

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karen:

Hello. I'm Karen Long. You're listening to The Asterisk*, a production of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards. An asterisk is a reference mark, indicating an omission. Today, we are figuring out some of the holes in our knowledge with the matchless poet, Marilyn Chin, a Californian by way of Hong Kong with an Oregon childhood mixed in. Professor Chin won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in 2015 for *Hard Love Province*, her fourth collection of poetry. It contains love, eroticism, and grief, as well as a poem that I believe the poet will read for us now.

Marilyn:

Formosan Elegy
for Charles

You have lived six decades and you have lived none
You have loved many and you have loved no one
You wedded three wives but you lie in your cold bed alone
You sired four children but they cannot forgive you

Knock at emptiness a house without your love
Strike the pine box no answer all hollow
You planted plums near the gate but they bear no fruit
You raised herbs in the veranda fresh and savory

I cry for you but no sound wells up in my throat
I sing for you but my tears have dried in my gullet
Walk the old dog give the budgies a cool bath
Cut a tender melon let it bleed into memory

The robe you washed hangs like a carcass flayed
The mug you loved is stained with old coffee
Your toothbrush is silent grease mums your comb
Something's lost something's made strong

Around the corner a new prince yearns to be loved
A fresh turn of phrase a bad strophe erased
A random image crafts itself into a poem
A sleepless Taipei night a mosquito's symphony

Who will cry for you me and your sister Colette
Who will cry for you me and your Algerian sister
You were a rich man but you held on to your poverty
You were a poor man who loved gold over dignity

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I sit near your body bag and sing you a last song
I sit near your body bag and chant your final sutra
What's our place on earth? nada nada nada
What's our destiny? war grief maggots nada

Arms cheeks cock femur eyelids nada
Cowl ox lamb vellum marrow nada
Vulva nada semen nada ovum nada
Eternity nada heaven nada void nada

Birth and death the same blackened womb
Birth and death the same white body bag
Detach detach we enter the world alone
Detach detach we leave the world bone lonely

If we can't believe in god we must believe in love
We must believe in love we must believe in love
And they zip you up in your white body bag
White body bag white white body bag

Karen:

Gracious.

Marilyn:

Oh dear.

Karen:

Marilyn, you are the poet of the wisdom that we are all temporarily here.

Marilyn:

The nation is going through a catastrophe. Over 200,000 people, Americans dead because of COVID and counting. Millions have lost their jobs and the streets are teeming with social protests because of the murder of George Floyd and others. Climate change is devastating the nation with floods and fires. I've been coughing all morning because I live in San Diego and I smell the burning wood. We're going through a catastrophic time. So I know this poem is really sad and mournful, but I feel that we need to mourn the nation. We need to mourn the world and get the guy out of the White House.

Karen:

Well, that's getting to it. I love the line, "Your toothbrush is silent, grease mums your comb, some things lost, some things made strong." That is vivid and it's particular, and in some ways it's bearable because it's particular. We've all seen that comb. We've all known someone who was here and not.

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Marilyn:

Yeah, they leave objects and impressions behind. They leave the impression on the bed, the pillow, the comb. Yes, the toothbrush. I find an old shirt or an old book that sort of reeks with memory and sadness. Yeah, it's a very sad time and we're all grieving. We're all grieving for the people we've lost and a world we lost, of the feeling of safety, so I hope things get better soon.

Karen:

And what does naming the thing that terrorizes us do for us?

Marilyn:

Yes. We have to speak truth to power, but also we're old world feminists. Personal is political.

Karen:

Absolutely.

Marilyn:

And the story of this man's life and death, I lost my mother, my grandmother, two boyfriends within like a 15-year period. I was mourning for a long time. I was very sad for a long time. And yes, we have to speak to grief. We can't deny it. We can't pretend it doesn't exist. We can't pretend that these deaths didn't happen. The administration is in denial. So I think it's very important to speak truth to power and to our personal and political situations.

Karen:

It seems the naming is so fundamental to the beginning of Holy books and the act of poetry. You know this cry, "say her name," just raises the hairs on the back of my neck. That is... She is lost to us, but she is with us if we speak her name.

Marilyn:

That's right, we have to say their names. Yeah. We have to. We have to name the problem. We have to name what needs to be done. I mean, we're just in deep denial. I mean millions are without work, without jobs, and these are real people with names. And the white body bag, are these anonymous? No, they all have names. I mean, the people within those body bags have names. They're just not garaged in these care homes. It's very heartbreaking what's going on right now. Very heartbreaking.

Karen:

And the special cruelty of letting elders know they're extraneous, and I've had several dear friends say, "I get the message. I don't matter."

Marilyn:

That's right and we're getting to that age.

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Karen:

Yeah, you and I are on the threshold.

Marilyn:

We're the sage age.

Karen:

Yeah. So I feel in this moment Adrienne Rich is with you. You know, she is one of the elders and I know that she wrote the theater of anger in your poetry that it is to be grasped and you know the fierce and tender line that you execute, and so when I was re-reading "Hard Love Province," I noticed you began with Adrienne saying the door itself makes no promises.

Marilyn:

Oh Adrienne, she was one of my mentors. I used to have dinner with her once a year and I used to meet her in LA. Her son and grandchildren live in LA. And I visited her and Michelle at their beautiful house in Santa Cruz and they cooked me a beautiful seafood stew. I just remember that. So moved. But she was so important to me. She said that we must read and write as if our life depended on it. And she loved poetry so deeply. And there are all these people who hate poetry. I can't believe it. She loved poetry and she really felt that poetry could change the world. God bless her. That is so optimistic.

Marilyn:

I often begin the poem as a love poem and with these two poems, I begin as elegies to the beloved, but they always open up to these larger concerns that upset me, that really speak to me. That mantra of the personal melding with the political is very important to me and I continue to hear Adrienne Rich in my brain that poetry is not luxury. It's important. It's important to write out our feelings.

Karen:

One of the things I cherish about your sensibility, Marilyn, is that you are unapologetically political and you experience it and I, as your reader, experience that not as a diminishment, but as an urgency that makes this not a piece of embroidery. It makes it go toward the largest questions. So thank you for that and for modeling that for us.

Marilyn:

As you can see by my... I love embroidery as well. I wear my nice silks. I know, this is a joke between Karen and myself because she likes my jackets.

Karen:

I'm obsessed.

Marilyn:

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But yes, poetry must work on many levels for it to be profound and sometimes it's subtle, sometimes it's in your face, sometimes it's filled with beautiful embroidery, sometimes it shouts out with urgency, and sometimes it does all that at once simultaneously.

Karen:

Right, the many registers that it allows one and I love knowing that you were born in a cold water flat in Hong Kong in 1955 and your grandmother carried you reciting poetry. The first music was this language that she held to your skin.

Marilyn:

Oh, yes. That's a beautiful image. She had those pouches on her back and she carried me around in a very bad neighborhood filled with prostitutes, shady characters, but she used to sing Chinese poetry to me. And she was illiterate, but she had memorized hundreds of poems and Confucius sayings and so forth. She reminds us that poetry comes from an oral tradition as well as a written tradition that is ancient, and everybody can embrace it whether you can read it on the page or not. You can hear it. She was remarkable that way. I owe so much to my grandmother, but she was mean too.

Karen:

She was mean to you. No poetry camp for you.

Marilyn:

Oh my gosh. We had this little duster. Oh boy, she used to hit us with her little duster.

Karen:

And yet it's hard to imagine you crossing the Pacific ocean and absorbing that shock without her.

Marilyn:

That's right. She was a strong matriarch. Actually the matriarchs in my family kept the family together. She was very important.

Karen:

Well, it was ever thus, right? So let's think about this year and what are you thinking about Hong Kong as it is as imperiled as it's ever been in your lifetime?

Marilyn:

Oh my, I'm going to read at their 20th anniversary book fair in November and the high school students are going to have this wonderful poetry contest called "Urban Love Poem Contest," named after one of my poems, and they're going to write a love poem to Hong Kong. I think Hong Kong needs a love poem right now. It's very sad. I don't know. I think China is an evolving space and all nations, and America is an evolving nation. I mean, it's hard to know what's going to happen. Hopefully, someone else will take over

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or maybe there will be wisdom and there will be wisdom and ideas change, but it's very strange. I don't know what to say about Hong Kong. I feel so sad for them. But definitely democracy is put on the back burner.

Karen:

It seems to be on its heel around the world.

Marilyn:

That's right. It's very sad, but let's be hopeful. Let's be hopeful. This nation as well, let's be hopeful. Go out and vote. And Hong Kong has lost their voice in the voting system, in the system, so we have the vote. We have the freedom of choice. Let's make those choices.

Karen:

And in the making of the choice, perhaps there'll be a path so Hong Kong is less alone. If there are leadership changes, perhaps that will happen.

Marilyn:

Yes, there might be dialogue and there might be enlightenment, for goodness sake. There might not.

Karen:

And now we'll pause for a short break.

Karen:

The Asterisk is a project of the Cleveland Foundation to bring more readers and listeners into conversation with the best writers in English. In this case, recipients of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. We now return to the conversation.*

Karen:

One thing though, Marilyn, that has to keep your heart near the flame is the privilege of how to teach around the world. You've taught in Hong Kong and Singapore and Beijing and Sydney and Berlin and at Smith College, and now you're teaching at Beloit in Wisconsin. So what does it mean to be proximate to that youth and beauty for you?

Marilyn:

Oh, I'm really enjoying my teaching in my sage era. Yes. The youth, especially undergraduates, they're just so uninhibited and they really teach me about beginner's mind, best mind. By the time you get to graduate school, the students are very proper and they want to get famous. They want to write. They want to be part of the scene. But these undergraduates, they just write. Oh gosh, they're filled with fire and invention and pimply love. You know, whatever it is.

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Marilyn:

At Smith College I took a class on hip-hop dancing with one of the kids, and I took drumming. I also taught at DePaul, so I'm getting these really sweet Midwestern kids. I just adore them. They're really wonderful and they keep me young. I don't have children, so these are my children and they're filled with excuses and whatever, but they're great. They're great. They keep me young. They keep me on my feet and trying new things, like drumming and also world beat. I was chasing this Cumbia band at the border because because I got into Shakira and I want to shake my booty. I'm learning so much from these kids. It's important to have friends of different ages.

Karen:

It really is.

Marilyn:

And different neighborhoods, diverse neighborhoods, and different classes. Yeah, it's great.

Karen:

A friend of mine in Cleveland says that the poverty he feels most keenly is intergenerational, that unless you go to church or some kind of worship, we lead very age-segregated lives all to our great deficit.

Marilyn:

Yeah, that's right. Yeah. And also Zumba dancing. All kinds of people Zumba dancing.

Karen:

It's true.

Marilyn:

And then I tried to learn to do Kung Fu, but I'm a big chicken. I didn't want to do any sparring. But Tai Chi, you meet a different set of people. I mean, so get out of your own neighborhood, get out of your own skin. It's really fun.

Karen:

It makes sense that you'd be attracted to music because from the jump, your poetry has Chinese music, American blues, it's there.

Marilyn:

That's right. It's so important to have a good ear, to train our ears. It all feeds into the muse, it all feeds the poem.

Karen:

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Do you want to give us another poem now?

Marilyn:

Oh okay. This one is called "Beautiful Boyfriend" for Don Lone Wolf, 1958 to 2011.

My skiff is made of spicewood my oars are Cassia bract
Music flows from bow to starboard
Early Mozart cool side of Coltrane and miles and miles of Miles
Cheap Californian Merlot and my young boyfriend

My beautiful boyfriend please shave your head
At the Miramar barber shop take the tonsure
Bow toward the earth prostrate and praise
Breathe in the Goddess's potent citron

Bullet don't shoot him he's my draft-horse
Night scope don't pierce him he's my love-stalk
Sniper who are you high on the roof
Stop for a slow cigarette let him escape.

If I could master the nine doors of my body
And close my heart to the cries of suffering
Perhaps I could love you like no other
Float my mind toward the other side of hate

The shanty towns of Tijuana sing for you
The slums of Little Sudan hold evening prayer
One dead brown boy is a tragedy
 Ten thousand is a statistic
So let's fuck my love until the dogs pass

All beautiful boyfriends are transitory
They have no souls they're shiny brown flesh
Tomorrow they'll turn into purple festering corpses
Fissured gored by a myriad flies

My boyfriend drives up in his late Humvee
Says: We're going to hunt Bin Laden
We'll sleep in caves and roast wild hare
And rise to praise the bright red sun

I was once a beloved spotted ox

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*Now I've become a war horse of hate
I pulled the lorries of ten thousand corpses
Before I myself was finally slayed.*

Down the Irrawaddy River you lay yourself to sleep
No sun no moon no coming no going
No causality no personality
No hunger no thirst

Skyward beyond Angkor Wat
Beyond Jokhang Lhasa
You were floating on a giant stupa
Waiting for Our Lord

Malarial deltas typhoidal cays
Tsunamis don't judge calamity grieves no one
The poor will be submerged the rich won't be saved
Purge the innocent sink the deprived

You bush down my hand with your bony hand
The fox-hair brush lifts and bends
You sigh *There's no revision in this life*
One bad stroke and all is gone

What do I smell but the perfume of transience
Crushed calyxes rotting phloem
Let's write pretty poems pretty poems pretty poems
Mask stale pogroms with a sweet whiff of oblivion

Marilyn:

I got rid of the last quatrain in my new book, in my selected. I didn't think that he wanted... He hated the military. He was in the military, but I don't think he wanted the gun salute, so I changed the line about that.

Karen:

I'm sure he thanks you. It feels so contemporaneous to read that now.

Marilyn:

Yeah. Yeah. I wrote it 10 years ago and he died in 2011. "One dead brown boy is a tragedy. Ten thousand is a statistic." That is so true now. You know, this is the thing with poems. We write them... I wrote this to mourn my beloved Don Lone Wolf, who was of the Ute Mountain tribe, and he had dark brown skin. I wrote this poem mourning him and mourning his tribe and his people, but hatred never ends.

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Oppression never ends. The death of black and brown bodies never ends. Unfortunately it's relevant today and I'm going to read it more now. It's a way to remember him and also speak truth to power, to what's happening today.

Karen:

Yes. And there is an ancient call in your poem. I remember at 9/11, I was around Robert Pinsky and these destabilizing events of course make us ask what's the point and I asked him if he thought there would be poems from 9/11, and he said, "Those poems of 9/11 are already written." And at first I didn't understand him, but he repeated that for me and there is a comfort in the cycle, even of tragedy, that people endure or they don't. But as you write, there's another cycle, there's another young person...

Marilyn:

Right. Poems are living history and as Audre Lorde says, "they're necessary -- they're just not luxuries." And it's just amazing that I wrote this poem over 10 years ago, or shortly after he died. And some of the anti-war poems are still relevant today. It's unfortunate, but these horrible events continue. These catastrophes continue.

Karen:

A friend of mine who works all the time on trying to interrupt the catastrophes and is working on Black Lives Matter, says to me when she's feeling the most despair, she reminds herself that these things aren't inevitable, that we built them. They're human constructions and therefore we can take them.

Marilyn:

Yes, we must be hopeful. We must be hopeful.

Karen:

She's younger than we are, but I think...

Marilyn:

She's out there doing the work.

Karen:

Absolutely because we don't want her to be having this conversation 30 years from now and we don't want her children to be having this conversation. So the poetry gives me solace because of the naming, because of the facing of the fact and the way the beauty allows you to hold onto what is pain.

Marilyn:

That's an eloquent way to put it. As a writer, it's hard to know which poems will survive. My poem, "How I Got That Name," I have to read all the time.

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Karen:

I know you do.

Marilyn:

Because people just want to hear it, and especially young Asian-Americans. I feel like that poem is like a rallying cry.

Karen:

Yes.

Marilyn:

And as you say, it's a naming poem. It places this Chinese-American girl into the world. It names her. And so it's wonderful how poems are passed through the ages and how they... You know, people are worried about whether poetry will survive because they're worried that books may not survive, but I see my poems floating in the web and people sharing them.

Karen:

They fit like hats on the YouTube. If you don't have to read a book and you can have "How I Got This Name." And I also will always love Bill Moyers having you write about read "The Floral Apron," and then people sent you aprons.

Marilyn:

That's right. Yeah. It's wonderful. It's wonderful. Yeah, poetry is important. And they'll float around. They'll float around to Mars maybe and beyond.

Karen:

And even as you make it important Marilyn, you're mocking it with "pretty poem, pretty poem." You get your cake and then you eat it.

Marilyn:

Well, some of these poems are so serious and dark that I want to...you know my personality. I like to laugh and I'm kind of... I love comedy. I think I'm Margaret Cho or something. Once in a while I just take a moment of a levity and you know...

Karen:

You change the register. It's beautiful.

Marilyn:

Yes. I remember at the ceremony, I teased Skip Gates about my X-rated haiku.

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Karen:

He's still recovering. He looked out the stage and he said, "Marilyn, you bad."

Marilyn:

I guess there's some very important reverends in the audience, very important church people.

Karen:

Churchy people, yeah. They're still talking about it too. And you insisting on female sexuality, in fact female sexuality with gray or white pubic hair, it just brought the house down.

Marilyn:

I know. I'm a little mischievous.

Karen:

A little?

Marilyn:

I can't help it.

Karen:

Well, somewhere your grandmother is scolding and smiling with that whisk.

Marilyn:

Oh yeah, and she has that little whip you know? Oh gosh, she was fearless. She was scary.

Karen:

Well, her blood is in you and we're all the better for it, and I need to thank you for this conversation.

Marilyn:

Well, thank you so much, Karen. Sister Karen.

Karen:

Sister is the only word.

Marilyn:

With much love, love you.

Karen:

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Same. We will be together again.

Karen:

The Asterisk is brought to you by the Cleveland Foundation. The executive producer is Alan Ashby with help from producers, Tara Pringle Jefferson and Jae Williams of WOJU Radio. I'm Karen Long, manager of the prizes. Thank you for listening.*