Tricycle Talks
"Poet Li-Young Lee on Awe, Adoration, and Turning toward the Unknown"
Episode #142 with Li-Young Lee
February 11, 2026

Note: Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

Li-Young Lee: For me, there's only three postures of the soul when you're writing a lyric poem. They can be summed up as "Oh my God," "Oh my love," and "Holy, holy, holy." You know, when I experience something and I feel, "Oh my God," I mean, I know I have to write about it. When I experience something like, "Oh, my love," I have to write about it. Or when I see and feel something that inspires in me, "Holy, holy, holy." Those three are the postures of awe. Adoration, I don't know who said it, but adoration is the proper attitude of a soul in awe. And it seems to me that the lyric poem is the greatest expression of awe and adoration, turning about one thing, and that thing is unknown. I feel like I live in those three postures all day long.

James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Li-Young Lee. Li-Young is an acclaimed American poet based in Chicago. He recently published a new collection of poetry, *The Invention of the Darling*, as well as a translation of the *Dao De Jing*, which he completed with the poet and cosmologist Yun Wang. In my conversation with Li-Young, we talk about the spiritual influences on his poetry, why he believes that every poem is a descendant of God, how he writes from a state of don't-know mind, and why he believes the task of the poet is to reconcile all opposites. Plus, Li-Young reads a few poems from his new collection. So here's my conversation with Li-Young Lee.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with Li-Young Lee. Hi Li-Young, it's great to be with you.

Li-Young Lee: Hi James. Thank you for having me.

James Shaheen: Oh, it's a pleasure. So Li-Young, we're here to talk about your recent poetry collection, *The Invention of the Darling*, as well as your recent translation of the *Dao De Jing*. So

to start, I'd like to ask you a bit about how you came to be a poet. What, what first drew you to poetry?

Li-Young Lee: You know, I think I was kidnapped by poetry. I don't know, I guess I heard my parents reciting ancient Chinese poetry all the time, quoting it, reciting it. They were both classically educated in China, which meant they had to memorize hundreds of poems and hundreds of passages from the Chinese classics. And so maybe it was in junior high school or something. I don't know. I just fell in love with Robert Lewis Stevenson's A *Child's Garden of Verses*, I fell in love with the Bible, hearing my father read from the Bible. He was a minister, and just hearing the language in the King James Version, all those wild stories, and it was about in high school that I heard the Song of Songs, the Song of Solomon, read out loud from the pulpit and I just was blown away. And I think I just fell in love with it. I couldn't stop thinking about it.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I mean, listening to what you just said, I think that's why you so easily pull from so many different sources in your poetry. You've written that poetry is a deeply spiritual practice for you. So can you say more about the spiritual influences on your work? For instance, you describe every poem as a descendant of God, as an example.

Li-Young Lee: Well, you know, James, I write verse, and verse means turn, and so when we write verse, we turn and turn and turn, so the poem, every poem written in verse makes a spiral, and this spiral pattern, it feels to me like that's the very pattern of interest itself. It's the very pattern of attention, when we go down rabbit holes and that kind of thing, and it seems to me from very early on—universe means to turn about one thing, so I took the universe as my pattern. And it seems to me to turn about one thing is the pattern of true love. It's the pattern of worship. You know, we get the word worship from worth-ship, to turn about that thing which is of highest worth, of highest value, the highest good, the highest truth, the deepest truth, the greatest beauty. So I've just been turning about one thing my whole life, you know? And so it seems to me that when we write verse and we turn and we turn and we turn, we are participating

in this pattern that the universe began, and I do think that everybody who writes poetry belongs to a cult of the word.

You know, in the Book of John it says, "In the beginning was poetry and poetry was with God, and poetry was God." I mean, there it is. That's the credo for the poet in the West, I think, who participates in the prophetic tradition. So it behooves us to think about the nature of the word, and if we notice that the structure of definitions says that we have the word, and then we have all these definitions for the word, but the law is, the rule is you cannot use the word in any of the definitions. Once you say the word in the definitions, the definitions are null and void. And it seems to me that also is a structure of true love. It's the structure of the beloved and the lover. It's the structure of existence, maybe, that there is the word, and then we live among the definitions. Our whole lives exist on the definition side, but every letter, every period, every semicolon, comma, on the definition side gets its meaning and existence from the word that must never appear.

All the definitions exist on the *taiji* side. You know, *taiji* means the ultimate polarity. So once we enter space in time, we are in the realm of movement, of definitions. But the word is beyond movement. The word is beyond the opposites. And yet the poet's entire job is to reconcile all the opposites. It's articulated in the *Dao De Jing*, and it's articulated in the Judeo-Christian tradition, that the poet reconciles all things, reconciles all opposites. You know, that's what a poem does. Now, I don't think everybody who writes verse necessarily writes within that tradition. I don't think they think that the job of the poet is to reconcile all opposites. But that's the gig if you write in that lineage. Am I making any sense, James?

James Shaheen: Well, yes. This dynamic of reconciling opposites also shows up in the Daoist texts that you translated and you recently published a translation of the *Dao De Jing* with the poet and cosmologist Yun Wang. So how did you come to translate this text, and how has the

Dao De Jing influenced your own writing? I think what you were saying earlier is a good example of how it has.

Li-Young Lee: You know, James, it's fascinating to me. When my father would recite the *Dao De Jing*, as a child, I knew I was going to try to translate that book. And I knew I didn't know enough, and I knew I would have to live a long time and do a lot of pondering and meditation and even the practice of taiji, the physical practice. Because the *Dao De Jing* is just an articulation of the yin and yang and their effect on each other, weak force, strong force, form and void, something and nothing.

James Shaheen: Well, the reason I ask about the *Dao De Jing* and its influence on your writing is that it seems so fused with it, and another paradox here is that you describe the *Dao De Jing* as a dialogue with silence. And I wonder, could you say a little bit about, I know it's not easy, but could you say a little bit about what you mean by this and how does silence factor into your own poetry? Because the *Dao De Jing* is so present in your writing that I wonder about this paradox of silence being present.

Li-Young Lee: Yeah. You know, I think in order to enact that spiral, the most potent spiral, that movement, it has to be embedded in stillness. So what you're trying to achieve is a kind of absolute stillness of mind in order to achieve the fastest thought. You know, all movement comes from stillness. Like for me to stand up from this chair, James, it looks like I'm standing up, but I'm actually pushing down against the floor. And if the floor is moving, I can't stand up. The floor has to be still. It has to be absolutely hard and still for me, and the harder and more still it is, the harder I can push off and achieve velocity to get up. You know, we can see the upward movement of the body when it stands up, but what we're not seeing is the downward force of the feet pushing into the floor, posting on the floor to stand up. It's always this invisible pushing against stillness that we don't see. What we only see is the outward manifestation, you know, the standing up part.

But in a poem, I think it's important in a poem that when you enact this turning, I think some poems furnish that spiral with so much noise and words that they forget that part of the job is to reveal the nautical chamber of the turning. And we furnish words just to inflect the chambered stillness, the spaciousness of that spiral because when we do that spiral, we're basically creating something like a seashell. It's a nautical chamber, and we don't want to fill it with words. We want to hear the chamber too. That's the stillness part. So it isn't just the speech. The speech part is the movement. Words move.

You know, in the practice of taiji, we make what are called characters, phrases, and sentences. But when we make the characters, the structure of the characters we make has to be embedded in the stillness. And the greater the stillness, the more firm the stillness, the more powerful the movements, the more speed, the more quickness in the movements. If you can't find that stillness, the silence of the mind, the stillness of the mind, the movements of the thoughts are precarious and the structures are weak. Wow. All of this is so impossible to talk about.

James Shaheen: You know, you mentioned structure and you mentioned turning and the spiral. The interesting thing about that is that the spiral, you keep ending up in the same space but different. They're at the same place, but different.

Li-Young Lee: Yes.

James Shaheen: And I wonder, you know, I've heard this before. I mean, it can sound a little bit Jungian, but the spiral of revisiting and getting closer and closer to something seems to come through in your writing too. I don't know if that's just an assumption I'm making, but what do you think of that?

Li-Young Lee: I hope that's true, James. I hope. You know, this spiral is so interesting to me, James, because on the one hand, it's extroverted. We spiral out into some subject in the concrete world, and we try to understand that subject. But even as we're spiraling outward, there's an

introjection, an introversion that happens. We spiral deeper into our own, I don't know, consciousness or unconsciousness. So there's a double spiral happening. You know, it isn't just one way.

James Shaheen: Right. So just coming back for a moment to stillness and motion, you refer to the stillness of the mind is really in many ways as the factor that makes motion even possible, and when we miss that ground or that stillness, we're sort of lost in the motion, and I wonder if meditation plays into that because I understand that you have a meditation practice. Is that correct?

Li-Young Lee: Yes, and of course, James. It's absolutely a way to touch the ground, you know, to be grounded. But here's the thing, James. This struggle between figure and ground is an intense struggle. Sometimes I think, you look at a Jackson Pollock and it's the triumph of the ground. There's no figure there. You know, it's just overwhelmed by the ground. I look at a Rothko, and I think the ground is just, it's the triumph of the ground. I love it, it's beautiful, but the figure is really important. You know, for me, James, and you're hearing from a bewildered person, I have no idea. You know, I'm totally lost and bewildered, but it seems to me that to surrender completely to the ground is not enough. The ground tends toward void to my mind, and the figure tends toward form. So this tension between form and void is going on all the time. You know, there's no identity without figure, so when we ask what is human, we're asking a question about the figure, but the figure's relation to the ground, I think, in a work of art, has to be recognized. You can't just draw figures. That would be like a poem that is all motion and no stillness, you know?

James Shaheen: Well, however bewildered you feel in explaining these things, clarity comes through in your poetry that is very refreshing and welcome. And I'm wondering if you can read from your translation of the *Dao De Jing*. The first chapter does a great job of illustrating this

play of opposites that you've been describing and the relationship between naming and unnaming. It also relates to ground and motion or void and figure.

Li-Young Lee: Mmhmm. Sure. This is chapter one.

Spoken, Dao is not the everlasting Dao.
Named, the name is not the everlasting name.

Without a name, heaven and earth emerged.
Named, all things can be traced back to the mother.

Free of desires, you discern
the subtle patterns of all things.

Grasping desires, you understand
the trajectories of outcomes and destinies.

The minute and the vast
are two from one mother,

each sublime, both enigmatic.
The great enigma is the door to all wonders.

Man, I love that so much, James, because you could say, "Spoken, the word is not the everlasting word," because once you enter time and space, it's words, it's not the word, right? So "Named, the name is not the everlasting name." It seems to me that this articulation of the Dao is just so profound and it's actually articulated in the Judeo-Christian tradition in other ways. You know, James, the next book Yun Wang and I are translating, we just finished the *Zhuangzi*. I'm sure you're familiar with the *Zhuangzi*. But we're working on the *Book of Changes* now. You could call the *Book of Changes* the *Book of Turning*—it's all turning. This turning into that, that turning into this. And it seems to me this turning, you know, I'm reminded that even Odysseus, the great

Western hero, they called him the man of many turns, you know? And every Shakespeare play begins with, which way is this going to turn? Is Lear turning toward this daughter, the first daughter, the second daughter, or the third daughter? We never know. You know, Macbeth opens with, how is this battle going to turn? It's all about turning.

And we see all kinds of turning. In fiction, it's a good person turning bad, a bad person turning good. In alchemy, it's lead turning to gold. In the *Dao De Jing*, it's weak force becoming strong force, strong force becoming weak force, silence turning into movement, silence turning into words, words going back to silence, this turning. It's all turning, you know? Ovid's *Metamorphoses* could be called the *Book of Changes* or the *Book of Turning*. We're translating the *I Ching*, and it's just how yin turns to yang, yang turns to yin. You know, there's sixty-four archetypal situations, how they turn into each other, you know?

James Shaheen: You know, there's also the turning between presence and absence, you mentioned form and formlessness. I wonder if you could read two short poems that get at this theme. One is "Call a Body" from *The Invention of the Darling*, and the other is from Chapter 14, or is Chapter 14, from the *Dao De Jing*. I mean, those two I think really get at this. Have you got them?

Li-Young Lee: Yes, I have them right here.

James Shaheen: OK.

Li-Young Lee: "Call a Body"

The one with bones
is born of the boneless.

The one with a face
is born of the faceless.

Too obvious?

The one with skin
is born of the borderless.
The one with features
is born of that without features.

Not concrete enough?

That's the mourning dove you hear.

Any objections?
Too soon the dove?

Maybe it's no dove calling,
but the voice of the moon
separated from its body, the pale body
missing all day, the paler voice stranded on earth.

Or maybe it's the sound of existence reminding
you of non-existence.
Or the sound of non-existence
haunting all of existence.

Are you thinking what I'm thinking?
Too married to death.

Tricycle Talks
"Poet Li-Young Lee on Awe, Adoration, and Turning toward the Unknown"
Episode #142 with Li-Young Lee
February 11, 2026

Too untethered from earth.

Let's wait for the body
to wash up on night's starry shore
and its voice to fly off and join it.

You, who will never have a body
long enough to know what it was for
except the two fires—the lifelong yearning,
and then the final offering,—

as long as you go on wishing to be housed
in something other than the disintegrating
vibration you call a body,

you'll never make any sound
but the sound of the diminishing
half-life of all things.
Can we agree?

The one with brothers and sisters
is born of the peerless.

The one with a mother and a father
is born of the motherless and the unfathered.

The one trailing dust

is born of the dustless.

The one bearing marks
is born of that
upon which no marks can be made.

Have I said anything you didn't already know?

This is Chapter 14 of the *Dao De Jing*.

"Chapter 14"

Look, it can't be seen. Call it formless.
Listen, it can't be heard. Call it soundless.
Feel for it, it can't be touched. Call it intangible.
These three resist interrogation and combine into one.

Its upper part is not brightly lit,
its lower part not dark.

Inexhaustible, it can't be named.
It always returns to nothingness.

Call it the shape of shapelessness,
the appearance of nothingness.
Call it imperceptible.

Greeting it, you can't see its head.
Following it, you can't see its back.

Hold the rein of the primordial Dao
to guide the world today.

Knowing the primordial origin of everything
is Dao's essence.

James Shaheen: You know, there's a paradox that runs through all of this that must necessarily run through all speech, and you grapple with that. And I'd just like to point out that in the introduction, you write, "The very first words of *Dao De Jing* admit to the impossibility of what they set out to do, that is, to speak of that which eludes speech, Dao." So the interesting thing to me is the impossibility of the task. And yet the task must be done. You feel compelled to write, you say from very early on you felt compelled to write poetry, trying to express something that really can be pointed to but not entirely expressed, and I find that very interesting because you end up saying, well, the fool does it, and you point to Shakespeare's fool. They can say what cannot be said. They can say whatever they need to say at great cost. How do you see this paradox of something really can't be said, reality can't be fully embodied in words, and yet poetry comes closest, or do you think it ever succeeds?

Li-Young Lee: I think it comes very close. I think it comes very close, but I think that's the gig for the poet, you know, is to stand right in the middle of all these contradictions and resolve all of them. You know, the reconciliation of all things. It's impossible. It's absolutely impossible. But that's the gig.

James Shaheen: So you describe the *Dao De Jing* as a yogic text in that it yokes us to our original nature and, and you've said the same of poetry, so there you go. So what do you mean when you talk about poetry or art as yogic? Can you say a little bit more about that?

Li-Young Lee: Well, first of all, it's a practice. It's a practice of the mind embodied. And it's a remembering, it's a remembrance of our original condition that, ultimately, our form is embedded

in void. Our motions are embedded in stillness. You know, you mentioned Jung. Jung called this the mysterious conjunction, that place where all opposites are resolved. You know, this mysterious conjunction, it seems to me that inhabiting that mysterious conjunction is a yogic practice.

James Shaheen: Yeah, and these opposites or these splits, they're born of language in a way, are they not?

Li-Young Lee: Yes. So the moment we enter into time and space, the moment we enter into language, all language is motion. You know, we give rise to the opposites, and there's no way out of it.

James Shaheen: You know, you also describe poetry, or in this case the *Dao De Jing*, as seraphic or descending from the seraphic level. So could you say a little bit about that? I mean, it's obviously not the "I" that is speaking necessarily. It's something that you feel comes through you from above, or how do you understand that?

Li-Young Lee: Well, you know, I took the Judeo-Christian formulation of all the levels of the angels. I don't know if that's true about the angels, but it says something about the mind that sees that, you know, so I took it as the architecture of the mind, of not our everyday mind, but that there must be some seraphic depth or seraphic height of consciousness that we haven't—

James Shaheen: Is it also kind of, I mean, not to get too psychological, but is it also the unconscious part of us that's doing work without our interference that comes and that feels seraphic? Is that possible?

Li-Young Lee: Yes, yes, and in fact, the *Dao De Jing* talks a lot about that. The *Dao De Jing* calls that the channel to the deepest part of the mind. They say that's the mother, you know, the mysterious canal, the mysterious channel. And I do think that when we write a poem, that when we spiral, let's say I look at a tree and I start thinking about that tree, I feel like I'm spiraling out

toward the tree to get to understand. But there's a spiraling inward into the unconscious depths that must happen in the poem, or there's no insight, you know, the big, "oh," the "aha," that Zen moment of "aha," you know?

James Shaheen: Right. There's a kind of outward movement and inward movement simultaneously, and one holds both. Is that a good way of putting it?

Li-Young Lee: Yeah, yeah.

James Shaheen: Yeah, because I can be aware of the tree and at the same time of myself experiencing the tree. So there's the tree, and both things are happening at once. I'm going inward and taking in the tree and I'm going outward and seeing the tree. I don't know. It's difficult to explain, so I don't blame you for being bewildered.

Li-Young Lee: Yeah, you know, when we observe anything, I guess poetry is a way to recognize the observer, not just the observed. I think for so many years, scientists have made that mistake. They left out the observer. You know, they thought they were observing an objective field, but I think poetry is a way to admit to the observer, and not only the observer, but the depths of the levels of consciousnesses in the observer, which includes the unconscious or the superconscious or whatever we want to call it. I think of that as the seraphic level.

James Shaheen: You know, you've also described your practice as writing toward unknowing, or writing in a state of don't know-mind, which our Buddhist audience will certainly recognize. Can you say more about the role of not knowing in writing poetry? What sort of space can that open up?

Li-Young Lee: Wow, James, you know that that practice is so difficult. When it's happening. You're writing things you didn't know you know, you don't know where it's coming from, you're making the turns in the poem you turn toward, the turns are surprises, you know. You start to recognize habitual turns, and when the poem is really happening, you're not making habitual

turns; you're making turns that are just toward the unknown, you know? It's all about this turning, James, you know, turning toward the unknown. And you have to train yourself to not reach out, not turn to the habitual handholds or the mind holds that we rely on, you know? And I don't even know what to say about it. I don't know what I'm doing, James, you know, when I write.

James Shaheen: Well, you know what, maybe we can start over. In an earlier interview you mentioned that you feel you start over with every poem you write. So you write that you still felt like a new poet even after publishing multiple collections. So is this still true? Do you still feel that sense of beginning each time?

Li-Young Lee: I do. I really don't know what I'm doing, you know. I wish I did. I wish I could find my voice or all the other clichés everybody talks about. I don't know if I've written a poem in my whole life. I don't know.

James Shaheen: Well, I think your reading public knows, so let us know that for you. You know, I'm also curious about how you think about poetry in relation to wonder and awe. You describe rituals as shapes of awe. In fact, you even refer to ritual before its codification. So how can poetry facilitate or create the conditions for wonder, and how do you understand ritual in this context?

Li-Young Lee: Yeah, these are such hard questions. I love them. But you know, James, for me, there's only three three postures of the soul when you're writing a lyric poem. They can be summed up as "Oh my God," "Oh my love," and "Holy, holy, holy." You know, when I experience something and I feel, "Oh my God," I mean, I know I have to write about it. When I experience something like, "Oh, my love," I have to write about it. Or when I see and feel something that inspires in me, "Holy, holy, holy." Man, I just saw a bunch of birds taking a bath in this freezing weather out there. I don't know why I thought, "Holy, holy, holy," and then I saw

a hawk sitting in the tree and I thought, "Holy, holy, holy." You know, I saw my wife lying in bed this morning waking up, and I thought, "Oh, my love."

And those three are the postures of awe, you know? Adoration, I don't know who said it, but adoration is the proper attitude of a soul in awe. And it seems to me that the lyric poem is the greatest expression of awe and adoration, turning about one thing, and that thing is unknown. I mean, I've been married so many years to my wife, and she still remains an unknown to me, a complete mystery. I don't know whether that's because I haven't, I don't know, just the unknown, the mystery of "Oh my love," and "Oh my God," and "Holy, holy, holy." And those are the only three postures. I feel like I live in those three postures all day long.

James Shaheen: You know, one of the things that I think of when you say, "Holy, holy, holy," you refer in your introduction to the *Dao De Jing* to the sage rescuing speech from debasement and profanation. I wonder if you sometimes think that's what you're trying to do yourself, because we live at a time when language is so debased.

Li-Young Lee: Yes. You know, this is strange, James, because I know one of the poems you asked me to read, and I'll read it, is "Counting the Ten Thousand Things."

James Shaheen: Yeah. Let's read that. I mean, that really gets at all of this.

Li-Young Lee: That poem, I think, there's a tension for any artist. One of the primordial tensions is this tension between the one and the many, that is unity and multiplicity. You know, multiplicity, the many tends toward void. Because what do you make of the many? There's no shape to the many. There's no shape to multiplicity. You know, oneness and unity, you start to have identity, you start to get a figure, you start to have a form, but you can't have that without the multiplicity. They're intimately bound. And I think that's what this poem is about, trying to make sense of the multiplicity.

And I want to say this too, James, before I read this. It seems to me that poetry is a way to count. If you ask me to count dogs, James, if you go, "I want you, Li-Young, to go out and count dogs in the world," I will go out and I will count one, two, three, four, you know. But what I'm actually doing when I count is I'm naming. I'm saying, "dog, dog, dog, no, that's not a dog, that's a cat, that's not a dog, that's a raccoon, but that's a dog, dog." So at the base, at the root of counting is naming.

Poetry is the most rigorously counted speech. You know, we count syllables, we count lines, we count stanzas. You know, we count ratios like the number of words to insight. Are there too many words for an insight of that size? So we're ratioing all the time when we write poems. So there's this counting going on, but it's based in naming, but we count in order to know what counts, what counts at all. But if words, if names lose their potency, I'm afraid we'll lose the vision of what counts. You know, because counting and naming are so intimately tied. I don't know if I'm making sense, James.

"Counting the Ten Thousand Things"

Start over
counting the falling petals,
I keep losing my place.

Begin again
to number these fellow passengers,
I keep losing our faces among theirs.

With every death,
I lose my story
and have to start over.

Tricycle Talks
"Poet Li-Young Lee on Awe, Adoration, and Turning toward the Unknown"
Episode #142 with Li-Young Lee
February 11, 2026

With every war,
I lose my future
and have to start over.

With every revolution,
I lose my past
and have to start over.

I lose countries, family, languages, friends,
and have to start over
with Moses and the flight out of Egypt.

Start over in secret, at night
with my mother and father and the escape to . . .
Canaan? Bethlehem? America?
Where was it we thought was safe?

Start over with the serpent cursed
in shameful banishment. With every curse,
I lose the meaning of the garden.

Start over, start over, start over!

No, no, no, she whispers,
Let the petals fall.
Stop counting.

But how will I know what counts?
I keep losing the petals at your gaze.
I keep losing your gaze at your eyes, your eyes
at your lips, your lips at your voice, your voice
at your hair, and I keep losing your hair
at the color of your hair, and the color of your hair
at the song I wrote about the changing color of your hair. Now,

what was I counting?
What was it
I thought counted?

You are one. And I am one, she says.
Together, we make two.
All of the rest are The Ten Thousand Things.

It's this struggle, James, between an identity and Whitman's multitude. You know, he said, "I contain multitudes." On the one hand, that sounds empowering and full. On the other hand, if you follow that to its logical conclusion, you end up in a miscellany of manyness. There's no identity. There's no I; there's just all these little mes competing, all these little desires competing for a say, you know? And somehow poetry's got to be a way to enter into the danger of the multitude, the danger of the many, the danger of the miscellaneous quality of our consciousness, and trying to summon a figure out of all of it.

You know what I love, James, is the late sculptures of Michelangelo, where you see the marble, and there's a face that's just barely emerging. There's a hand that's barely emerging. You know, his statue of David is so clearly and cleanly a figure, but as he got older, he had to recognize the ground, and those late sculptures where just a hand emerging out of the marble, there's just

barely a face, barely an elbow, barely a foot. He's recognizing the ground. You know, in a way, there's more poignancy there. As much as I love the high figuration of the David, man, there's a tragic poignancy of the figure barely coming out of the ground, the oneness barely coming out of the manyness, you know?

James Shaheen: Well, I never really thought of it that way as finding the ground and bringing the two together. I had never thought of it that way in the late sculptures. That's beautiful. Listening to the poem, and I don't know if I'm misunderstanding, but when we get to the words "Stop counting," I felt tremendous relief, you know, I felt tremendous relief. I feel like I can't keep track of the multitudes. I can't do this. And then when it's rendered very simply at the end, there are these two, it's a bit of a relief. Am I hearing this correctly?

Li-Young Lee: Absolutely, James, and the two at the end is that tantric figure of the male seated in lotus and the female sitting in his lap. It's on the cover of *The Invention of the Darling*. And man, they are eye to eye. You know, I want to remind us, James, that the word reconciliation means eyelash to eyelash. It's out of that gaze, you know, when the beloved in that poem says, "Stop counting. There's you, there's me, and our looking into each other's eyes, all the ten thousand things emerge out of that," and that's what the tantric Buddhist seems to suggest. It's so beautiful because the yin yang sign, the two paisleys with the black and white, that's such an abstract symbol. But for the tantric Buddhists to imagine it as an actual male and female in conjugation looking into each other's eyes, man, that's just so powerful, you know? That's like the yin yang in an embodied form, you know, and it's out of their reconciliation, out of the eyelash to eyelash, all the ten thousand things emerge.

James Shaheen: I have another question for you, if you don't mind. We're getting toward the end, so you'll be free soon, however that's understood..

Li-Young Lee: No, I'm loving this.

Tricycle Talks
"Poet Li-Young Lee on Awe, Adoration, and Turning toward the Unknown"
Episode #142 with Li-Young Lee
February 11, 2026

James Shaheen: You've described poetry as a score for the dying breath, or a score for our dying. So what do you mean by that, and how do you think about the relationship between the dying breath and the musicality of poetry?

Li-Young Lee: Well, it's another one of those contradictory patterns that we engage in when we write poetry. You know, the pattern is the pattern of speech, and that is when we inhale, we can't speak. You know, we inhale in silence, we feed in silence. The minute we talk, we have to breathe out. But that breathing out, that exhalation, is the dying breath. And it seems to me that the nature of speech is that we breathe out in order to speak, but the more we say, the more our meaning gets disclosed, divulged, but the less breath we have. So we take in a big breath and we start to speak, and as we say more, the meaning grows. But I have less breath. So meaning increases in opposite ratio to vitality. So in the beginning of life, we're full of life, and we begin to live, and as we live, the meaning of our lives gets disclosed, but the less life we have. So by the end of our lives, we're able to read the meaning of our lives, but there's no life left.

So these contradictory, opposing vectors of meaning and vitality seem embedded in speech and life. But this contradictory nature is one of the patterns we engage when we're writing poetry, and in poetry I think the poet is so troubled by this reality that he or she tries to pack as much meaning as possible into the dying breath, to ransom the dying breath, you know? And we try to pack as much meaning as possible into our dying, into our deaths in order to ransom our lives. You know, Robert Frost said, "Well spent is kept," so a life well spent or speech well spent is kept. You get to keep something that's well said. But it was born on the dying breath. You know, we can't escape it. It's just one of the realities.

I think of that as the tragic pattern we engage when we write poetry. There's the spiral pattern, you know, inner spiraling and outward spiraling. There's sentence patterns, you know. And then there's the pattern set up by the structure of definitions, that every word in the poem, every period, every space, every letter serves the subject of the poem that must never be explicitly said.

So every poem, I think, has a secret center that is never really quite graspable. Every successful poem can't be paraphrased. So I think that's just one of the patterns that we engage this dying breath, that meaning is born on the dying breath, you know?

James Shaheen: You know, I was reading a poem of yours in the *New Yorker*, and very happily there's an audio version of you reading it, and I immediately chose the audio version. And there's great importance we attach to reading poetry out loud, so the dying breath, it relates to this, I mean, because you're hearing the exhale and you're hearing the dying breath, and then you think of getting the more you live the closer to death, the greater the meaning, it parallels this exhalation. But can you say something about the importance of reading poetry out loud, or did I just say it?

Li-Young Lee: No, you did, James, you did. You know, to read it out loud is to embody it. You know, James, when we speak, it's a form of trembling. The vocal cords are trembling. So basically a poem is a form of trembling. You know, it's the vocal cords trembling, it's embodied trembling, you know, it must be read out loud, you know? But that modulation of the right trembling in the poem, you know, not too loud, not too soft, you know, and I imagine that all my poems are spoken to the beloved. So I'm trying to find the right register to speak to the beloved, but they must be read out loud. We have to hear the trembling. We have to hear it not just in our minds, you know?

James Shaheen: As one last poem, would you be willing to read "Big Clock"?

Li-Young Lee: Yes. Trying to get this right.

"Big Clock"

When the big clock at the train station stopped,
the leaves kept falling,
the trains kept running,

my mother's hair kept growing longer and blacker,
and my father's body kept filling up with time.

I can't see the year on the station's calendar.
We slept under the stopped hands of the clock
until morning, when a man entered carrying a ladder.
He climbed up to the clock's face and opened it with a key.
No one but he knew what he saw.

Below him, the mortal faces went on passing
toward all compass points.
People went on crossing borders,
buying tickets in one time zone and setting foot in another.
Crossing thresholds: sleep to waking and back,
waiting room to moving train and back,
war zone to safe zone and back.

Crossing between gain and loss:
learning new words for the world and the things in it.
Forgetting old words for the heart and the things in it.
And collecting words in a different language
for those three primary colors:
staying, leaving, and returning.

And only the man at the top of the ladder
understood what he saw behind the face
which was neither smiling nor frowning.

And my father's body went on filling up with death
until it reached the highest etched mark
of his eyes and spilled into mine.
And my mother's hair goes on
never reaching the earth.

James Shaheen: Thank you so much. I mean, I'm going to ask a dumb question. Maybe there are no dumb questions, but I think this may be one. I read that several times, and I was thinking, what did the man on the ladder see?

Li-Young Lee: I keep wondering, James.

James Shaheen: I was wondering about that. So maybe it wasn't such a stupid question. But I think wondering what he sees is what stayed with me, like a koan almost, you know. OK, anything, Li-Young, before we close?

Li-Young Lee: No, you know, it's just that there's a French phrase for it, right, when you're walking down the stairs after a party, you think of all the things you should have said. There's a French phrase for it. You know, I don't remember the phrase, but that's what I always feel at the end of these conversations. I always think I should have said this, I should have said that, I didn't say that clearly enough.

James Shaheen: Well, if it makes you feel any better, I think, ah, I should have asked this, I should have asked that, or that was a stupid question. So I come away with the same kind of strange uneasy remorse, but it's always great, and it was really wonderful talking to you. So Li-Young, it's been a pleasure. Thanks so much for joining. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *The Invention of the Darling* available now.

Li-Young Lee: Thank you James.

James Shaheen: Thanks so much, Li-Young. You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Li-Young Lee. To read a couple poems from Li-Young's collection, visit tricycle.org. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at tricycle.org/donate. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by Sarah Fleming and the Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!