**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 are figuring out some of the holes in our knowledge with poet **Shane McCrae**. Born in Portland, Oregon, Professor McCrae won the 2018 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in Poetry for “In the Language of My Captor,” a book about freedom and its limits told through stories of captivity. The collection features both prose memoir and poems in historical persona. These include a clutch in the voice of Jim Limber, the mixed race child Jefferson Davis's family kidnapped and informally adopted in the final year of the Civil War.

Anisfield-Wolf juror Rita Dove lifted up McCrae's fifth collection of poetry. "These voices worm their way into your head, deceptively simple language layers complexity upon complexity until we are snared in the same socialized racial webbing as the African exhibited at the zoo or the Jim Crow universe that banjo yes has learned to survive in. You can be free, or you can live."

McCrae dropped out of high school and later earned a law degree from Harvard, the first in his family to finish college. Now, he teaches creative writing at Columbia University and edits the poetry journal *Image*. His Twitter handle is @akasomeguy. He lives in New York City with his wife, Melissa McCrae, and their child, Eden. Welcome Professor.

**Shane McCrae**:

Thank you for having me.

**Karen Long**:

It is wonderful to be sitting with you and to be thinking about poetry. And it would be delightful to go straight to a poem, if you don't mind, from, I think, your last poem, “In the Language of My Captor.”

**Shane McCrae**:

Yeah. I'm happy to read it. This is, "Still when I picture it, the face of God is a White man's face.”

Before it disappears

on the sand his long white beard before it disappears

The face of the man

in the waves I ask her does she see it ask her does

The old man in the waves as the waves crest she see it does

she see the old man his

White his face crumbling face it looks

as old as he’s as old as

The ocean looks

and for a moment almost looks

His face like it’s all the way him

As never such old skin

looks my / Daughter age four

She thinks it might he might be real she shouts Hello

And after there’s no answer answers No

**Karen Long**:

Thank you. There's so much yearning in that poem. I wonder if it sprung into your imagination or there was an incident that gave you that frame.

**Shane McCrae**:

Well, first I suppose it was based sort of on my child Eden's habits and certain things they did when they were small. The part that ended up becoming the poem was excerpted from a larger poem that I never, or a longer poem, that I never finished. I got that excerpt to a point that I thought was reasonable. At the time, I didn't think it was successful, but I wanted to submit a batch of poems to a journal and I needed a third poem. And so, I had that lying around, and so I just put it at the end of the submission, and it ended up being a poem that it seems one of my poems that most people like, but it really wasn't a poem that I even thought of as complete when I wrote it.

But now, I realize that some of the consequences of it being, in some sense, fragmentary, make it one of my favorite of my poems.

**Karen Long**:

It rattles around my breastbone because I remember feeling a closeness to the idea of God as a child that is elusive to me now.

**Shane McCrae**:

Sure. Sure. Well, when I was a child, I don't think I had that experience. I didn't come to that sort of feeling until I was in my 30s. What the poem is, in some sense about, is the disintegration of the idea of God as a White male human being with superpowers, that I don't think is a very helpful idea. So the notion behind it I suppose was, although folks in my generation probably still have that idea floating around inside them, my hope was that, for my child, that would no longer be a thing.

**Karen Long**:

Thank you for sharing that part of it. It does seem that theology has become more interesting to you over the decades.

**Shane McCrae**:

Sure.

**Karen Long**:

And the first poem in your book that we're speaking on is called “His God.” So I just noticed that book ending after you selected the final poem. It's so profound because it's about, in part, withholding that interior life from the person who has taken the speaker captive.

**Shane McCrae**:

Yeah. Yeah. I didn't think really that I could, with any authority, write from the perspective that that poem comes from. The first sequence is about a person who was in a human zoo. The character is in some sense imaginary, but of course, there were Africans displayed in human zoos in the first part of the 20th century. I can't really know what that was like or even get close, but I can sort of try to imagine what would it feel like, what would you want to share, what would you not want to share. The character, at least as I imagine him, there are certain things about his internal life that he doesn't want to surrender.

If there's a way in which his body can be trapped, his soul at least, if he doesn't give it away, give these aspects away, can remain in some sense free, although I wasn't thinking that before I wrote the poem. That's where the poem ended up going.

**Karen Long**:

And I was thinking this was the man Captain 1906 in the Bronx Zoo. His name was Ota Benga. I remember where I was when I first read about him in a book by John Livingstone Smith, and my shock and horror. How did you first hear about him?

**Shane McCrae**:

I think I might have been in Oberlin and I was walking past the college bookstore and saw a book that had just come out about him. I just saw it in the window. And I think seeing it reminded me that I had heard about it before, but I didn't know when. I didn't read the book. It was important to me to the writing of the poem to not really know all that much. I have a general sense of it was good, but I wanted to imagine as much of it as I possibly could. And so, that's why I say that the person in the poem was a character as opposed to the historical person.

**Karen Long**:

Appreciate that. The second poem is also in the voice of this speaker. It's titled An Opticon, which is a form of prison in a circle.

**Shane McCrae**:

Yeah.

**Karen Long**:

And it has, in the second stance, one of my favorite distinctions in your work, and that is, "The keeper put me in the cage with the monkeys because I asked to be put in the cage with the monkeys. Most of the papers say the monkeys must remind me of my family. The liberal papers say the monkeys must remind me of my home. The papers don't ask me." And as somebody who spent three decades in journalism, I thought you captured a really critical way that the racism just marinates it all.

**Shane McCrae**:

Sure. I wanted that. I was going for that because thankfully, I think, in the last several years, we've been kind of coming out of this cloud, but you grow up with, particularly... Well, I shouldn't say grow up with because I wasn't in these circles until I was in my 20s or so, but when you're sort of hanging around intellectuals college types, people who read the paper even, you get this sense that, I don't know, a liberal paper is, I guess, progressive. But it's just a little bit to the left of center, but it is not all that far.

And so, it's not as if such organizations aren't struggling with their own racism, etc. It's just that they would frame it in a different way. But the speaker doesn't really see a tremendous difference between saying the monkeys remind him of his family and the monkeys remind him of his home because the end result is still this sort of making him alien and, if human at all, not human in the same way that the people who write the paper and presumably the people who read the paper think of themselves as being human.

**Karen Long**:

It's brilliant in a couple of words to still what I experienced and then have language in that poem. Thank you.

**Shane McCrae**:

Thank you. I'm glad that worked.

**Karen Long**:

I also am drawn to epigrams, and I paused over the epigram you have in “In The Language of My Captor,” which is just six words. But I don't know how to pronounce the poet's name.

**Shane McCrae**:

Thylias Moss. I've never actually heard it said.

**Karen Long**:

And she was born in Cleveland.

**Shane McCrae**:

Yes. Yes.

**Karen Long**:

And the epigram is, "You will feed yourself 5,000 times." And my stab is, is that a reference to poetry?

**Shane McCrae**:

There's a way in which it's for the best that a poet doesn't know what they're doing. Once I've written a book, it's not as if I suddenly have all the keys to whatever it is that I've said.

**Karen Long**:

Sure.

**Shane McCrae**:

But I know the poems well enough. And choosing an epigraph, sometimes that comes early. Sometimes it comes late. But it can often be sort of the last unknown thing. I was thinking about, when I picked that out, I was thinking about to some extent the ways in which the speakers of the poems were isolated and that they had to sustain themselves. But it can be about anything.

**Karen Long**:

It sure can.

**Shane McCrae**:

Yeah.

**Karen Long**:

And I guess in that open-ended evocative way, it's an invitation.

**Shane McCrae**:

Yeah.

**Karen Long**:

So in January, you tweeted, "The sound a comma makes is probably my favorite sound in language."

**Shane McCrae**:

I did.

**Karen Long**:

Elaborate.

**Shane McCrae**:

Well, for a long time, my poems didn't have any punctuation in them except for I used this virgule, I used a slash. I have a book coming out in November and it's got punctuation in it. And of course, I have a memoir coming out in August and that's full of punctuation, and that book has punctuation in the prose sections. And there's a certain kind of lyricism that I enjoy particularly that is, in some ways, very comma dependent. It's very clause heavy.

I think of Dylan Thomas's “Fern Hill,” which I think is, if not the greatest... Well, I think it's probably the greatest lyric poem of the 20th century and certainly one of the greatest lyric poems ever if you're thinking of lyric as sort of pure music, although it's not as if Thomas isn't saying something. He is saying something, but there's this just sort of desperate and gorgeous momentum that builds up in that poem and it is because of the way that he's deploying clauses. They just build up and build up and build up. You add another thing. You add another thing.

And so, that commas make it possible to sort of have this sort of additive kind of music that there's no other punctuation mark that quite does that, and also not having punctuation marks. Like the word *and* doesn't do the same thing. And so, I was thinking of that. I just enjoy kind of never-ending strings of clauses connected by commas.

**Karen Long**:

I was thinking of as silences and pauses as being the thing to another open-ended-

**Shane McCrae**:

Yeah.

**Karen Long**:

... way of thinking. I was really surprised when I went and re-read the 2015 review Slate did of one of your books where the critic was talking about your words hurdling down the page. I experience reading you as a slowing down. So I was really struck by the radical difference in which he entered and I entered. Do you have any thoughts on that? Is that just the poem reading us?

**Shane McCrae**:

I suppose there's a way in which... I tend to write my poems double spaced, and they aren't always printed that way, which I've gotten fine with it. It used to bother me a lot. So I write them with a lot of pauses and I write them with a lot of pauses because I write in the lines. And so, these things are all meant to slow down the reading, and I suppose there's so much emphasis on slowing the reading down, partly because I do think of it moving fairly quickly.

And so, the pauses are meant to sort of stop that. But either kind of reading is fine with me, and a medium kind is fine too. I am doing some things syntactically, etc., particularly in my poems that aren't punctuated. I'm not having punctuation that allows for a certain kind of difficulty that's different when a poem is punctuated. But I am trying to do certain things syntactically that I would like to think of that would require a bit of slow reading to engage with because otherwise the words wouldn't make a ton of sense.

But if you stop for a second, it should come together. So I think either reading is totally fine. There is a certain kind of sped up breathless reading that I am very fond of. Yeah.

**Karen Long**:

And now we'll pause for a short break. The Asterisk\* is a product 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.

When I told people in Cleveland that I would be in New York to talk to you, the folk who were in the room in 2018 invariably brought up the way you spoke at the podium about Melissa McCrae. And so, I went back to listen to it. It was essentially a sentence, and you said, "Melissa McCrae, who married me nine years ago and whom I love as brightly as one does at the beginning of love, but more than I can at the beginning of love." And talk about hitting the breastbone. Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr. immediately commented on it. And I remember a young man clutching my elbow at the reception saying, "I brought a date to this. I can't compete," just in sort of a delightful way.

And it made me want to sort of check in with you about that nature of love because you named it as what we give each other when we're living rightly.

**Shane McCrae**:

Sure. Well, I can say that, at least with regard to Melissa, nothing has changed. It still feels like the very beginning, and we both... I can't speak for her and I wouldn't want to, but we both seem to feel the same way. That's what she says. That's what I say and we act that way. This year, we will be married 14 years, but it does feel just totally brand new. I think about her all the time. If we're not actually physically together, we call each other several times a day. We are just sort of... We want to be with or talk with each other all the time.

And a large part of it for me, a large part of what I can do in love, is trying to think about what it is that she might want or what it is that she might need and trying to make the distinction between that and what I think people tend to do at the beginning, which is think about what I would like to have done for her, which is not the same thing at all. And you grow into realizing what the other person actually wants and that it may not have anything to do with what you would like to have done. Yes.

She just occupies my thoughts. I don't know where I would be or what I would do if she wasn't in my life. I certainly wouldn't have... I was thinking earlier today about how there's no way I would have written the memoir. Yes. We've been together since before my first book of poems came out. In fact, when we got together, I was putting together my very first chapbook. It had gotten accepted but it wasn't being published. And so, it was in the days of sorting that out. So it's from the very beginning.

**Karen Long**:

So interesting because we had a chance to speak to George Mekari yesterday and we were talking about how the partners of the people we interview are invariably just as interesting, and the producer of The Asterisk\* said, "It's not an accident. You probably don't get to this level of creativity without a wonderful partner."

**Shane McCrae**:

Sure. Melissa's way more interesting than I am. She would be much more interesting to talk to. Yeah. She's very exciting to talk to.

**Karen Long**:

So one of the things that I'm thinking about is we're sitting here in masks, and I know I won't understand all the ways that I've been changed by the Coronavirus endemic, no matter how long I live. But I do think a lot about the revelations that have come to our ability to love each other through this experience, and there was a haunting story in the New York Times last year about the Australian model of care during the epidemic in which people went out and spoke about needing to take care for their elders in different communities, including the Indigenous communities.

And that the epidemiologists believed had we taken our cues from the Australian model, 900,000 lives would have been saved.

**Shane McCrae**:

Sure.

**Karen Long**:

It's such a difficult thing to think about, and you are excellent at thinking about difficult things. So I wonder how you're thinking about our communal learnings in this.

**Shane McCrae**:

Well, it's a really touchy subject. I try really hard for it to not be made bitter thinking about it. It's the third leading cause of death. Hundreds of thousands of people died last year. I can't remember who it was that pointed it out, but in any year, if the flu suddenly killed two or 300,000 people, we would be in a panic. But seemingly, we're okay with Coronavirus killing two or 300,000 people in a year. The more I talk about it, the more I will sound, I am certain, like a jerk.

And so, there's a casualness with which people didn't wear masks, they're just sort of coughing all over the place, that I don't understand. When this wasn't a thing, I would go out sick and I wouldn't wear a mask. I don't know how bad that is. When I had a cold, I mean, who cares? I had a cold. I don't know. I didn't want to think about it very much. But now, it just feels like, oh, well I guess we're just willing to kill each other rather than be very slightly physically uncomfortable for a stretch of time.

You don't have to wear the mask 24 hours a day. In certain situations, you should be wearing it, I tend to think. Otherwise, you're just sort of... Probably what it is is people aren't really thinking about it. I can't imagine anyone saying, "I'm not going to wear my mask and maybe I'm going to kill somebody right now." I don't think anybody thinks that.

But it is troubling that it's easy to not think about it. Yeah. My wife is immunocompromised. Yeah. I think about this kind of all the time. It bothers me.

**Karen Long**:

It's also interesting that one of the decisions in Australia was explicitly not to politicize it, to yield to science.

**Shane McCrae**:

Sure.

**Karen Long**:

And part of the strength of that decision rests in a 1928 law that requires people to vote. And what that means is that the common sense that gets expressed from people in the middle and the weaponization of different points of view occurs a little less robustly.

**Shane McCrae**:

Sure. Yeah. That makes sense.

**Karen Long**:

Well, it feels intentioned with what you were trying to tell us in 2018, and what I noticed is you kept going back to gratitude. You thanked everyone you could possibly think of. You memorably thanked my husband for loaning you a blue striped tie that day.

**Shane McCrae**:

Yep.

**Karen Long**:

And that thanking is related to prayer, and questions of theology are emerging across your beautiful books with actually thinking about purgatory, hell and heaven. I don't know if there's a question in there, but I'm very curious about the things we can't stub our toes on and how we manage around that.

**Shane McCrae**:

Sure. Well, when I was a teenager, I was very much an atheist. I wasn't a casual one. I was really very aggressive about it. I came to some sort of inchoate faith when I was maybe 20, maybe about to turn 20. And I was baptized when I was 30. In those 10 years, I was sort of drifting around trying to figure out what it was that I believed. I felt certain about the existence of God. I still feel certain.

So far, I've been fortunate enough not to really have to struggle with doubt. That's not any more a problem, which seems maybe strange coming from somebody who was really a very convicted atheist for a while. And so, I spent 10 years trying to figure out what it was that I thought, and then eventually became a Christian, and have been since then.

And I guess when I think about it... I think about it all the time. I take it seriously and it seems living one's life as if God didn't exist, which plenty of people do, people can believe what they want to believe, but I find it hard to imagine coming to that position without thinking a lot about it because I can't imagine anything more serious than God. And I can't imagine just sort of... Although I did do it. I'm just sort of casually floating around as if... Not even as if God didn't exist, but as if it didn't matter.

I can't imagine what could matter more in a broad sense. And so, it's in my books because I think about it a lot. It's on my mind a lot, trying to figure out how to live according to my faith, which is sort of the struggle of faith. It's difficult to live fully according to what one believes.

**Karen Long**:

And I wonder if it links to what we were talking about, or would it be self-righteous to think that thinking about wearing your mask speaks to the seriousness with which you try to lead a moral life?

**Shane McCrae**:

Sure. There's so many ways that I wish I could be better, a better person. But wearing a mask is a small thing I can do. It doesn't, by any means, mean that I'm a good person or something, but it at least means that I can do this very tiny thing to try to keep people safe.

**Karen Long**:

You had once described your work as heavily political books, and that also surprised me. I see it and I don't see it, and I thought it was worth bringing up because, once you know about Ota Benga or Joe Limber, you can't unknow it.

**Shane McCrae**:

Sure.

**Karen Long**:

And here we have a governor, very populous state, saying, "We should not know these things in high school."

**Shane McCrae**:

Sure. Yeah. I did describe my books that way and that's not my goal anymore, not that I have anything against heavily political poetry by any means. You can't write the same thing forever. But I did think that it was important in my very, very, very, very small way to talk about these things so that they could be in people's minds. Being a poet, one reaches only so many people, but the few people that I could reach, I thought most of them haven't heard about Joe Limber.

**Karen Long**:

Right.

**Shane McCrae**:

I thought I could at least sort of get these ideas in their minds when those ideas weren't there before. And so, I thought that that was, in some ways, maybe useful. It's difficult because, when you're writing poetry, political poetry, there are a lot of ways in which, given the audience of poetry, one is sort of preaching to the converted. And so, instead of just saying the same things that everybody already thinks, you can maybe point them in directions, like toward Joe Limber, things that they didn't know about that would help them to think hopefully in a new way or a different way.

**Karen Long**:

And I am thrilled to discover just this week that you have a memoir coming out August 1st called “Pulling the Chariot of the Sun: Memoir of a Kidnapping.” So, light bulbs exploding. Oh, this is part of what I'm reading about in your earlier books.

**Shane McCrae**:

Yes. I was taken from my father who is Black by my maternal grandparents when I was three. They told him they just wanted to take me for a weekend, and what they did was, we were living in Salem, Oregon. He was in Salem, Oregon and I sometimes lived with him, sometimes lived with my mother. And instead, they left for Texas so that when he came back to get me, the house was just empty. He had no idea where I was.

And I have been writing about that in some sense for a long time. But that is what the memoir is about.

**Karen Long**:

Tell me how you got that title.

**Shane McCrae**:

I was writing a section of the book about, sort of in an abstract way, maybe I guess a little political, but it's terrible to say that, about kidnapping. A lot of the book is sort of about thinking about what a kidnapping is, what it is to be kidnapped, and there's just a part of that section that talks about there's a way in which the kidnapped child is sort of... It's talking about the ways that the different parties of the group sort of view race. And so, the grandparents, they're sort of looking at a very kind of placid lake, and they see this white streak going across the lake.

And the white streak is sort of the trail of the chariot of the sun. And the surface for the child is very rough. Nothing is reflected in it, but he's also pulling the chariot, and he thinks that he is running from it. But instead, he's pulling it. And so, that's where the title comes from. There's a lot of ways in which the sun sort of figures in to White supremacist imagery in various ways, and so I guess that's where that sort of came from.

**Karen Long**:

And then, in the ear, it's the same word as son.

**Shane McCrae**:

Sure. Yeah. Although believe it or not, I didn't think about that until yesterday.

**Karen Long**:

Well, it feels miraculous to sit here and talk to you about these things calmly because I think of Thich Nhat Hanh who said, "Be gentle. Every person you pass is fighting a war." And your gentleness is such a defining trait and your history is so violent.

**Shane McCrae**:

Sure. Hopefully one works to be better, and I say that as if I have achieved some sort of goodness, which I certainly don't think I have, but I do hope eventually to get there. And so, I guess I would say, yeah, I hope to be gentle.

**Karen Long**:

Forgive me for deifying you a little bit. It's easy for a reader to do that. Speaking of, I know the listeners would appreciate knowing what you're reading.

**Shane McCrae**:

Yeah. We talked about this earlier and I said that it was going to be a crisis to try to figure out how to talk about what I'm reading. Very easily, I can say that I am reading David Yezzi's biography of Anthony Hecht. I'm very excited for the book to come out. It comes out in November and I am... yeah. It's wonderful so far, and I'm just excited to read it. I can say that I'm really looking forward to reading Gabrielle Bates's book Judas Goat. I've read a few poems from it, and I think I might just go buy it today.

And so, I think that that's a book I'm about to be reading. And I've finally gotten around to actually reading, and this is kind of the worst way you can do it, but cover to cover reading the King James Bible, which last year, I read Robert Alter's translation of the Hebrew scriptures, which is an enormously long book because there are more notes than there are original texts.

And I read David Bentley Hart's translation of the Christian scriptures, and I love both of those versions, but I thought since I just read those, I should finally read the King James. And so, I'm reading that too.

**Karen Long**:

And how are those three pulls sitting with you?

**Shane McCrae**:

Oh. I don't know. The King James is sort of always around. And so, it has a way in which it's ambient, but it's also of course central. And so, you're not supposed to make ambient music sort of the central music, but it is sort of a central thing. The Hecht is a book that I've been looking forward to for so long that it is difficult to even believe that I'm reading it, even though I'm reading it. And Gabrielle Bates is another book that I'm looking forward to. And again, I've only read bits of it, but the bits I've read, she seems like a very exciting new voice and I've actually been looking forward to her book for some years too. And so, each is sort of sitting comfortably in its place, I think.

**Karen Long**:

Terrific. Thank you so much for spending some time with us.

**Shane McCrae**:

Thank you for having me.

**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.