a full heart. And can one impart that to the reader? Of course it means one experiences that first. And I guess that would be . . . Yeah, and I guess poetry is a double medium, that the one medium is language, and you're trying to get that right and to say it clearly. But then on the other hand you are trying to inflect the silence, punctuate it. And there are different kinds of silences you know. I feel as if there are even silences that say, extend back to childhood. And then there are more ancient silences that predate childhood. Can a poem give us that? I sense sometimes that in Gerard Manley Hopkins, the silences that occasionally emerge out of his work are older than him. And certainly in Dickinson, it's that prehistoric silence. I would call it something like "the silence of the ground of ourselves." It's beyond personal history. I think if a poem can impart that, then that is just amazing. My sense is that there are a lot of silences that I experienced in childhood. And I can get to there, but I can't get past it. In a weird way, poetry is a form of remembrance then. In the deepest way, like in the Bible when . . . is this wrong to mention specifically religious?

ES, HW, JM: (In virtual unison) No, No.

LL: Okay, in the Bible the word "zachor", to remember, occurs again and again. And I think poetry is a way to remember, but not just a personal past or our childhood. It's a way to remember our own embeddedness in God. It's a way to remember how the human psyche is embedded in nature. It's not separate from nature. Nature is embedded in the mind of God. It's these concentric circles of embeddedness. If a poem can give us a feeling of this by talking about flowers or a tree or your father, you think that's what the subject is. But if the poem at some deep level allows us to experience that embeddedness, then I think that is the most a poem can do . . . A lot of embeddedness is experienced in this deep prehistoric silence. Does that make any sense?

ES: yeah.

JM: I've got a question along those lines, and you talked about this last night really early on in your presentation. It's been said about playing a musical instrument that the greater the mastery, the greater the mystery, and you allude to as much in your writing and sometimes feeling . . . that you're more puzzled the deeper you go. So this is the question, and I want to say initially that I spelled the word elusive with an I, illusive. Do you think there is such thing as the perfect poem, that is ultimately illusive, that even the

best poem just points the way toward that perfect poem? In other words, the best poem is, illusive. And I hate to play with words like that, but you talked about that and I want to explore that with you just a little bit. Where do you think poetry can get you in that concentric nest, towards whatever it is in the center that we're looking for?

LL: Yeah, you know I really do have the sense that the cosmos is the great poem. It's both made of materiality and something that's immaterial and deeper and that phenomenon somehow; that beingness kind of floats or is the kind of manifesting continually out of . . . I mean if we look at our physical bodies, at three billion cells a minute, that amazes me! As we speak they are dying and being reborn. I keep thinking born out of what? What's the ground of that. So that's true about trees and everything. Physicists will tell us it's all vibration. It looks solid and still but it's mostly space and atoms vibrating. So everything is made up of this vibration, and I'm curious what is the ground for my body? And I'm curious about. . . I want to write from that place where the cell has just died and the next one is coming into being. So I do have the sense that the cosmos itself is the poem. So when we write a poem, the poem is a little model of psyche. Psyche is embedded in cosmos. So psyche is a model of cosmos, so that the poem is a little model of cosmos. It just seems to me reflection after reflection. Because whatever the psyche makes it can't help but make, it's. . . It just seems to me, I know this sounds a little farfetched, I feel as if there has only really been one subject of human history. The only subject has been human perception, because we can't and really don't know. For instance, when Democritus said everything is made of atoms . . . Well he didn't have a microscope. It was his intuition. So where did that come from. It must have come from his psyche right. He must have been making a . . . So the atomic model of the universe worked up until now. Now it's kind of beginning to slip. It still works up to a point, but the most radical physicists are saying it's an incomplete model. So now we're seeing that what psyche projected onto the world, that mask is starting to slip. Now we need another model, another projection, if I can call it that, projection from psyche. It seems to me that ninety percent of models we have of the universe are models of psyche. We really don't know what the universe is. For instance, if I say . . . if I see a beautiful sunset, "I saw a beautiful sunrise this morning," well the sunrise isn't sitting there saying, "I'm beautiful" for you to . . . I mean there are some people who might look at that sunrise and say, "I don't see what you're seeing." So if I say, "That's beautiful" then I'm guessing that it's very likely that I'm projecting inside onto the world. I think, in fact, that's part of our job, that we're put on the planet here to create value like that. But it's not just the ego projecting. Ultimately, I hope that ego understands that it's embedded in nature and embedded in God. If that whole model gets projected then what we see is God. See that confuses me because then it's God looking at God, which goes back to God saying "I love you" and then God saying, "I love you." So there's only one conversation and we're just participating in it. This is all over the place right?

JM: In a very interesting way.

LL: So you asked a . . .

JM: Well, the ultimate point is the cosmos and any poems that you write or any other poet writes, or any works of art that are of a poetic nature, those are just . . . some of them

more accurate than others, but they are pointing, and not . . . in other words, your frustration is that you won't be able to write the perfect poem.

LL: Right.

JM: And maybe the more you get into poetry the more you realize that, and the more frustrating it gets.

LL: Yes. You know Frost talks about that too. You know he was really sly. He talked religiously without ever being religious, so that the academics could embrace it or something. He said the poem is a great symbol, is the great symbol. It's the great symbol of the human will braving alien entanglements. I love that. That means the poem is a little paradigm of human life. Because what are we doing except braving alien entanglements everyday from the moment we get up? So it seems to me that that is the paradigm of human will, braving alien entanglements. But for me it's even deeper than that, it's a model of psyche, because. . . When we study a poem we're really ultimately studying the psyche that made it, the decisions that psyche made. So we're studying psyche. But if we recognize that psyche is a reflection of cosmos, psyche is a child of cosmos, it's a child of nature and nature is a descendent of the cosmos, and the cosmos is a descendent of the mind of God, that ultimately we're studying a little model of cosmos. Because ultimately it's like all the properties, laws that govern a poem, are the laws that govern psyche, like probability and randomness, repetition, a sense of time and return. It goes out, then goes back to silence, then begins again, goes out, back to silence, then begins again. So if you have, for instance, a blank page. A blank page is a symbol for pure potentiality. At that point you can write anything. You can write anything. But the minute you start writing this particular poem, you begin to differentiate this poem from every other possible poem. On the one hand, the poem begins to close down its possibilities. It leaves the realm of pure potentiality in order to write this poem, and becomes highly differentiated. On the other hand when you write the poem, just by the nature of verse, you keep returning to pure potentiality and going out. That seems to me something like. . . I haven't thought that through, but that seems something like reincarnation, or all those other properties or laws of return. We're enacting the breath itself. So there's just all these things. I really do think that the laws that govern a poem, they're not literary devices. For instance, I don't think a metaphor is a literary device. I think it is the marriage, the resolution of two incompatible psychic elements. We marry them alchemically with metaphor. So I don't see it as a literary device. I think we're actually wedding psychic elements. There are actual psychic counterparts when you say the word "duck," and you say "Li-Young," and you say, "Li-Young waddled into the room." I mean, you're actually marrying two seemingly incompatible elements. Then you see me differently. You say, "Yeah, he's like a duck." You see what I mean? So, it isn't a literary device; it's a different way to see the world. It psychically changes you I think. Is this making any sense? So I do feel that when we study a poem, we are ultimately studying psyche, and when you're studying psyche you're studying cosmos, and when you're studying cosmos, you study God. So it's a little way to see through to God I guess, ultimately.

ES: Is writing a poem an embodiment of spirit? Is it embodying spirit?

LL: Yes, it's enacting the spirit on the page. It's a record of the spirit dancing. It's like a giant chess game. At the risk of oversimplification, if you write the first line, that's your first move, but you're playing against yourself, or death, or God. You write the first line and the next move you make is the second line. Or, you write the next stanza, and the next move you make is the second stanza. But you're trying to make these moves that both keep the dance, the game, in play; you try to keep things open and at the same time you try to resolve things. And yet because what makes a poem interesting is irresolution, and tension, and jeopardy . . . so you want to keep the poem in play, in tension, in jeopardy, and at the same time give just enough closure and resolution so that it's satisfying as you go along. It's a spirit playing . . . maybe it's like a ten way chess game: spirit, body, eros, emotion . . . all those elements playing against each other. So you're just trying to move the poem out in the page among all of those players. Does that make any sense?

ES: Yeah. Do you have a sense of the poems body, or the poem having a body?

LL: I do. I do very much. In fact I feel visceral about it. I feel that when I'm writing the poem, it's not my head writing the poem, it's my left hand. I mean, it doesn't even come into play, but I realize my left hand is in there somewhere, the hair on the back of my neck, an aching in my knees, the soles of my feet, the breathing two inches below my navel, whether I had enough rest, whether I had too much rest, whether I'm relaxed, all of that comes in and I feel it in my body, the poem . . . Yeah, very much so.

HW: I wonder . . . a kind of shift of prose?

LL: mmhmm.

HW: Last year Naomi was telling us how much she loved sentences, and I've heard you say, on the Lennon tape the same thing. And she even, as she published what she called *A Collection of Paragraphs*. . .

LL: Oh, I have that!

HW: And so I just wondered, when you were talking about *The Winged Seed* last night, I heard you saying that it really was compressed language in a poem. You look at poetry and then you look at prose. But you loved Lawrence and Dickens and Dante . . . What about prose and poetry? There are sentences in each. Do you view them differently? Is there some prose that's just poetic and some that isn't, as there is poetry that is and isn't?

LL: Yeah. I don't know. I know that because something is written in lines, it sets up a different . . . but the line is a tool of differentiation . . . If a sentence is one kind of . . . It seems to me that the mind, I run the risk of oversimplifying, but basically it has two modes: one is integration, and the other is differentiation, so that a sentence is a mode of both integrating of materials, information, whether it's emotional information or historical information, but at the same time it's a mode of differentiation. A sentence is one unit of integration and differentiation, and a phrase would be another. But then you break it into lines and the line itself is another unit of differentiation. It's another period. Denise Levertov talks about this idea of the period. I love that because it means that a

sentence being a period and having a period but being a period means that it's an embodiment of time. A different sentence would embody time differently. A line of poetry then would be even a further mode of embodying time. The prose writers that I love are just great sentence writers. Like Emerson, I just love his sentences. I could read those sentences over and over again. They're just so beautiful, and they're crazy! Some of them are just out of this world you know. Of course there's Faulkner, especially in *As I Lay Dying*. That is my . . . that is the one prose book that I love.

HW: You say it's a prose book?

LL: Well I see it as a long poem. It feels to me . . . I read it in one sitting. I mean I didn't even stop to eat. It was just . . . It felt to me like a huge epic poem. Yeah, because it's complicated. Like in "Four Quartets," I was reading Eliot and it donned on me, this is prose. It's beautiful but it's prose. And why is it prose? I don't know. You know Harbour, I really don't know. I mean there are books like . . . Bruno Schultz, do you know this novelist.

HW: No.

LL: He's amazing. Have you guys ever read Bruno Schultz? He's amazing! He's got this book called *Street of Crocodiles* and I read it, and I think: this is poetry. I went to the trouble of taking a pencil and lineating it, thinking: I would have broken it like this, the perfect free verse long poem. I don't know what the difference is. Maybe there's more science in poetry. Maybe poetry is slower, or more present. I don't know.

JM: We had Michael Ondaatje here, who is a poet/novelist and I'm not sure really if his prose isn't just a different version of poetry. I think the best prose really is a form of poetry. The passages you read in a book that just knock you flat, there's something there that's beyond just a paragraph. I would say it ventures into the realm of poetry. It's a tough . . . We asked him the same thing . . .

LL: He couldn't . . .

JM: I don't think it's an answerable question, but it's a good question.

LL: And he couldn't answer it either? Well if he can't answer it then I don't feel so bad.

HW: You talked about *The Winged Seed* as unfinished or it was coerced to publication. Are you writing it again? Are you sequeling it?

LL: No. I need to find the courage to actually read it and revise it. But I'll tell you, it was so hard . . . the material in it was so hard that I've dipped into it but I haven't actually . . . This is really going to undermine what shred, any shred of confidence anybody ever really had in me: I haven't read it. I've been terrified to read it. Because I know the process, it was completely unrevised. I'm afraid to be too embarrassed to read it saying, "what was I thinking?" So I'm still trying to work up the courage to read it through and to revise it. Because I'm beginning to remember now, there was a form that I saw for it. But I don't remember what that form was. Occasionally the form would reveal itself and

then I couldn't see it again. So it got published the way it did, and so I'm still working on it. Not a sequel, but the finished thing.

HW: So the form is something you experience only in the process of creating it?

LL: Right. Writing that book was like trying to get the head and the tail of a snake at the same time. I was wandering around in the body of it. I couldn't find either the head or the tail. It felt like a nervous breakdown. It was such a scary process.

HW: It's scary for me in some ways, but maybe that's part of what's exhilarating in it too. Even a person last night was talking about reading it with their students. And I am right now too, and I look forward to when you reread it and rediscover what's there or find what you were looking for.

LL: Yeah.

SIDE 2--- *beginning in medias res*

LL: . . . Barely remembering what I did the day before that, and not remembering what I did four days ago, and I didn't know if I was repeating. Sometimes I would be typing along and the words seemed like they were just falling into place. But I wasn't reading it. There was a blank screen and the words were just . . . I couldn't even tell. Is that a sentence? I couldn't go back to see, and I would wonder: Have I said this already? Why is this sounding so . . . like I had written this before. And I did not allow myself to look back. It was a very . . . I have a feeling when I go back and comb through there is going to be a lot of repetitions and things like that that I didn't know about. That's my fear.

HW: Maybe the motifs that are in a long poem?

LL: Maybe.

JM: Have you ever encountered Julio Cortezar, *Hopscotch*?

LL: No.

JM: Have you?

HW: A long time ago.

JM: It's . . .

HW: *Blowup* he wrote *Blowup*?

JM: He wrote *Blowup*, but *Hopscotch* is written in avantgarde. It's in chapters and you can read them in any order you want. He has a recommended order, but at the end of every chapter you're free to take off and jump somewhere else. But he talks about words. There's a passage in there . . . That book was frustrating because you never could go back and find where you were if you were doing his little hopscotch through it. But there was

a passage on words, and being terrified of words, and he called them spiders and black bitches on the page, that they were tormenting. But in the act of turning that off and just having your own self free of any . . . you couldn't go back and edit. That's high-wire walking without a net.

LL: Yeah, very scary.

JM: I need to look. I have not read that book. I'm interested in your take on it, going back through from more of an editorial . . . with the ego present.

LL: Yeah.

JM: I've listened to you last night and this morning and here today, and I hear Buddhist; I hear Daoist; I hear those strong. I've been wondering: what are the major influences on you and on your way of thinking and on your poetry? You talk about quantum mechanics; you talk about astrophysics; you talk about metaphysics, all of these things, and they all seem to influence you. Can you list just some of your basic, major influences that define . . . When you go back through a stack of poetry that you've read, what comes out that are your main influences.

LL: You know, my father, of course his own spiritual bent, as I said he was sent to a Daoist monastery, and he studied there for three years when he was young, and he learned meditation and contemplation, and he raised us doing it. So he handed that on. It was very influential to me. You know, this is really weird. Somebody gave me a book about a year ago and it was *The Letters* . . . has anybody ever heard of Wulfgang Paulie (Sp.?) the physicist? He's a Nobel winning physicist and he was seeing Carl Jung for therapy and he and Jung exchanged letters. There's a collection of their letters and someone gave them to me. So I was reading these letters. Some of it's pretty interesting. And at one point, Paulie talks about . . . he's obsessing about a colleague. It's a Chinese woman, and she's a physicist. He's dreaming about her and he's projecting all of this stuff onto her. Jung is trying to help him through this, and he says her name and I thought: is that my aunt? And it said who it was, it was my aunt! So this Wulfgang Paulie was obsessing about my aunt. So she's the one who really influenced me too. When we were really little she would tell us about quantum reality, and things like that. And she was talking to us about neutrinos and all kinds of crazy things. Every time she talked I thought: this, in a weird way, is like talking to my father about meditation, and breathing, and cosmos, and God. They were very similar about the spaciousness of materiality. In fact the immateriality of a parent materiality . . . it seemed that that was exactly what my father was except from another way. So those two influences were very strong. And then my mother's culture, she comes from that aristocratic culture with a lot of memorization of texts and all those stories about the way she grew up. So I always had this kind of idea about my little life being connected to this vast household of . . . my great-grandfather's nine wives and nine mansions, and all their servants, and all their stuff, and the compound with the big wall. He built nine mansions for his wives with a big wall around it. My mother was never allowed to leave. None of the women were allowed to leave the compound. They were all educated inside. In fact, they had this room, a big sewing hall, where women sewed all the clothes for the female members of that family, because they did not want any of the females to wear clothing that men had

touched. So it was all women making clothes for all the female members of that household. Just weird stories like that that were exotic . . . darkly lit stories of some ancient culture, that was my mother's influence. So it's all of that stuff, my father's love for Christian mystical thought, love for Daoist texts, his love of poetry, the old testament, his love of Paul's letters, and just stuff like that. It was a whole big hodgepodge of influences. I don't know. They're everywhere.

ES: I hope we're not jumping around too much with these questions.

LL: No, not at all.

ES: Especially in *The Book of My Nights*, some of those poems really do remind me of Emily Dickinson's poetry because they have that really intense kind of compression to them and a density that really reminds me of her. And I wondered if her kind of strategies of compression were an influence.

LL: Yeah, very much so. And I felt this need to . . . I don't know. Yeah, but she was a huge influence. She's so interesting. Sometimes she gets so compressed that the poem is like a stone. You can't even penetrate it. And then sometimes it comes out the other side. It's like she's so compressed it comes out the other side. It's like complete transparency, completely transparent. I don't know how she does that, she goes from the completely lapidary, opaque, almost impregnable poem to this kind of transparency that comes out the other side. I just wanted to know if I could do that. If I tried that, what would that do to my own mind, to attempt that. She's been a big influence, Emily Dickinson.

HW: Last night, your response to a question I thought really deserved a larger audience, so I wanted you to talk about what it's like to grow up in an urban world versus a more rural, world of nature, and what's the cost. I thought: that's something I really remember about last night.

LL: Well, because I do feel that my mind and body are embedded in nature and nature is embedded in God, I feel as if when we're cut off from nature, and when it's just a human being among things other human beings have made, it's a kind of limitation of the scope of what . . . I think our inheritance is. Our full inheritance becomes very limited. It's only like . . . it's as if our psychic inheritance was only the things human beings have made, and our psychic inheritance didn't include birds, and trees, and rivers, and mountains, and the wind, and clouds, and skies. I mean you can't even see the night sky in Chicago. You look up and you can't see any stars. That's a big deal to me! I have to drive thirty miles . . . farther! I drove an hour and a half, and I still couldn't see stars. We have to drive so far out to see stars. It seems to me that that's part of our identity, all that space up there and those stars, and the knowledge that some of them are already dead and gone. So, I feel that there are writers, very deep expansive writers, who speak with a voice that is not narrowly human. I could be wrong, but one can hear in poets like Frost, or Robinson Jeffers, or in Neruda, even those through translation, you can hear the mountains in their voice; you can hear the birds in their voice, you can hear the river in their voices; you can hear stones and clouds, and you can hear nature! In their voices! It's a part of their voices, I feel. And I feel, in an urban setting, the definition of what is

human becomes more and more narrow. I think that's dangerous. I think that's really dangerous. It has something to do with our inheritance. It's such a narrow version of our full inheritance. I don't know; it's a problem I don't know how to solve. Because there's eleven of us. If we move, eleven of us have to move. We made a vow to stay together. But we're always trying to solve that problem.

HW: I have one more thing I was really interested in. We were talking about the difficulty of teaching, and you said last night that, I think, what maybe we should be teaching is the science of gut feeling. How could that be shaped? What form would it take? What is it that would enact that as your children, my children, his children are growing up in their experience with an education and I guess the institution?

LL: I don't know Harbour. I know that there are other modes of thinking, if we can even call them thinking, there are other modes of thinking than just rational, logical thinking. It seems to me poetry is a form of thinking, a very deep form. Painting and music, those are all forms, but those forms are . . . I don't know. It would be the science of intuition right? You would have to study models of intuition. Then we would have to develop a whole new vocabulary to talk about it. Yeah, so that it doesn't seem like . . . because the difficulty. My experience with young students is that they think they're in the realm of intuition so anything goes. But that's not really true. You know what's so hard . . . when I taught a couple times, I told them, "I want you to write a dream poem. I want you to write a poem that is like a dream." They seem to think: anything can happen. But the fact of the matter is, in dreams, not anything can happen. There is a dream logic. It's not daytime logic, but there is a dream logic to it. Because sometimes when somebody's telling you a dream you can tell – that's a real dream, or – you're kind of making that up right? You can tell. So I don't think intuition or the modes of . . . I think daydreaming is a form of thinking. Like the guy who came up with the DNA helix, he was . . . I think the story is it was in a dream, and he woke up and he realized it. And the guy that came up with the benzene ring, it was daydreaming. Einstein always talks about daydreaming. When students hear that they think: well it just means I can do anything I want. Part of it is their misunderstanding too, that this is . . . to be taught something like that, it doesn't mean you can do anything you want. It means you're really studying something. I don't know how one would do that. Maybe, art, studying art: painting, poetry, music, and dance. See, I think aesthetic consciousness is like the mother consciousness. I think great poems are forms of math. So I think aesthetic consciousness is like the mother consciousness because I write poems. Other modes of thinking are like grandchildren of aesthetic consciousness. Because even when I read the great mathematicians, I feel like I'm reading aesthetics. Or if I read some of the ideas of the great physicists, I feel like I'm reading aesthetics. I'm not reading . . . so at any deep level it becomes artistic. So, it seems to me that that's obvious, but that may not be.

JM: Maybe the inverse, that art is defined by depth.

LL: Yeah, yes right. So the deeper you do a discipline, it becomes art. Is that what you're saying John?

JM: No matter what. I mean washing dishes.

LL: Carpentry, right?

JM: Yeah, yeah. Very Buddhist, very much along the Buddhist way of thinking, that nothing is unimportant. The depth with which you take it is the important thing. I think that that's where art lives. The great works of art, no matter what genre they are, move us in a similar way.

LL: But you know, great poets who aren't Buddhist know that too. When Denise Levertov talks about cutting onions, do you know that poem? It ends something like, "Oh to have a grief equal to all these tears," and suddenly cutting onions becomes this sacred thing. So anything looked at deeply becomes art.

HW: Jane Hirschfield has poems like that.

LL: Exactly, right.

ES: Are we still going? So much of your poetry seems to be an exploration of the sacred dimension of human love, and you kind of talked about it this morning as a dysfunction. I wondered if I could keep reading your poems this way? (laughing)

LL: (laughing) Oh yeah! Especially romantic love I think. Because my experience of romantic love is, I don't exist unless I exist in your gaze. That's dysfunction isn't it? To feel like I don't even exist, and the beloved or the lover looks at you and you feel like: now I exist. That's dysfunction, to feel like I don't even have a body unless I'm touching the other person or the other person's touching me, then I feel like I'm here, but if they're not touching me then I feel like I don't even know where I am. Where am I? My wife touches me and I feel like: ah, I'm here. That's dysfunction. I should know I'm here. I should have a sense of my identity even if she's not . . . so that seems to me dysfunction.

JM: I wrote a short story years ago that was of no value except for this one phrase in it that the young character, a high school boy, thought he was falling in love with this little girl sitting next to him. He was physically a wreck, but it turns out he was coming down with the flu in those first few moments of illness when you don't realize you're sick, and he was projecting it onto her as if he must be falling in love with her. And she had nothing to do with it. It was just . . . but that same dysfunction.

LL: Well the Greeks used to say that. If you were to say, "Oh I'm in love." In ancient Greece didn't they used to say, "Oh, I'm sorry. You will get better soon." Lovesick.

JM: I've got one more on my card. Several of the poets that we've had visit us have been what those of us here in America would call outsiders. Michael Ondaatje was a Sri Lankan via England and now living in Canada. Mark Doty is an outsider by virtue of being gay. Naomi Shihab Nye is a Palestinian American. You're a Chinese American. It seems to be a theme with us. What we've heard, threads of searching and wanting to belong and threads of home, but we've also heard the universality of human experience from all, including you. Can you tell us how and in what ways being a Chinese-American has affected you and informs your poetry?

LL: John my first reaction to that would be that poetry for me, or trying to live a life in which I can write poems, is nothing less than alienation by transcendence. So to me, that kind of alienation is, I don't want to say it's beyond social alienation, but it's . . . alienation by transcendence. It's being called by some source that transcends me, that is the ground of my personal history, being called by that source more than I'm called by social structures. So, you know, I feel even as if I was a white American I would be alienated by transcendence. I feel like if one lives a serious life, one is alienated by transcendence. Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Frost . . . I know Frost courted acceptance but ultimately . . . The Chinese-American thing, it's been difficult. Because, well, normal things. One can't look at the culture and see authentic representations of one's own personhood, one's own cultural personhood. I don't see authentic representations of Chinese people. Sometimes it bugs me. But then when I really think about it, there aren't even authentic representations of people, white people! Nobody can see a movie about white people and say, "that's an accurate representation of human life." So I feel like it's across the board. If you're a thinking person, you can't find true authentic representations. And I think that representational deficit is a real problem. In my case for instance, the representational deficit may be cultural, or racial. But I think ultimately for me my real sense is it's spiritual. I don't see any genuine representations of genuine spiritual hunger, or resolution, or possibilities. So in magazines, or tv, or movies . . . I mean one can read books, but it's hard to be in a culture where . . . so I don't know.

JM: Well it does, and it brings me back to the beginning of our conversation here. We seem to be walking around with blinders on or a blindfold even, and not tapping into that ultimate source you're talking about. Why is that? Why can't human beings live our lives at a deeper level? Why is it that we go there only momentarily when we hear a poem or listen to music that is moving? Why do our lives exist on this superficial level and not on a deeper level?

LL: I don't know. There are just so many distractions. It's almost as if I have multiple personalities, and one of them is worried if I have a job, and the other part doesn't even care. The other part could wander around the city in the open-air market looking at things taking notes. I do that with my kids. When they were little we used to just walk through Chicago taking notes of things we saw, and they still do that now. When they do it, I find myself worrying: is that . . . a nineteen, twenty year-old boy, should he be doing that? And then another part of me slaps myself and says, "You taught them that. Let them do it. It fulfills them." Sometimes they're a little down and they pack up their backpack . . . now my nineteen year old has gotten a little camera and he goes around taking pictures of things that he likes, and I've gone through with him and he's shown me some of them and they're like a broken flower pot with some little flower, or a fish gasping for air at the market, and he takes little notes. So, I'm conflicted about it too. Part of me wants to just inhabit that world of constant saturation of vividness and meaning and being, and the other part of me worries: are they going to be able to pay the rent? I don't know. It's tough. There are so many things that call us away. We're like corks. We try to go down to the bottom and the minute you let go, it pops back to the surface. I would just like to be weighted and stay down. . . Maybe we're afraid to be alienated. It is alienation by transcendence.

JM: Maybe we need the air.

LL: Maybe

JM: It bothers me though.

ES: Do you feel that critics and reviewers have been attentive enough to the spiritual dimension of your work? Have they paid enough attention to that?

LL: No, because most of them are academics and they don't even like the word "spirit." I was telling Harbour, I was at Duke University and was talking, and the head of the English department got up and walked out. I thought it was to go to the bathroom or something. He didn't come back, and later he said to me, "I was really offended when you used the word 'soul'. You said it once, I thought it was okay; you said it again, then you used the word 'God'." He said, "This is an English department at an institution of learning and thinking, and that kind of fuzzy thinking . . ." I said, "What's so fuzzy about this at all, I don't get it."

JM: This was at Duke?

LL: This was at Duke.

JM: That's a Methodist University like OCU.

LL: Is that right? That guy has now gone to the University of Illinois, he's the head guy there, and that's where my kids go. I don't know what the problem is. I was at another university where I used a word like spirit and a couple of teachers at dinner said, "That was really bad for the kids." I said, "Why?" They said, "We talk about real things here." I don't think they're ever going to get it. They never talk about the spiritual dimension even of, like, Emily Dickinson. They don't. They don't talk about the spiritual dimension of Robert Frost; they don't talk about the spiritual dimension of Ezra Pound. I don't know what it means to them. I really don't know what it means to them. . . The word "psyche," that was the word that really offended the guy at Duke not soul: "You used 'psyche' twice, then 'God,' and that was it. I can't take it." . . . That's a Methodist University?

HW: In its origins I don't think it has the kind of affiliation OCU has.

JM: The Divinity school there has a Methodist . . .

LL: Maybe it wasn't Duke, maybe it was the University of North Carolina at someplace. Maybe that's what it was . . . UNC at Charlotte, that's what it was. Not Duke.

JM: But still, just the fact that a college professor, even if offended, wouldn't sit through it and work through it.

HW: That science of gut feeling maybe.

ES: That's pretty terrible I think.

HW: Want to call it an interview?

LL: Yeah, thanks. I feel like I've been babbling on for hours.

HW: I've got to get you back to the hotel so you can work on that poem.

LL: (Laughing) Yeah, I've got to get to that poem Harbour.