

## THE RESISTANCE – EPISODE 17

### Alex Ebert interview – Episode Transcript

**Li-Young:** I think the resistance sometimes is the ground itself, just this constant roar and murmur, but we don't even know what's important to listen to. We don't even know what counts.

[Intro]

**Matt:** Hello, and welcome back to The Resistance. My name is Matt Conner –

**Jay:** And my name is Jay Kirkpatrick.

**Matt:** Jay, today is a special episode. Jay, my friend here, has been waiting a long time for this, because a little while back, I had the opportunity to speak with a wonderful poet by the name of Li-Young Lee, who just happens to be your favorite.

**Jay:** He is my favorite. I don't think I have another artist, poet, writer, musician, that I, I want to say fanboy. I've met many famous people. Li-Young Lee I've never met him. But he is one of my favorite artists of all time. I was introduced to his poetry way back with *The City In Which I Love You*, which blew my mind. Up to that it had been the limerick-y, went to the bed and hit my head. The rhyming. And this is the first time, he opened me artistically and emotionally in a way I had never, never been opened up. And this conversation that you had with him today is amazing. Matt, this conversation was amazing.

**Matt:** Well, I'm glad you thought so. I had very little to do with it. One of the things we appreciated so much about it, we're talking about the resistance, and typically with an artist of some kind, we end up talking about one angle of the resistance. This is what they're going through right now. But with Li-Young, he ends up talking so much about several layers of resistance as he thinks of them in the moment, and you're able to listen to the poet in process.

**Jay:** Yeah, he talks about different types of resistance. He talks about the process of an electron, jumping from one orbit to another, takes an immense amount of energy, and sometimes resistance is that energy to jump into another plane that we've never been in. He talks about creating a silence as a ground within your art, he's talking about poetry, so the poem could actually stand above and actually be seen, I guess, differentially and elevated because of the silence and the ground you've created within the art. So a two-fold kind of struggle. And then he talks about, which I think this is really impactful, the Israelites as they left to go to the promised land, and actually the resistance was leaving their paradigms and leaving their way of thinking so their resistance was against a better future, because they wouldn't leave those things. And I think that is one of the things that hit me the most. I don't know what was the most impactful part for you, Matt, but that leaving what you know and your paradigm so that you can have a better future I thought was one of the big points of this conversation.

**Matt:** Yeah, but I think what is so striking to me with that especially is any fear I've ever had, I'm speaking generally here, but if you follow that fear to its logical end, okay what if this did really happen, this thing that I'm really afraid of? I often find that I'm able to disempower it. I

don't even know if that's a word. But I'm able to limit its hold on me by going all the way there and realizing it's not, the resistance isn't as big as I'm allowing it to be, or I'm allowing it to be bigger than it really is, is what I'm trying to say. So Li-Young Lee goes into that and so much more, and we're just anxious for you to hear it, so let's dive in. If you've never read or heard the poet Li-Young Lee before, here's your chance. And we certainly encourage you to look him up after this. Here is our conversation.

**Matt:** We have source material that inspired the name of the podcast and the subject, from Steven Pressfield's book, *The War of Art*. And in it, he says this: "Most of us have two lives: the life we live and the un-lived life within us. And between the two stands the resistance." Li-Young, I'm curious for you, what form does resistance take at this point?

**Li-Young:** You know, it's complicated, because I've been wondering about the nature of resistance, especially in writing a poem, that is the urge to speak fully, from the center of our entire being. And what resistances there are to that. And I sometimes think I'm not sure. The resistance, I think, is necessary. Because some of it, I think of it as like an electron, jumping in atomic orbit. I know that an electron, I don't know much about science, but I remember that in order for an electron to jump in atomic orbit and become something else, it has to be bombarded with an incredible amount of energy. That resistance maybe sometimes is just, we need that. The poem has to kind of jump in orbit or our psyches or mind or something has to be bombarded with so much energy that you speak, or you write a poem down.

The threshold is a kind of, it could be used to describe that.

**Matt:** Sure. Sure, very much so.

**Li-Young:** Yeah, and a wilderness experience, too, right? The idea of, let's say in fairy tales, the heroine or the hero gets lost in the woods, and then he or she is trying to get to the land of the living water or the talking bird, whatever. They're trying to get to that place, and they're trying to get to their kingdom, but they run into all these distractions and I guess forms of resistance. But if fairy tales have any wisdom in them, they seem to imply that that resistance is necessary. I'm not sure if this is the same kind of thing that Pressfield was talking about, so –

**Matt:** I think part of that is the beauty of what Pressfield maybe is doing is trying to put such general language around it that we're each maybe just prompted to do the work to try to identify what resistance is at work, and maybe what is a healthy resistance, a necessary resistance, and what is unhealthy, the one we need to discard, the one we need to contend with, etc.

**Li-Young:** So there are all forms, there are for instance, there's just laziness. You get to the table and write the thing. And then there's insecurities, and then there's paradigms, old paradigms of reality that aren't working for us. I think sometimes in the making of poetry, it's very specific kind of confusion, because a good poem or successful poem has to create its own silence in order for the words to be heard. It has to create a kind of lift-off from the ground, so that the figure of the poem stands in higher relief to the ground.

Sometimes there's a kind of murmuring in the world. I think it comes from the natural world of the ocean, wind, birds, breezes in the grass, you know, just natural sounds constantly there. And then on top of that, the human-made things. The social media, news, television, computers. I feel as if we feel in a condition of a constant murmuring, or even roar, that is in the background, and for us to make art, or to make a poem, we necessarily have to create a kind of silence that makes a place within that roar, that constant murmuring.

That silence has to be made, within which the poem can be heard. So the poem, it's a two-fold project. You have to create the silence, and then you have to create the poem, which is a part of that silence. But then I think the resistance sometimes is the ground itself, just this constant roar and murmur, we don't even know what's important to listen to. We don't know what counts. Especially in poetry, we count so radically. We count words. We count lines. We count stanzas. We count pauses. We count – the counting is crazy. It seems to me that that's a way to finally arrive at what counts at all in the world.

That counting may be some of the resistance for a poet is we don't know what counts. We don't know what's worth mentioning. So there's this constant roar of just information coming from the natural world, the atomic world. Even, if you do meditation long enough, you start to hear your own nervous system. There's a constant high-pitched whining that the nervous system does. So there's this noise.

I think that can be very distracting, but at the same time, I feel like we're writing against that noise, so that the poem has to be really strong to make it over the hurdle, so that the poem can be heard within the context of the reader's mind, which is probably a very noisy place. So a lot of that resistance is noise. I know personally there's something inside of me that says, why speak at all? Just be quiet. You'd better really have something to say in order to write a poem. And that itself becomes a resistance to speech. A resistance to the word, of speaking words. I don't know whether that's healthy or not. I can't tell what's healthy resistance, Matt, and what isn't. I don't know.

I was thinking a lot about the book of Numbers in the Old Testament, and it's all about resistance. The whole wilderness experience of an entire people, the children of Israel. A lot of that resistance is their resisting a better future. It's because of fear, it's because of old paradigms, old habits, old thought habits that they're unwilling to give up, and maybe sacred texts like the Old Testament or the New Testament, or anything, Baghavad Gita, all these sacred texts, they depict the trajectory of conscious evolution of a human being. Maybe they all depict resistances. That's the better part of the story. We resist our higher selves. We resist the urge to want to love more, to love better, with more awareness. The worser angels of our nature take over, so man. We are just, we're under siege, I think, constantly, the more I think about it. This threshold experience is bloody. It's like a really bloody scrimmage before you get to the other side and meet the beloved.

And then there's lack of faith, too. For me, for instance, my writing, the paradigm of the lover and the beloved is really important. That, to me, is like a paradigm for reading altogether. The book I am reading is a kind of stand-in or a form, a shape of the beloved, and I'm the lover reading the book and trying to appreciate it. So even theories about love and theories about

interest and perception or finally theories about reading, whether or not the world is legible to us. But then, even to have faith that reading can bring us any good, sometimes I don't even have faith in that. So I think a lack of faith is a big deal. I don't know, Matt. Are we getting close to talking about this thing at all? It seems to be a huge subject.

**Matt:** It is a huge subject. You're right. There's no way for us to tackle all angles of resistance and all possible forms. I think that's why we try to start the subject with what form does that look like for you, because it is such an ever-changing, ever-present idea, that even once we move past one thing, we find ten new versions of it thereafter.

I wanted to ask, though, about one thing you said. You were talking about the craft itself, seeming to say, for you to write a poem, you have to arrive at a respite from the noise. The silence is necessary, this cocoon within. And it was interesting to me, because I was reading an earlier interview with you, and I loved something that you said, where you mentioned "there are connections everywhere, and everything sounds like a poem. Everything the beginning of a poem." In one way, it sounded like you could pull poetry from the noise, that all of the noise itself was a poem waiting to be found. But then just now you were describing the need to silence it to get to the poem. How does that come together for you?

**Li-Young:** It is everywhere. I'm looking out the window right now, and I'm noticing these beautiful shadows on this house across the street. Those shadows, I feel like just describing them would verge on a poem. Just the quality of the light in the window. There are poems everywhere. But they have to be teased out, I guess. There are, I don't know what you want to call them. Patterns or something in the world that's a part of the general formlessness. Matt, this has something to do with the word. The idea of the logos. I'm sure it does. Because Heraclitus defined the logos as, it was the ruling principle of manifestation, of all manifestations: physical, psychological, material manifestation. He said, the ruling undergirding law is the law of logos, which he described as the strife and harmony of opposites. So that would imply that the resistance is built into it, of strife and harmony, of opposites, so that it has to be something. You're pulling one way, but something is pulling against you, and that makes you pull harder, and so this rescuing form out of the void, out of formlessness, I think that work is just really hard work. I find it very hard work. It's interesting that the ancient Chinese, 500 years before Heraclitus, discovered what they called the Taiji principle. And they called that the dynamism of opposites. So the study of Taiji is the study of strife and harmony, of opposing forces.

And it seems to me that the minute we enter into the word, the cult of the word. I do think that people who write poetry all belong to a cult of the word. We enter into the laws and the principles of language. I think those principles of the word, language, there's a resistance built into it somehow. The minute I point to a dog walking down the street, I'm not pointing to everything else around it. There's this differentiation. I think language in poetry is more highly differentiated than other forms of language, but that kind of high level of differentiation makes it necessary for us to point to what we're naming and what we are not naming. The thing between the dog I'm looking at and everything else around it. It seems to me that's such high relief. What we're looking at has a lot of relief from the ground. I don't think the ground itself is, I think we would like sometimes, see there's a form of resistance right there, Matt.

Maybe sometimes we wish the ground of murmuring, the roar of the ocean, cosmic winds, and wind in the grass, and birds chirping all day long. Bees humming. All of that background noise. We wish that was our mother's voice and we could just rest. But that's not the poem. The poem is in there. It's in there somewhere, but it isn't just the formless waste of repetitious nature. Just all the leaves look the same on the tree. This kind of undifferentiated eros is not the same as art. I think art is a more highly differentiated eros.

I think some of the resistance is to differentiate. I think there is a resistance to differentiating. And I can't account for, but I feel the struggle, to write these words as opposed to all the possible words. To write this poem as opposed to all the possible poems. I experience it as a kind of bereavement, because I feel as if the world is just so full and so plentiful, and poems and signs and wonders and insights, but to close down and say I'm not going to write all of the poems. I'm going to write this one today. I experience it as both a joy, because I write the poem, but at the same time it feels like I lost, out of the hundred poems I wrote one, so there's ninety-nine there I didn't write.

So the resistance doesn't come just as a feeling of, it comes in all shapes, Matt. It comes in the injunction to not speak. To be quiet, just look at the universe in its beauty and its horror and its terror. There's nothing that needs to be said. Sometimes I am convinced of that. There's that kind of resistance. And then there's the resistance of just, there's so many poems. I'm watching these shadows on this house across the street change. These shadows have been changing as I'm talking. That itself could have been a poem. Not only the description of the shadows, but the shadows changing. I just feel as if, but you'd have to pick that out, to tease that out of all the other things going on in the universe. That you have to frame this, you have to talk about this thing, as opposed to everything else. Everything else outside the frame doesn't exist for the duration of the work of art. I don't know, man. We're hit on all sides, this resistance thing.

You know, I've been thinking about this thought, Matt, that has troubled me recently, that I thought, my own need for plenitude is finally, I'm in love with formlessness and void. To love everything in a way is maybe to not love anything. Do you know what I mean? I've been thinking about that. I thought, wow. This resistance thing is really tricky. You think you can love everything in the world, because that's some sort of ideal. If you belong to a cult of love. I grew up in a cult of love. Christianity, that's what that is. So there's this idea that you could love everything and everybody. Then I wonder, does that retain its differentiation, or is it just the soupy kind of miasma, you're just loving everything? It amounts to nothing. It amounts to a kind of void. I don't know. Maybe it depends on which side of the door you're standing, Matt. What constitutes the resistance, right?

**Matt:** When you're talking about differentiation, for you, let's look at the craft. When you're choosing the one of the hundred, and you said that comes with a joy and a grief or a bereavement to that. How do you know what to differentiate? Is there an energy around the one and not around the hundred that calls to you? Is it just a matter of choosing without emotion or energy? If differentiation is such a big part of this, what does differentiation look like to you, at this stage in your craft?

**Li-Young:** Yeah. Boy. Choosing is just everything. And it's being done at such a high speed. It's before even conscious thought. It's pre-conscious, I feel. But man, Matt. I don't know. It feels like I'm choosing the thing that opens the poem up more, even as it closes it down more to more of a clear, a clarity and insight. The more it closes in on one insight. I like to make choices that keep opening the poem up to other possibilities. I don't know, Matt. It is tough. Because sometimes, for all I know, I'm just choosing out of habit. That becomes its own resistance. You're resisting writing a new poem. A really new poem. You keep doing the same thing. But you don't even know -- that's part of the resistance. One doesn't know one is doing that. I don't know. It does seem important to me that somehow art is a way to figure out what counts altogether. Because then the poem -- if possible, the poem can be driven by a lot of energy, kind of almost a mission. I think a strong poem has a kind of mission to it. You can feel it inside the poem. It's mysterious what the mission is, but there's definitely a strong mission in the poem. And then we get to the idea that who's writing the poem? Because if I write the poem, Matt. If I sit down and I say I'm going to write a poem about this house across the street, and I try to write that poem. But let's say that's not what the poem wants to be. It wants to be something else. Is that part of the resistance? Or am I supposed to surrender to the impulse of the language itself? Who's resisting then, if I keep trying to write this poem about the house I see, but let's say the poem wants to move toward something else. What should I yield to? I don't know. I don't know. The whole thing is so mysterious to me, Matt, that it seems to me we live at the threshold. And why am I thinking of it as a threshold experience? Well, it's below consciousness, so it's liminal, right? And we're trying to get from one place to another, so we're crossing through this kind of area of false signals. But there you go, Matt. Do you write, Matt? Are you a writer?

**Matt:** I mean, mostly just journalism. Yeah, very rarely in any sort of creative writing or poetry.

**Li-Young:** Yeah, so false starts are, you do that too, right, in journalism? Yeah, so there are false starts. And I guess that's all part of the resistance. And looking back, it seems to me that those were all necessary so that you'd know what a false start looks like. I don't know. There's something else working through me, I want to say, Matt. I don't know how poems get written. I really have no idea how they get written.

**Matt:** That sounds funny coming from someone who has made a living writing poems.

**Li-Young:** Yeah, I don't know how I've done it. Yeah, I really don't.

**Matt:** Li-Young, that idea of whether you follow that energy, what if the poem doesn't want to be about the shadows on the house, do you navigate that differently now than you did when you were first starting?

**Li-Young:** You know, Matt, I don't. I am as lost today as I was when I started. I don't have any good instincts. I haven't developed any. Everything I write is like from scratch. It's horrible. One would think that after much practice, you would get some sort of mastery, but that hasn't been the case with me. I don't know what I'm doing.

**Matt:** Do you think therein lies the posture needed?

**Li-Young:** I want to say yes, but at the same time, I hope I achieve some sort of mastery, so that it isn't starting from ground zero every time. Yeah, starting from scratch every time. But it really is starting from scratch. I don't know. I don't know. Man. I wish I had brighter things to say.

**Matt:** No, I think this is great. Even my mind went back to what you were first saying about balance and these principles that kind of we live in this tension. So even what you were just saying about, "I wish I had a mastery but I'm still starting from scratch as if I was just beginning." I wondered if therein lies that necessary tension. Is it possible to master it in such a way that you retain the posture of someone brand new? Even that sounds silly, but it makes sense in my head.

**Li-Young:** No, no. Exactly. Exactly, Matt. I think that is necessary. I think it is for us to constantly be new to this. But man, you know, just inhabiting that place. Carl Jung called it the mysterious conjunction. Right at that threshold between all the forces. Order and disorder. Chaos and speech. Form and void. All the great opposites. All the great sages have thought about for years. Something and nothing. Beingness and nonbeing. All those tensions, to inhabit that right there, to stand exactly in the middle of the fire and not go crazy and try to write a poem when that's happening. It seems like that is necessary, and it seems like the resistance is part of it. Yeah, and if you're lucky, you don't get pulled apart by the good and evil in you, and the light and the dark in you, and the male and the female, and the puer and the senex, and the child and the old person in us. All of these opposites inside of us, somehow inhabiting that threshold where all these opposites lay claim to us. And allowing ourselves to be laid claim to.

All these things have claim on us, and for us to somehow endure them to make a poem out of it, it seems to me, yeah, that's it's necessary. And that there's just no way out of it. But maybe Pressfield's talking about something else, because he's talking about an un-lived life. If we become subject to that resistance as opposed to masters of it. If we can master the resistance, we can maybe find a happy ending. Man. A happy ending is so hard to arrive at. I look around me, and all these stories, people in my lives. It's just so full of grief and sad endings, you know? I don't know, man. I feel like happy ending must be possible, right?

I think that's what Pressfield must be talking about, right? For us to get to that life, the un-lived life, not to leave huge rooms inside our mansion unexplored. Yeah, there might be gardens there an orchards in part of our estate, our psychic estate that we never even discover, because we got too hung up on something. I don't know, Matt. I don't have a clue any way around this, it seems huge.

**Matt:** Let me ask you one more. I read an interview with you from over a decade ago, where you were sort of crying foul the urban setting and just kind of wishing for, I think, less of the noise, the murmuring that we were talking about. Yet, I think you still live in Chicago, is that right?

**Li-Young:** You know, I divide my time now between Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Chicago, because we have old people, very aged and frail people in both places, so we're shuttling back and forth taking care of them. My mother is in Chicago. My wife's folks are in Pittsburgh. So we're shuttling back and forth.

**Matt:** Yeah, I just wondered if you had come to better terms with the urban setting and the craft of writing.

**Li-Young:** You know, I chose the urban setting because of more access to the culture I needed to be around. It's hard to be in a rural setting in the United States and find an Asian grocery store. So I have to be in a city to have access to that. But my real love, I think, is to be out in rural settings. But it's just hard to find the culture that I need to be around. I get tired of the human hand. You see the human hand on everything everywhere. It's beautiful, architecture, music, all that stuff, but sometimes I just get, I need to find a deeper ground than the human. And that's I think my pull toward nature.

But then I worry, Matt, because I think maybe lately I've been thinking about this resistance thing, I've been wondering whether or not my own pull to nature is like John Keats' pull toward death, an undifferentiated state of plenitude. Basically it's formless and void, and it's a kind of death. The ego is tired of its own existence and wants to be just subsumed into this larger plenitude, nature, but maybe that's just formless and my own wanting to be part of the ground. It's work, Matt, to be a figure. That figure ground tension for the artist, that tension seems to me to be the existential tension we experience just living, trying to differentiate ourselves from the herd or from the rest of the culture, from family, to find our primacy. I think deep down we all feel we're all just, like I'm a version of my mother, a version of my father, I'm a version of my siblings, a version of my friends. I'm a version of an Asian American male of a certain age. I'm a version of a person alive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century living in the United States. So there are all these aspects of my identity that are just versions of others.

I think we're hungry for, we need to experience some primacy. Something in us that is not like our family, our class, our gender. Like even my Chinese name. Like if I introduce myself in China, it would be Lee Li-Young. I would first tell you my family name so you know where my family comes from. And then Li that precedes the word Young tells you my generation, and the last thing I am is the Young part, which is individual. So I tell you my family, I tell you what generation I'm from, so I'm part of a version of other things, and to emerge out of the ground of that is really hard work, I think, in Asian families. Maybe in all families. But there it is again, that differentiating from the ground. The figure from the ground. So that's just hard work. I think it's part of being alive. When you make art, you're trying to differentiate it on another level, I think. And that poses other challenges that are similar to the existential challenge of trying not to get lost in this world of plenitude.

[outro]

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