**Karen Long**:

Hello, I'm **Karen Long** and 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're figuring out some of the holes in our knowledge with poet **Donika Kelly**. Born in Los Angeles, professor Kelly won the 2022 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in poetry for The Renunciations, a response to the ending of a marriage and to remaking meaning from childhood suffering. Her first collection, Bestiary, was selected for the 2015 Cave Canem prize. Anisfield-Wolf juror Rita Dove lauded The Renunciations saying, "Several, many sequences are woven throughout their periodic reappearance. The Dear, Erasures, Self-Portraits, Sightings, Oracles acts as a subtle, yet devastating reminder of the cycle of violence. I returned to Kelly's book and she set me gasping anew. This is poetry of the highest order."

The poet is a professor of creative writing at the University of Iowa and lives with her wife, the writer Melissa Febos, in Iowa City. She earned her bachelor's degree from Southern Arkansas University, a master's from the Michener Center at the University of Texas and her doctorate from Vanderbilt University. Welcome, professor Kelly. Welcome.

**Donika Kelly**:

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be with you today, Karen.

**Karen Long**:

It's so good to be in person. I know people will scratch their heads in centuries to come, but it is what the human animal requires.

**Donika Kelly**:

It is what we require. Yeah, it really is.

**Karen Long**:

I believe you're going to start us with the art. So that would be a poem from The Renunciations.

**Donika Kelly**:

That's right. I am going to read Portrait of my Father as a Winged Boar:

When his mother dies—halved

in a wreck—from her opened

body springs my father,

whose name I refuse

to say as he refuses

his father, the half-known man

who sired him. In the dry L.A. light,

the boy, my father, turns

so that he is caught—

one way: a winged boar—

another: a giant,

a gold blade of a man—

both high skulled, thick maned:

a juvenile without a sounder,

a boy without a mother.

He recognizes himself

only in the man, carves

himself into golden armor—

but the rutting

fact of him, the curved

tooth, the thick neck

and beating wings, trembles

beneath his skin. Whatever sheen

the California sun

burnishes out of his body,

whatever good work

his thickening hand

compels, whatever woman

he touches in the afternoon,

on the roof, he cannot deny

his first born, his red fledgling,

her many heads and hands.

What he makes for her:

a junk bike she loves cattle, red

in the field a mirror

a red wreckage of her body.

**Karen Long**:

Thank you. One of the things you said in September at the award ceremony was you love that poetry disrupts narrative and here we have it. I think about the boy that you conjure here and the generosity of thinking about a boyhood for someone who does this wreckage. This poem is holding this tightness of the refusal of a name that is generational now and then ends with a bicycle that he built for you -- or the speaker, and at the same time a wreckage of the speaker's body. The question for the reader might be, how can all this sit together?

**Donika Kelly**:

Oh, well, that's a great question. It's the challenge of the poems that I took up when writing. When I was working on Bestiary and the poems in that book, and that really represents probably poems written between 2007 and I would say maybe 2013 or 2014, but most of them between I would say 2008 and 2013, somewhere in there. I was in a space where I could not really think about my experiences in any kind of depth. I just really wanted to push them away. I've been in therapy for a million years, therapy for a very long time, and so we were doing in therapy, I was doing a lot of work around what I think of as the big boss, so my experience of childhood sexual abuse. So I was doing a lot of work around that.

It's just like how do I have healthy boundaries? How do I practice vulnerability? How do I allow my friends to have their feelings and not take responsibility or impose a sense of responsibility for their feelings? And so I think the poems in Bestiary are really thinking about that. And a figure like my father appears in Bestiary, but that figure is fairly flat. And after Bestiary came out, I'm still in therapy. I continue in therapy.

I moved back to California. So I was back in California when the book was accepted, was chosen for the Cave Canem prize and then was published or we were getting ready for publication. And being back in California just brought all of those memories very much forward and I couldn't push them away. I did not have the tools to do that or the will to do that. And I also didn't have a therapist. I was adjuncting. I was adjuncting at the University of California at Davis, also at Santa Clara College. I was just trying to make stuff work. So I was, for the first time in a really long time without that support. I was like, oh no, what do I do? This is a roundabout answer to your question, but it is an answer to your question. And I began writing poems that we're trying to reckon more fully with my experience.

So in 2016, I moved to western New York and in western New York I started teaching at St. Bonaventure and I had just a really wonderful therapist there. I was finally back in therapy because after a year of not being in therapy, and my therapist name was Heather and she was fantastic. And I walked in, I was like, Heather, I don't want to do this work. I was like, but it seems that this is a little bit outside of my control, so I need to do the work. And one of the things that I was really concerned about was that... Well, I just didn't understand the choices my dad made. And because I couldn't understand his choices, it seemed that there might be a slim possibility that I could make a similar choice. Not plausible, but there was just this sort of sliver of, if I didn't understand why he did what he did, and he probably didn't understand why he did what he did, then it's outside of the realm of reason.

And so that was one of the things that I was working on in therapy and that sort of entered into the work in a different kind of way, which was I was trying to understand my dad's history. I was like, is there something in his history that explains this? Can I understand my father as a more, or my dad? I don't call him my father, he's my dad. Can I understand my dad as a more complicated person? And if I understand him as a more complicated person who experienced a difficult childhood, who has worked incredibly hard, has made some really amazing gains in his life in terms of just where he began socioeconomically and then where he is now. I was like, if I could understand him more fully, then I felt I could hold him accountable in a different kind of way. And so in some ways, that was the worst. Trying to imagine my dad as a child.

**Karen Long**:

Who does that?

**Donika Kelly**:

Who does that? It's like dads aren't children.

**Karen Long**:

They're closer to gods as you explore.

**Donika Kelly**:

That's right. And I think one of the... So he sat inside my family and I think men in my family sat inside their specific family units as gods in a way, which my family structure I think is very similar to lots of family structures worldwide. It's very patriarchal. And so I think one of the strategies that I took instinctively to renounce inside myself, his status as god, as a god, was to think of him as a child. It's like, all right, he was a boy. There's another poem in here, Donika Questions the Oracle.

**Karen Long**:

Right. And you ask if he rode his bicycle through the city.

**Donika Kelly**:

But did he also have a bike that he made out of junk parts? Because that was one of the things that my dad could do. He could just take parts of things and make a new thing. One year for Christmas, we didn't have a lot of money when I was growing up and I must have been six, six or seven, and we all got bikes, but it was bikes that my dad had scavenged the parts for. And so no one's bike looked new, but we were all very excited. We were like, we have bikes. Now we can ride in a circle on our street.

**Karen Long**:

And it's freedom, it's motion, it's a universal joy to have a bike.

**Donika Kelly**:

So in this poem, I was thinking through the notion that my dad has of himself, which I think is a golden man. And then there's the sort of animal part that we all have that sort of rutting, toothy, smelly part, and it's like, how could I reconcile the notion that he has of himself with the facts that I experienced when I was a child?

**Karen Long**:

It's so wonderful to hear you talk about being around the boss and then being more with the boss in these two books. I'm understanding them better in that context. I was also struck... It was so beautiful that Nikky Finney lifted this for the Cave Canem, who is an exceptional poet writer herself.

**Donika Kelly**:

It's so generous. A generous person, just period.

**Karen Long**:

You can tell it just as a reader. And right in her second paragraph of her introduction to Bestiary, she writes of you or the speaker. She will not look away anymore. The poet is writing of the narrator's undoing, but refusing to be undone. It's true of both books, don't you think?

**Donika Kelly**:

I think so. I think that's what poetry does for me is it helps me, what's the word? It keeps me grounded. It's like I get to sort of make this thing that is somewhat ephemeral or sort of touch on moments that are ephemeral. But then there's like, here's an artifact and I love having the artifact and then that changes my relationship to the thing that I'm writing about.

**Karen Long**:

Right. It's sort of the internal to the external. And it feels, as you say, grounded. It's a thing now.

**Donika Kelly**:

Yeah. And I think the... Nikky's language there is really interesting. The undone refusing to be undone, but the making of a poem is doing, so it's like it's making something. And to make... I often talk to about this with my students in this way. It's making poems. It's like we can just make lots and lots and lots of poems. Stakes are pretty low most of the time, even when they feel high, we can always just write another poem, which is different from other genres, I think, where it's harder to say, well just write another novel or unless you're a prolific friend, but most people are not in that way. But with poetry, it's like we spend time a page, two pages maybe that takes up hours, maybe that takes some weeks. But there's always the possibility of saying, well, that didn't work. Let me write another one. Let me take some of the pieces from this. And not that isn't possible, another genres, but it feels the most possible in poetry. The easiest to do. It's like, well, I'll just write another one. We'll see if something different happens another time.

**Karen Long**:

One of the delights of The Renunciations are the Erasure poems, as Rita Dove mentioned, as a signifier that what you're saying here is a fragment and most you don't see. And I love the physicality of that. You can't deny, you don't see, but a glimmer here. And I think you said that this just occurred to you one day that you could take your experiment with Erasures and import them here. Is that right?

**Donika Kelly**:

I had the wonderful privilege of taking a workshop with Gabby, Gabrielle Calvocoressi, who's a beautiful poet. And this was at the Fine Arts Work Center. And one of the activities that Gabby had us do was some Erasure poetry. I was like, well, what could I work with? I didn't want to work with someone else's text. I thought I have something. And I did. And so I have these letters that I had written in that therapeutic way therapists are often suggesting... They suggested to me often I'll say that, say it that way, to write a letter, don't send it. And so I had written a number of letters and I thought, let me see if there's something in here. And so several of the Erasures have... They're from the same letter, which I think one could kind of tell...

**Karen Long**:

I didn't pick that up. That is very cool.

**Donika Kelly**:

But also, I kind of changed the shape just a little bit. But what was originally underneath was a real letter. And I was in this workshop, I won't name any names, I won't even tell you where the workshop was, but I was working with people across disciplines, and I shared some of these poems in a PDF. And one of the members of the workshop... Because people are curious and hungry, he started doing word searches to see if he could figure out what was under. And we had to have a talk after. I was like...

**Karen Long**:

That was a little aggressive.

**Donika Kelly**:

I was like, there's a reason this is redacted. There's a reason. And I think he felt because he could...

**Karen Long**:

He would.

**Donika Kelly**:

Yes. But one of the things that I hope to signal with the Erasure, with the redactions, is that all of the poems were that. Every poem is that. There's so much that's left out. There's so much that people don't have access to. In those poems, the redactions show that in a different way, show the choice, show the shaping, show what is, at least gestures towards what is left out.

**Karen Long**:

And you did that with brackets too, which felt really important to the reader and the speaker.

**Donika Kelly**:

They were important to me as well, to the writer as well.

**Karen Long**:

Of course.

**Donika Kelly**:

Yeah, there were things... There was a version of, well, The Oracle Remembers the Future Cannot Be Avoided. That was in Tin House. And so what was in the bracket? What's excised from the poem now? At one point was in the poem and I thought, I just don't want to say it. And I just don't want that... It exists somewhere. People can find it if they're interested. But I thought about all the things that I just didn't want to say if I were to read the poem aloud or that I didn't want to write or I didn't want to see because the writing of the words, the speaking of the words, even seeing the words could activate something that I didn't want activated. But I didn't want to leave the space entirely blank. So that I think that was the pickle. I was like, what do I do? And it wasn't... So much of this was really intuitive. I wasn't sort of rifling through my bag of tricks like now what will work here?

But I just went with... I was like, oh, a bracket. And there were these funny moments where in the editing process where the two editors I worked with at Graywolf, Jeff Shotts and Chantz Erolinhey had some really interesting questions about whether or not the brackets should be italicized because the rest of the speech was italicized. Or if there was a question mark outside the bracket, should that be italicized? And I realized I had thoughts about that and I hadn't, but I didn't have those thoughts at the top of my mind when I made that choice. The choice was really instinctive. It's funny to think about that stuff after.

**Karen Long**:

Yes. To wonder how you landed where you did. And it evokes in me the sense I have when I'm in relation with anyone, especially the people I love. I try not to say things like, my gift to you today is, I'm not going to say this. In fact, I might not ever say this to you. And that is out of tenderness because I freaking want to say it to you.

**Donika Kelly**:

Oh, I have that a lot. I actually don't have that control in the same way. I tend to say the things. And I also try not to be blunt, but sometimes it's hard for me to hold my observations is how I'll frame it. It's hard for me to hold onto them. In the case of my dad, he and I stopped talking in 2008 and it began because he was upset with me for a number of reasons.

**Karen Long**:

I'd love for you to tell this story because I listened to it on Lit Hub's podcast, Threshold. So if you don't mind pulling us back to that year when you were starting graduate school at Vanderbilt.

**Donika Kelly**:

That's right. So my mom had gotten sick. She'd coded. She was dead for about 10 minutes, I think. They resuscitated her. And my dad was upset that I didn't drop school and come back to help take care of my mom. And I asked him what I would do if I came to live in this town that I had no connection to, where they had moved to just a few years before.

**Karen Long**:

In Arkansas.

**Donika Kelly**:

In Arkansas, in Pine Bluff. And I was like, well, what would I do? I was like, no, I think I'll keep going to school. And I wouldn't give him my friends contact information. So he couldn't call my friends if he couldn't get a hold of me. So he was trying to find ways around my boundaries, and I wouldn't let him. It's always been easier as an adult to hold the boundaries with my dad. So on my birthday that year, he did not tell me happy... I saw him on my birthday. He did not tell me happy birthday. He did not talk to me. And I thought, oh, we're not talking to each other. Wonderful. Which I don't think was what he expected.

**Karen Long**:

Of course not.

**Donika Kelly**:

I suspect he thought I would be hurt, but instead I was freed.

**Karen Long**:

You were liberated by his control mechanism.

**Donika Kelly**:

Yeah. And so I did not wish him happy birthday on his birthday. And we essentially did not talk unless it was about my mom's care. And even then, eventually we just did not talk at all. I would say for the next... I mean, he and I actually, in 2020, we had extended conversation because my mom was sick again and he was like, oh, here's my in-road. And I was like, there was no in-road, the roads are all closed. We can talk about what we need to do around my mom's health. So it was like 12 years without us talking and we're back to not talking again, which I really like. Because when I talk to him, actually, I try not to be cruel, but it is difficult. And the reason that I don't talk to him is because it is hard for me to maintain being respectful. And I was raised to be respectful with my parents. So the way to do the thing is actually not to talk to him. Exactly as you described. It's like it's the loving, more tender choice and action.

**Karen Long**:

And the beauty of that is it dislodged the god. The god was out of the house.

**Donika Kelly**:

I mean, it took a while though to realize it. I would say it took until probably until... It was probably like 2016. It was probably eight years after that where I was like, wait a minute. There's a story sitting at the center of my life where I'm holding myself responsible. I had two great therapists at Vanderbilt. Vanderbilt was wonderful in terms of its mental health resources at the time that I was a student. And I had my primary therapist, and then there was a therapist I went to for triage. And one day she was like, go look at an eight year old. They both actually told me, but when my primary therapist told me, I was like, no, I won't be doing that. But when the triage therapist told me, I was like, well, let me go look. And there was a daycare on campus and I saw little kids and I was like, oh, no, no, no. These children are not responsible for a single thing.

**Karen Long**:

That's profound.

**Donika Kelly**:

But I was resistant to it, resistant to confronting that for a really long time. So it really was... I was very fortunate to work with providers, both who were mostly free or offered me a deep, deep discount who were just really gifted practitioners and who were really gentle with me. Because I could be really stubborn in sessions because I felt protective of my parents, both of them.

**Karen Long**:

And now we'll pause for a short break. 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'll now return to the conversation.

And then I find myself thinking about the plainness of your speech, the saying of the thing that moves your reader or listener deeply. And I wanted to tell you that my brother for the first time, because he lives in Washington State, was at the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards in September. And so when we debriefed, he lives on the side of the mountain, he has a lot of guns, we're kind of chalk and cheese, love each other deeply. I said, what are you thinking about? And he said, **Donika Kelly**. I need more of that in my life. And I said, I don't see your Venn diagrams overlapping, hon. Tell me more about this. And I think what he was trying to say is, you had squeezed the BS out of your art.

**Donika Kelly**:

There's so much artifice though, but yes.

**Karen Long**:

I mean, that's why it's not just blubbering, right? It's done at such... this level. I was telling Alan Ashby that when I return to your books like Rita Dove, I keep saying this is so good. I don't know if I can say why.

**Donika Kelly**:

I love that. Thank you.

**Karen Long**:

You're welcome.

**Donika Kelly**:

Can I say something actually about...

**Karen Long**:

Please.

**Donika Kelly**:

So I often get the... I think lots of writers get the question. I think especially writers who write about trauma or traumatic experiences. And the question is, is writing therapy? And the answer is not exactly. It is therapeutic. There's something absolutely therapeutic about it, the externalizing, the working with material, the transformation of that material into something new. But for me, therapy is therapy. So therapy is often the place where I figure out how to say the thing most plainly. It's the place where I get a sense of clarity. And writing brings me to a new measure of clarity, but I can't often... If I'm writing about something that I don't have or haven't gotten to a space of clarity about, the writing itself tends to be a bit murkier, a little bit more opaque.

And my goal for the poems in this book, particularly the poems around childhood sexual abuse, my experiences with my dad, I wanted to be clear. And I had said in Gabby's workshop, they'd asked us what was one of the challenges we were facing in our work. And I said, I would like to be clear with music. I would like to be clear. I want the writing to be clear. I want the reader to know what is happening. But I also want it to sound nice. I want it to feel pleasing to read. I want there to be interesting line breaks. I want just all of the stuff that makes poems good and pleasurable for me.

**Karen Long**:

Clear with music.

**Donika Kelly**:

And it's so hard. It's so hard to do. And I said to Gabby... I said to the class, actually, I was like, you can't say, oh, the moon rose over the bay. I had a lot of feelings. That's not a poem. But then I thought, oh, that's a great title. So I'm going to keep that title. And I did. And I have several poems with that title because it is a good one. It's a good one. But it's not a poem. It's doing some other kind of work. And so I appreciate that came through, has come through.

**Karen Long**:

And I think the clarion moment is the very first one in the title, The Renunciations. What a word. How did you land on it?

**Donika Kelly**:

I had a working title, which was Bear God -- B-E-A-R -- as an imperative. To bear the god. And that position, the speaker of the poems as the subject. And when I got to the end of the book, I thought, oh no, that isn't what's happening at all. And so I sent the book in under that title, but I told my editor, I told Jeff, I was like, this is not the title. I was like, I will get back to you with a different title shortly.

And I was sitting in this cafe in New York waiting on my sweetie to wrap up some things. And I was like, well, let me try to tackle this question. And I had my dictionary app on my phone, I had my notebook, and I just started brainstorming. And I was like, is it deicide? And I was like, that's not a good title even if that is what I'm trying to do. That's a terrible title. But once I got to that word, I felt like I was on route to something interesting. And so I thought, what are the ways that god... How do gods die? And I got to renouncing and I thought that word feels interesting. And then I saw the noun form and I was like, oh, okay. Renunciate. And I was like, oh, this...

**Karen Long**:

And it is the religious overtones that feel so perfect.

**Donika Kelly**:

Oh, thanks. Thank you.

**Karen Long**:

So you got that title after you got your epigraph from Anne Carson?

**Donika Kelly**:

I think so, yeah. I loved... I just wanted something from Anne Carson. I mean, Anne Carson has given me so much, so it feels greedy to ask for more. But in the book Knox or the project Nox. There was this very long quote that I wanted. It was like, this bird carries this egg to the top of the thing. And I was like, that's too long. I was like...

**Karen Long**:

It's got all your things.

**Donika Kelly**:

But it had all the things in it. And I was like, that's too long. So I had to sort of hunt around for something that felt a bit more succinct. And when I found... When I got to this line, I thought, well, that's it. And I don't know who's living in the book, past the end of...

**Karen Long**:

Well, read the line so we all are there.

**Donika Kelly**:

So the line is, "to live past the end of your myth is a perilous thing." And it sure sounds like it would be, but there is something about we can come out on the other side of peril. And I think... So it's like my dad lived past the end of his myth, so now he's just like a dude who does not occupy that much energy inside my life. I would say my ex-wife lived to the end of what she understood to be the myth of our relationship. And I think I have lived past the very narrow ways that I understood myself and understood...

**Karen Long**:

Before you could see that eight year old?

**Donika Kelly**:

And before I could see how I was replicating patterns that no longer made sense in my life. I'm just not interested in hierarchy. And I've never really been interested in hierarchy. I love a feeling of alongside-ness and I and like dependency. I like being connected to other people, relying on other people, doing that in balance in so far as that is possible. But sometimes it's not. So then sometimes that balance sort of works itself out across time. So maybe I have mentors who give me a lot. I can't give to my mentors in the way that they give to me, but I can give to my mentees in the way that my mentors give to me. So that's balance.

**Karen Long**:

Right. And you and Melissa Febos seem... That's the last thing in the acknowledgements is the love and balance between you.

**Donika Kelly**:

It's really great. And sometimes it continues to be very confusing. I just could not have imagined the kind of relationship that we have, which is really like we are two people alongside each other who choose to be in the same space, who choose to make and tend to a life together. But there is so much room for both of us to be very strange and very much ourselves. And one person isn't subordinate to the other, and that's just not the vibe. And neither of us would be interested in that. That would be so boring and terrible.

**Karen Long**:

And that you couldn't imagine it. You of a great imagination -- is humbling.

**Donika Kelly**:

I have such a small imagination as it turns out. It continues to grow the things that I come to know are possible. But I think my world was so small when I was younger, constrained. Constrained in the ways of Black people living in the United States, Black people of a certain socioeconomic status living in the United States. It was hard to imagine the life that I have right now, which is this job, which is so wonderful. I teach creative writing to undergrads. I work with undergrads. And teaching sometimes feels like a strong description. But we make stuff together. We talk about process. We try to imagine the longitudinal field of the writer's life. That I get paid because I write poems and someone's like yeah, you're good enough at doing that, that we're going to trust you to do that with these young people. It was wild.

**Karen Long**:

Permanently too.

**Donika Kelly**:

Yeah. When I was in high school, college, I just... That was not... I didn't have any dreams. I didn't know what the future was. I didn't have plans for the future. I didn't have fantasies for the future. So this is all just very uncharted.

**Karen Long**:

One of the most intriguing planks in this future you've built was the one you crafted with your doctoral thesis, which led you said to The Renunciations. Will you let our listeners know that story too?

**Donika Kelly**:

I will. So my dissertation is on representations of white men in contemporary American westerns. So it's really like Lonesome Dove. I think maybe one of the later films was... It was like that 3:10 to Yuma, Brokeback Mountain, sort of late 2000s kind of vibe or mid-to-late 2000s kind of vibe. And I was thinking about the effects of the folks who we are taught, and I think structurally occupy the top of the cultural pyramid. They're just at the very tippy, tippy, tippy top. But we often talk about those about white men and about cis straight white men without much texture or granularity, especially when it comes to the critiques. I feel like the critiques tend to be quite broad.

And I had a number of experiences, I think living in Arkansas, going to school at this small state school with folks who... Most of us grew up poor. There was a reason we were at Southern Arkansas University. It was affordable, it was in town, it was local, and it was a great experience. I have no regrets. I'm really happy that's my alma mater. So I was like, well, what if I try to think more granularly and see what the ripple effects are. Essentially, I was like, if we read more closely, we can actually hold people accountable for what they're doing in a more compelling way. So that was the gesture of the dissertation. There was another part that got argued, and I'm not great at arguments. I don't really believe in the gesture of the argument in the academic essay, which is why I'm not well suited for the field. But one of my implicit arguments was if we are better at close reading than we could actually engage with the texts on their own terms.

And there's a way that people talk about the western or the men in westerns don't talk, which is not true. They talk all the time. If one watches westerns, they're just talking and talking and talking and talking about their feelings, about their hopes, about any number of... the girl they'd like to marry. Maybe there's another kind of job they'd like to do, but they're stuck cowboying. And I was like, they're talking, so we can't say that they aren't talking. Maybe we don't value what they're talking about or we don't see the value in what they're talking about. But that's not the same as them not talking. I was like, it's full of men talking. Every single one, just men talking so much. And so I was also making an argument for, again, an implicit argument for close reading, actually just attending to what the text was offering.

And that ended up offering me a pathway. It became a kind of practice. So I completed my dissertation in 2013, and started really writing the poems for The Renunciations that would end up in The Renunciations in 2015, 2016 to 2018, I would say. And those poems were engaged in the same work. What happens if we attend more granularly? What happens if I attend more granularly to the facts that I have of my father's life, of my dad's life? Can I now hold him accountable in a different kind of way? And its made me... The work has actually made me feel a little bit more tender towards him. I've been able to access a little bit more, and not in a extravagant way. But when my mom was sick, I could actually attend to and respect the fact that he was also suffering because where she was in her illness was pretty scary. And they've been together since they were kids.

**Karen Long**:

17 and 19 when they had you.

**Donika Kelly**:

And they were together I think a year before, maybe a year-and-a-half before that. And so they're just little kids when they got together and now they're not little kids. And it is whatever their relationship is. And it is complicated. It is a long-lived one. And so I don't have to like it or even respect it, but I can see my dad as a person who is struggling. And that felt good to me. I felt like I'm a good person because I can do this.

**Karen Long**:

Yes. And the loneliness of the silence we impose on the sort of emotional constriction on white men at the top of the hierarchy allows us to wonder what's behind that flattening because there's a person.

**Donika Kelly**:

Yeah. And what do we do with people who make choices in those ways? How do we actually come to understand the choices? How can we then push back against those choices? And understanding the choices doesn't mean that we say, yes, that makes sense and is valid and is correct. It's like, oh, actually, because I understand where the misinformation is coming from or the radicalization is coming from or the... It's like we can sort of figure out in a different way how to assess and approach the situation instead of just saying, well, that's how they are.

**Karen Long**:

Yes. It makes me think of a theologian, a Methodist theologian who talks about, it's not the 10 commandments we violate. We sin when we increase the separation and the harm. I thought, what if the commandment said that?

**Donika Kelly**:

I feel like people would have a really hard time. I feel like as it is, folks are like, well, I'm not really doing it that way, so it can't be that bad.

**Karen Long**:

Well, of course.

**Donika Kelly**:

Yeah. I often talk about being disoriented from the things that come in to interrupt my relationship to my work, my relationship to myself, as being disoriented. So what can disorient me to my work? What can disorient me to my friendships? What can pull me out of balance? And there are lots of things that can do that. Capitalism definitely does it. Recognition does it.

**Karen Long**:

Cell phones.

**Donika Kelly**:

Cell phones absolutely fall into the phone and out of one self. But I think there are just so many... The hunger for wanting to be known or seen I think is one of the big ones. And I don't know how we get away from that, but that takes a lot of work. And I think the way that relates in some ways to my dad is the way that he wants to be seen as good. He wants to be seen as good and necessary and helpful. And also that runs counter... So he wants to be the golden man.

**Karen Long**:

But he's not.

**Donika Kelly**:

Well, he is kind of, but also, it's both. I feel like I can just see the hunger in him to want to be perceived as good. And I think also to want to be good. But there are these other facts. And I think trying to hide those or suppress those, to me that is part of what leads to imbalance. And so squeezing the BS out to quote your brother, or the way that you described how your brother interacted with my work, I think is about wanting to let all of the things exist as they do.

**Karen Long**:

Which comes right back to the poem you read. So you talk of what disorients you. Let's end with what orients you. What are you reading?

**Donika Kelly**:

What am I reading? That's a great question. So I just finished... I've mostly been reading what I've been teaching. And so we've recently finished Ross Gay's Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude. Asked my students to write gratitude poems in the style of Ross Gay, which is to say complexly. And what they made was so beautiful. I mean, every time I've offered this prompt to the students, what they make is just so much more... It's so much bigger than what they've been making before. So much more granular than what they've made previously. Even with the students who are already quite gifted, there's like a different level that reaches.

Jos Charles Feeld, which is... My students were scared at the beginning. I don't know if you've read Feeld. It is a beautiful book and also a bit intimidating. So I think my students were right, but once we got into it, they really loved it. And then in the spring, I'm doing an independent study with a student, and I'm looking forward to reading, Ai. I think we're going to read Dread or The Killing Floor, both of which are very scary because Ai's poems are very scary. But also Lucille Clifton. We're going to read Quilting. We're going to read Gwendolyn Brooks, In the Mecca. Sonia Sanchez's, Morning Haiku. Evie Shockley's new book. And also just essays by Audre Lorde and June Jordan.

**Karen Long**:

Talk about buckets to fill us up.

**Donika Kelly**:

Yeah. My student said, what do you want to read? Because she wasn't sure. And I was like, I think we should read black women in the springtime. And I was like, I think we should read these black women. And she was like, okay, sounds great. Because she's really wonderful, also hungry young person who just wants to read and read and read and take in as much as she can. So it's going to be a pleasure.

**Karen Long**:

Well, it's been a pleasure to speak with you, and it's so humbling and exhilarating to be in a room with you. Thank you, **Donika Kelly**.

**Donika Kelly**:

Thank you, Karen. It's always so great to see you. I'm glad we had the chance to chat.

**Karen Long**:

The Asterisk\* is brought to you by the Cleveland Foundation. The executive producer is Alan Ashby, with help from producer Tara Pringle Jefferson. Cleveland Public School students working with the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society, wrote and performed our original score. I'm **Karen Long**, manager of the prizes. Visit Anisfield-Wolf.org to learn more on the history of the award, about previous winners and upcoming events. And thank you for listening.