

L. A. Johnson

Accepting the Poems for What They Are: An Interview with Victoria Chang

JOHNSON:

Not a lot of people know that aside from poetry and nonfiction, you're also an accomplished author of two middle-grade novels. One of the things I love most about your writing is the different forms it takes, both on the page and in its approach to different themes. And in your most recent book of poetry, *With My Back to the World*—an ekphrastic book in conversation with the artwork and writings of Agnes Martin—there are also your illustrations paired with some of the poems. Can you discuss what draws you to poetry? As someone who practices many forms of writing and creating, what do you love about poetry and what keeps you writing it?

CHANG:

I was thinking about a Donald Hall quote about poetry where he says a poem is “one inside talking to another inside.” I think poetry goes so deeply into the caverns of one's interiors that sometimes it's hard to imagine ever coming out. But then with poetry, our souls hitch a ride on language, and I imagine the soul barely hanging onto the tails of language, and then somehow there's a transference where our souls enter another interior, and this feels very beautiful and essential, beautifully essential.

That depth of reaching in poetry, as well as that connection with another inner soul, is what draws me to poetry. I keep

writing poems because it's the only way I know how to live in this world. Poetry sometimes feels like the only way to communicate about certain things. I'm also attracted to the unknown of poetry, the fact that we are using language to describe the unknown, and silence is so intriguing.

But to properly answer your question, I think I like to do a lot of things, probably too many things. In the realm of writing alone, I love writing poetry, but I also really enjoy writing creative nonfiction and novels (especially for children). I would also love to write an adult novel, and I love writing poetry criticism and essays about poetry. I also love visual art, drawing, making things with thread and needle, paper arts, calligraphy, and so much more. I could do a ton of other things if I had one-hundred hours in a day, but obviously I don't. My interests just tend to be wide, sometimes too wide.

JOHNSON:

It's interesting to hear you talk about poetry as attempting to describe silence. Your newest book, *With My Back to the World*, contains ekphrastic works, but they're an interesting take on ekphrasis. In some ways, I feel like they're more in conversation with Martin as an artist, and the paintings are jumping-off points. Sometimes, you include quotes from Martin that the speaker wrestles with. For example, "Agnes said you just can't be an artist if you can't / be alone," from "Untitled, 1978." Also, the speaker often longs to ask Martin questions. So much of the book is about silence, but it's also about conversation. Could you talk a bit about this artistic conversation, which I know began so privately, and if it has evolved since readers are now part of it?

CHANG:

Once I started looking really closely at Agnes Martin's body of work and writing poems in conversation with some of her pieces, I was able to get at difficult emotions that I was feeling related to sadness, the inadequacies of language, being seen and seeing—and regarding this last one, I think I had to look at something in order to explore perception. Some of my poems explore the nature of seeing and being seen in a digital world. My artistic practice in these poems seems committed to rethinking our relationship to what is diminished—which is the personal, which is privacy, and bearing witness to that diminishment.

And maybe some of us need both art and writing when we sense that neither is enough. Or that the interaction of the two can create something else, something larger.

For me, this process transcended the more typical definition of ekphrasis or “verbal representation of visual representation.” In my ekphrastic poems, I wasn't just representing in words what Martin had presented in images. In retrospect, what I was doing was allowing Martin's work to be an evocation of language and emotions inside of me.

JOHNSON:

I really see that in the poems. This is a somewhat related question, but I was wondering if you could talk more about poetry's ability to continue conversation with people who are no longer with us. Obviously, there's the conversation with Martin, but there's also the loss of your parents, which permeates the book. Do you think poetry has an ability to reach, or to speak, beyond the boundaries of life and death?

CHANG:

You've made me think about a question that pops into my head a lot: *Who are you talking to?* I think this all the time in the age of social media. Before I post, I think this, and when I might read or see someone else's post, I think this. Sometimes I think this when I read my own poems later and wonder who I was talking to. In *With My Back to the World*, I was talking to myself (my sad self, to be specific), Agnes Martin, and perhaps anyone else in the world who might be feeling something similar.

I think poetry absolutely has the ability to reach and speak beyond the boundaries of life and death. I feel this every time I read a poem by a poet who is no longer alive. Sometimes I'll read a poem by Brigit Pegeen Kelly or Louise Glück or Larry Levis and feel like they are alive, speaking to me via their incredible words, across time, race, gender, physical space, and more.

JOHNSON:

It's interesting because I feel like that experience for me is unique to poetry, to writing, but you seem to have a similar experience with both art and the written word. I can look at a painting, for example, and feel a lot of things and think a lot of things, but I never really feel like the painting is speaking uniquely to me. Maybe the way to phrase it is that the painting always feels outside of me, whereas a great poem can feel inside or a part of me. Have you always experienced both art and writing with a similar emotional depth, or did that change in the process of your work becoming more ekphrastic?

CHANG:

You make an important distinction between visual art and poetry/language. When I'm reading a poem, I literally feel like the poet or those words are speaking *to* me. But visual art is something different. When I'm looking at something that really resonates with me, it's more like I'm being washed over with feeling. But I love both equally because they both, for me at least, have the power to transfigure, perhaps just in different ways, but the feeling can be similar.

JOHNSON:

My favorite poem in the book is "Today," which is in a journal-entry form and responds to On Kawara's "Today" series. What I find interesting in its approach is that it sometimes addresses the speaker's father directly and sometimes speaks about him from greater remove. Could you talk more about the process of writing this poem? Related to our conversation so far, could you talk about how you perceive that shift in address in this poem, and how you approach address in your poems?

CHANG:

I wrote "Today" *while* my father was in his last days, or what were supposed to be his last "days," which ended up being his last weeks. The difficult thing about my father's illness was that his physical body was always strong, but his brain was no longer functioning at any manageable level. I thought I might write a few lines a day in ten syllables as a day journal for a few days, because the experience was so traumatic as a witness of the event. But my father lived for another three weeks, so I ended up with a long poem. If there was ever an example of poetry as "therapy," this would be it. Writing through the experience was very helpful for me emotionally.

I didn't notice who I was talking to in the poem, but you're right in that the address shifts. By this point, I think I had become so accustomed to the grief-living experience and the grief-writing experience, having written so much about my mother's illness and death and my father's illness, that I think I was writing a bit about grief, about death, to grief and death, and to my father all at once. I wrote whatever came to mind. I also love the slippery pronoun so the "I" and the "you" are not always the first person or the second. Sometimes, they're toggling between the two and mostly unreliable.

JOHNSON:

There's an orderliness to "Today," which is obviously in contrast to the uncertainty of your father's final weeks. Do you think that writing about grief—shaping it on the page—changes the way you experience grief? Do you think that's evolved over time for you?

CHANG:

Grief is so big and seemingly endless that I think any formal constraint can be useful. My brain is also one that jumps around a lot and spills a lot, so I often find formal constraints to be useful to me. Even within those constraints I might set for myself, I end up wandering around a lot. I have a naturally leaping brain. Sometimes when things feel difficult and you are waiting for something to happen, I've found it useful to do something, such as writing a line or a few lines. Simply naming emotions during difficult times can feel so therapeutic.

JOHNSON:

I'm curious to hear more about your leaping brain. How does that change how you revise poems or know when they

are finished? How does the form or constraint change that process?

CHANG:

I'm happy to allow the naturally jump-cutting movements of a brain to manifest in the poems. I'm happy to allow thoughts to shift and leap, even if they didn't appear to go anywhere or resolve. I think of leaping in poems as an interesting way of irresolution. Leaping in a poem can lead to surprise and strangeness, both qualities I seek in poems I read as well.

I often think about how far poems have travelled while writing, revising, or reading the poems of others. Sometimes a poem might seem to end up where the poem began, but it has travelled a lot in between, so even the ending might seem new or different, earned perhaps, and have a kind of shadow of leaping underneath the ending.

Other times, a poem might have travelled to outer space and seem so different from where it started. I was recently at a reading where an audience member said they were very happy with the opening of my poem, which felt so peaceful and calm, but in the middle, I took a pretty big turn that made him uncomfortable—suddenly, we were in a poem where violence was the subject matter. He asked how a poem could do that. I sensed he didn't like the turn the poem took. I think that some readers might find the leaping in my poems to be frustrating or hard to follow, but that's okay because maybe they're not a reader for my kind of poems. So to answer your question, I think I don't mind ending poems wherever they end, and sometimes that can be very far away from the beginning.

In terms of how leaping might change or affect how I revise poems when I have a fresh eye and am revising, I

can usually sense how much of a leap, or how many leaps, I've made within a poem. It's during this revision time that I ask myself whether those leaps need to be toned down, buttressed with connective tissue and new writing, or whether I can simply allow them to be. Within a container, my poems can feel free to leap, perhaps even more than they might otherwise. That's the gift of a constraint—I'm willing to leap or try new things because I know I won't fall off a cliff. The walls will protect me.

JOHNSON:

What issues of craft have you been thinking about lately that perhaps you didn't consider earlier in your writing career?

CHANG:

I'm always thinking about new things as the years go by. I've finished a manuscript of poems that explore the longer sustained poem, although I think many of my recent books, such as *OBIT* and *Dear Memory: Letters on Writing, Silence, and Grief*, are actually one long poem or one long work. It's a dream to be able to think about poetry and poetics regularly and to see how one evolves over a lifetime of writing. I think I tend to think about whatever it is I'm working on at the time. I'm also thinking a lot about animals lately, as the recently finished manuscript is quite engaged with the natural world.

JOHNSON:

How has your sense of yourself as a writer changed over time? What do you think of when you look back on the Victoria who wrote *Circle*?

CHANG:

I never planned to be a “writer” or a “poet.” I simply engaged with the world and made/make sense of the world through writing and art. I don’t see what I do now as anything different than what I did before. Obviously, many poetry books and books later, it might appear that I have changed from the outside, but my sense of myself as a writer hasn’t really changed. I still enjoy writing just as much as I did before and still find it to be a necessary part of my life and making of a life. My organic personality has shaped my writing life.

I have learned a lot about the *life* of a writer over the decades, though—many things that I didn’t know at the time. For example, I didn’t realize how much free labor a living poet might have to do! Book blurbs and references, as well as requests for mentorship, are quite common on a daily basis, and I didn’t understand this kind of work when I first started (and was asking others for blurbs, references, and mentorship). Balancing this free labor with my own time limitations has been a big challenge over the years because I do feel it is important to give back to the community that one engages in. But it can be overwhelming sometimes, since I’m not a vending machine to extract something from. I’m a real person.

JOHNSON:

How do you protect your private life and your creative spark amid so many public roles, teaching, and traveling?

CHANG:

I am very private about my personal life. I do not share anything about my personal life to anyone, really, except a close, small group of friends. That’s one way to protect my

private life—I just don't share things publicly.

I'm also pretty anti-social, so when I am doing something away from home, I don't go out late. I spend as much time as possible taking walks, reading quietly, or just resting. It's a privilege to be engaged with the public, to teach, and to travel in the poetry world. I don't take any of it for granted. But it's important to protect your time, and that varies for each person individually. I'm a Sagittarius, so I like to travel and see new things. That's been fun.

JOHNSON:

What's next for you and for your writing? What questions do you want to pursue?

CHANG:

I don't really have any goals in writing or the writing life. I'm not sure I ever have had any goals beyond publishing one book of poems. I don't think I even think about writing "good" poems or "great" poems. I tend to just write poems and do the best I can with my abilities at any point in time, and then accept the poems for what they are.

I tend to think of writing and the writing life as being parallel to regular life. You just live it, one step at a time. It's all just a process that might end up accumulating into something larger, but in terms of what it accumulates into, that doesn't matter to me at all. I also don't really have any questions related to my writing or artistic life. I think the questions will come as I go through life. That's the beauty of writing as life and life as writing—they just keep going forward as you live.