

The Rigorous Muse

A Conversation With Poet Marilyn Chin

By Thom Tamaro & Kristin Garass-Johnson

Marilyn Mei Ling Chin was born in 1955 in Hong Kong, where her father operated a restaurant. When he moved the family to Portland, Oregon, when she was a child, he changed his daughter's name from Mei Ling to Marilyn, in homage to the actress Marilyn Monroe.

Chin graduated from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 1977 and received her M.F.A. from the University of Iowa in 1981. She is the author of *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*; *The Phoenix Gone*, *The Terrace Empty*; and *Dwarf Bamboo*. She also coedited with David Wong Louie *Dissident Song: A Contemporary Asian American Anthology* and cotranslated with Eugene Eoyang *The Selected Poems of Ai Qing*. Among her many awards are two National Endowment for the Arts Writing Fellowships, the Mary Roberts Rinehart Award, the PEN Josephine Miles Award, a Stegner Fellowship, four Pushcart Prizes, and two Fulbright Fellowships to Taiwan. She currently lives in San Diego, her most recent exile, where she teaches in the M.F.A. program at San Diego State University. Chin's work reached a national audience in 1995 when she was one of the writers featured in Bill Moyers' eight-part PBS series and its companion anthology, *The Language of Life: A Festival of Poets*.

Chin is spending the 2003-2004 academic year at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, courtesy of a Radcliffe Institute Fellowship, an annual award given to writers with substantial publication or a contract for the publication of a book.

This interview took place on April 19, 2002, in Moorhead, Minnesota. We followed it up with equally lively e-mail exchanges during the following months to correct, clarify, amplify, and shape the interview. Chin's graciousness and enthusiasm throughout the project reflect her deeply held belief about the necessity of poetry in our daily lives and her passion to bring that poetry to her audiences.

Thom Tamaro: *You are traveling a lot to promote Rhapsody in Plain Yellow. What has been the reception?*

Marilyn Chin: *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* is an interesting book, just in the wide variety of poems. I've been playing with form, both closed and open, East and West, traditional and "postmodern." I was all over the intertextual map, working on a fusionist aesthetic. At the same time, my poems are still image-driven, honoring the classical Chinese love of concrete details. And the audience following me because they love vivid associative imagery still has something to chew on. And I continue to write about my tribe, my people. The poems are still grounded by identity and autobiography, with a strong political consciousness. A good poem should be a collaboration of beautiful technique and high moral purpose.

TT: *The autobiographical dynamic in your poems appeals to young readers and writers because it is a way for them to enter poetry—through autobiography—and at some point they leave that and move into other areas. Your work is attractive to young writers*

who are struggling with the intersection of the fictive self and the autobiographical self. As someone who has been doing that in three books over a 12- to 15-year period, it must be exciting for you to mentor them through that process.

MC: *Rhapsody* is foregrounded by three deaths: those of my mother and my grandmother, and then the long title poem is for my partner who died in an airplane accident in 2000. These are important events in my life. I'd be negligent if I were to avoid these major issues. Meanwhile, instead of being incapacitated by grief, I felt compelled to express my grief through formal structures. I tried to find the appropriate elegiac forms to work with the content. It was both reassuring and liberating, because I felt a need to "rein in" at least four years of continuous sorrow. Poetry gave me a safe place to grieve and contemplate. In the *Shih-ching*, there is a section devoted to funeral dirges and rites. The ancients understood that song and poetry have useful functions in documenting and ameliorating people through important passages in their lives. The elegies in *Rhapsody* are meant to move the imagination toward personal and universal healing.

Also, I've been playing with Eastern and Western forms and trying to merge them, trying to exact the Chinese quatrain in English and reinvigorate the ballad. I investigated the ballad from the Western point of view, from the Eastern point of view, from Scottish border ballads to Chaucer, to American railroad ballads and slave narratives, to the ballads in the *Shih-ching*, which, supposedly, were compiled by Confucius. The ballad is a historical form that tells the stories of the people.

TT: *Often it comes out of folk and working-class traditions.*

MC: Yes, and I wanted to show that autobiography in poetry can take on many disguises and permutations. When I write ballads, I am asserting that my personal story is commingled with the folk stories, the stories of the people. Furthermore, I wanted to write some blues ballads, because I wanted to pay homage to the African American tradition, which is "the true" American tradition, whereas the sonnet could be traced through English and Italian lineages. The Shattered Sonnets Series, which I wrote when I was at Yaddo, was my attempt at breaking up the form to find its essence. I had a folder of about 30 sonnets, and they were all problematic. I said to myself, "You know, these are terrible sonnets!" So I took my little cuticle scissors and cut them all up. Sometimes all you have to do is just play around and, magically, something interesting happens.

Kristin Garaas-Johnson: *Like a postmodern experiment, in the vein of William S. Burroughs.*

MC: That's right. There are some poems in the book that sounded like they're burlesquing romanticism and romantic fervor. The long one in the middle of the book, "Where We Live Now," has a high romantic fiction, but it's obviously burlesquing the tradition. Then the long poem in the end is a remake of the Chinese digressive form called the Fu. The title itself is a riff from Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, which makes my poem a "double appropriation." We know, of course, that Gershwin's symphony owes much to the African American tradition. It doesn't matter if the audience knows what I'm doing; I just want to have fun at the laboratory. I want my muse to remain rigorous. I don't want her to get too self-satisfied. I want each poem

to be as adventurous and rigorous as the last poem. And for *Rhapsody*, I accomplished this through formal play and song, cross-fertilizing Eastern and Western traditions. I was also working with the fragment. The Chinese fragment is very different from what postmodernists call “fragmentation.” The Chinese fragment can be a wholistic enterprise. Sometimes within one fragment there is a full-fledged conceit that references a similar conceit back to the Tang dynasty. Sometimes within one fragment there is a self-contained aphorism, or an epigram, some kind of sagacious instruction. The Chinese fragment can do a lot. These East-West puzzles are very interesting to me. My muse is spirited with innovation.

TT: *You’ve said that at readings and in conversations afterwards people asked you for the answer to the magic question: How do you do it? You said, “Learn what your rhythm is and discover how the muse works for you. What works for me may not work for you, so don’t listen to me when I tell you the way I do it. Listen to yourself. Discover your muse. It may take awhile, but once you do, it will work for you.”*

MC: That’s right. My muse has a voracious appetite. She is not static; she challenges me daily. When I was in my 20s, I thought that if I wrote in forms, I would be subscribing to fascist ideology. I thought all formalists were fascists. But as I’ve grown older, I find it’s fun to work in forms, and that formal experimentation has deepened my work in many ways. It’s important to have that intertextual argument with the poem. It’s totally appropriate for my muse to yearn to find a formal bridge between Eastern and Western aesthetics. My muse likes to play on the canvas and work on a variety of forms, styles, and conventions, so she leads me to write a poetry that has a strong East/West, integrative consciousness. Of course, this is the muse in my own image. I tell students they have to find their own muses, voices, but most of all, that the act of writing poetry must be meaningful. It’s not just a matter of stuffing one’s résumé. It’s a privilege to pick up a pen. Many freedom marchers before us have sacrificed their lives so that we can have this privilege—the opportunity to express. We should not take anything for granted. The muse is very personal and takes on many tasks. I’ve been working with my “Performance Muse” for many years to exact a seamless delivery between the poet/self and the poem. I see the poem as an extension of myself—a speech act. I am not putting on a persona when I’m out there reading.

KGJ: *You become the poem.*

MC: Yes. I’m the vessel for the poem, but it’s also my poem. It’s a very personal deliverance. Another person might deliver her poem in a quieter way. And some poets are more dramatic. I think Carolyn Forché is probably more dramatic than I am. I was able to develop a performance style that feels dynamic yet comfortable. But on the page it’s about loving your genre. You want to write a poem that nobody else can write, and you want your muse to be very ambitious and rigorous. At the same time, I’m an old-fashioned proletariat. I want to be understood by “the people” and accessible on a personal level.

I think, in part, this is a condition that comes from the heart in relationship to autobiography, to say to the audience—

especially a young audience—“This is how I felt then, and this is how I feel now. This is the story of my life, and I want to share it with you in this intimate fashion.” I think I’m a lyric-autobiographical poet who grounds her work in true human emotions, and that comes from lyric tradition, not only in Western tradition, but in the Chinese tradition of Tu Fu and Li Po. The poet shares a part of her life, her worldview, with her audience.

KGJ: *You’ve written about Jesus and Buddha, and other religious themes, which you have labeled as the highest stage of poetry. How have you shaped your poetry over time?*

MC: The Taiwanese poet Chen Chou-yu said that there are three stages in a poet’s life. In the first stage she writes about herself; in the second stage she writes about her society and her world; and in the third stage she writes about God. I’m not saying I’m enlightened enough to write about God yet, but God is always in the work. I was raised by strong Buddhists, and my sister is a born-again Christian. God is often an in-your-face argument in my home. It’s another one of those East/West, Christian vs. Buddhist binary oppositions, another contradiction to problematize one’s thinking. Although it’s not my time to really talk about God in this “grand philosophical fashion,” God is somehow never divorced from the social or the personal context in my work. It confounds me when young poets have the temerity to write about God before they learn how to crawl. They invoke the unseen, the “ultimate” abstraction, before they learn how to ground themselves in experience.

Basically, in mid-career I feel I am fearless, largely because I no longer need to prove anything to hegemonic culture. Despite my fancy-footed borrowings, I have full ownership of my poetry. I’ve set down my roots, I possess my territory, my land deed, if you will. I own my rights to both lineages, because I’ve put in my time, my love and deep contemplation. I am certain that I have more important things to say, that I have developed my craft, that I have gained the sophistication to take on anything the muse might send in my direction.

KGJ: *In your essay “Translating Self,” you say that poetry is your chance to talk back to the oppressors. And you say that as a Chinese American, as a minority poet, you’ve also thought of African American writers and others as your masters. When you come to the stage and you’re speaking out, what main message do you want to give to your audience?*

MC: That’s a loaded one! What’s the main message? I guess for now I want the reigning poetry mafia to disabuse themselves of the notion that “poetry written by the ‘other,’ the American ‘minority’ poet, should be considered ‘minor.’” The truth is that many of us are “major” in our expansiveness; we’re hip to a global consciousness, the global voice. We hold up “half of the sky,” as the Chinese put it. When all is said and done, the canon of the American poetry would be impoverished without Chin and Komunyakaa, without Harjo and Ai, Dove, Troupe, Clifton, Bersenbrugge, Knight, Walcott, et al. Moreover, the poetic genealogy is a long, global, historical continuum: I can connect my aesthetics as well as my political concerns to international poets like Sachs, Braitwaite, Alegria, Soyinka, Ai Qing, and Césaire. Ideally, we should be able to read poetry from second, third, fourth languages. I believe in participating and collaborating with that strong “world” music, that global sensibility.

As Mao Zedong once philosophized, “Let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred ideas contend.” We can’t define an “American” poetics based on one cohesive nationality per se. We need to reevaluate what constitutes “American” poetry as much as we need to reevaluate what it means to be an “American.” And in the current global context, cultural boundaries are increasingly conflicted by politics and economics as well as by the technological revolution. Expressing cultural experience through art fosters greater understanding, and poets can contribute in a very special way. Of course, poetry should always remain celebratory. We must never lose the subjects of beauty, pleasure, or great food!

KGJ: *Yeah, and the food! You keep bringing up the metaphor of food!*

MC: Right. Food is about celebration. The “salty squid” that I use in my imagery is a grotesque creature, but it also represents the sacrifices made by one generation on behalf of the next; it’s about self-denial and suffering in the world. I still have to write identity anthems so I can assert my existence. You’d think that in this day and age one would not need to do this, that in the new century, race would no longer be a fomenting issue. The president has reinforced the “us or them” binary by saying, “You’re either with us or against us.” Years of breaking down the divisions among civilizations, from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the addressing the Catholic/Protestant conflict in Ireland, seem all for naught in the binarist language: You’re either the good guy or the bad guy, the victim or the victimizer, the haves or the have-nots, black or white, white or brown, Christian or Muslim.

I still write identity poems and immigrant anthems. I still have to remind the world that cultural others are neither stereotypes nor invisible. We make up a range of beautiful and integral elements in the human mosaic of experience. I still have to assert my presence, to present the dissenting voice. The dominant culture still has the power to annihilate through silencing cultural difference.

KGJ: *You mentioned that you are writing so that you don’t forget your traditions as well.*

MC: So as to not forget the message, the subject of the immigrant experience—to remember always where I came from. I am very grounded and was very much shaped by the immigrant experience. That’s who I am. To be fair, I live a different life now. I teach at a university. The truth is, I have an iron rice bowl. I am of the first generation in my family to get an education. My family was of peasantry. My grandmother was illiterate and was denied an education. I will never forget where I/they came from. I keep close at hand the memory of refugee boats, exclusion acts, coyotes, and all who have sacrificed their lives so I could live in the promised land. I can’t turn my back on incoming immigrants in a time when civil rights have been overshadowed by the over-used threat of terrorism, which becomes the justification for civil rights violations and acceptable levels of a police state under the rubric of patriotism.

KGJ: *You have talked about reclaiming the haiku with the “Bad Girl Haikus,” transforming it from what it’s become and reclaiming it as your own.*

MC: Yes, I was paying homage to a great Japanese tradition. Simultaneously, I needed to offer a critique on how the haiku had changed in the hands of well-meaning high school teachers

through the years. I thought, “Look what’s become of the great form invented by Basho and Issa, the great Haiku poets.” They have turned it into a Hallmark greeting card. That’s part of my mission—to reclaim these forms for myself, to reinvent, and to merge East and West.

KGJ: *Since we’re talking about different aspects of Eastern culture within the West, what do you think of this fascination with elements of Asian culture like feng-shui in design and architecture and with the I-Ching? You can go into shops and find all those different kinds of Buddhas in different poses and little fetishes and things. It’s so romanticized.*

MC: I think it’s fine. I think it’s great. In my younger days, a lot of my friends became Buddhists, but it was a Buddhism I didn’t recognize. They’re into the Zen Buddhism. They became vegan-vegetarians, went to Zen retreats, and paid good money to real and false masters. There’s a whole consumer extravaganza that is fostered. This is not the Buddhism I grew up with. With my family, with my mother, Buddhism is a deep part of her character in the way she speaks and behaves in the world. Also, the statue of Buddha is in the alcove right next to the kitchen god, and it is mixed up with a giant head shot of an ancestor, etc. Our Buddhism is intermingled with folk religion, and I wouldn’t be surprised to find a crucifix in the alcove. The Chinese will accumulate all the talismans of luck and good fortune. Westerners are preoccupied with the Chan sect, or the Zen sect of Buddhism. They are attracted to this mystical otherness. They forget that Buddhism is born out of the need to detach oneself from intense physical and psychic suffering and deprivation.

I used to be very judgmental about all this, and sometimes American Zen folks can be very self-righteous and irritating. But hey, if they look stupid mumbling the wrong prayer, it’s not my business. I’ve stopped being so judgmental about it now. I don’t own all of Asian culture. It’s there to be appreciated by everybody.

TT: *Can you talk about your teaching of writing poetry?*

MC: I came out of the workshop tradition, a workshop brat, you might say. I went to Iowa and then to Stanford as a Stegner Fellow. By the time I started teaching at San Diego State, I had overdosed on workshops. The workshops I teach now are mostly directed. They’re often thematic. Once in a while, I’ll teach a comp-lit class on contemporary international poetry in whatever I can find that is in good translation. Later, I’ll teach a translation workshop. There are two reasons I do this: First, I was tired of the workshop process; second, I feel that students don’t read enough, and I expect them to read broadly. I have them read international writers, the ancients, the moderns, and I have them work from a second language. This is my way of enforcing good reading and writing habits. My workshops can seem like intellectual boot camps.

TT: *That’s another way of pushing boundaries. As you push boundaries with forms, you’re also pushing their reading and experiential boundaries. You’re embracing those boundaries and saying, “Let’s bring in an Australian writer, and how about some contemporary Chinese writers? And hey, here are some contemporary South American writers.”*

MC: I’m also talking about a contrarian sense. There’s a formalist in my program. He nails the students down and teaches

them iambic pentameter, which is very important. He's one of the few who can do that these days. I value his teaching very much. But then they come to my forms class, and I work on exotic forms. I say, "Let's try a ghazal, let's try a haibun, let's try a tanka, let's try things that you don't know about. Let's look at an 'image' from the Chinese point of view. This political poet writes in 'code.' How do we crack the 'code'? How do we invent our own 'code'? Is it necessary to write in code in an affluent, free society?"

KGJ: *So many young writers have such a misconception of form. They do get the iambic pentameter, and they get the sonnet or the sestina. They have a specific idea of what poetry should look like. Then if you give them alternate forms, they realize, "Oh it doesn't have to rhyme, and it doesn't have to be contrived."*

MC: That's right. As I say, poetry has given me a fascinating life, and my teaching is really a part of a wholistic experience. I am an international person, and I bring that global identity to the workshop. And when I teach my translation workshop, I bring my translation experience, my experience as a bilingual person in the world. I bring both my political consciousness and my aesthetic consciousness. I bring my global feminism and my postcolonialism. I consider myself a complex poet, and I have much to bring to the table. I imagine that there are handfuls of writers like myself teaching on the fringes of the universe. Creative writing programs still need to expand their field of vision and include more diversity in their faculty. If one were to do a survey on these programs, one would still find a monolithic stronghold. It still is, I'm afraid, a white male-dominated world. The aesthetics are also circumscribed. A good program should have poets interested in different ideas.

And in a Confucian way, I want my students to be good people, good members in the community, to help each other. I don't believe in these dark forces in the graduate students. You can tell when they first come into the program. They're in sunny southern California, and they're dark and brooding. They wear all black and come into the class and look like stale cigarettes. They leave the program, and sometimes they become bilingual because they have to live in the barrio. Sometimes they lose their rebelliousness, sometimes they find it. Sometimes they will have forged eternal friendships. Poetry is also about community. Of course some of them bitch and grumble, and I have to bring them back to their senses. Be positive. You have to work in the communities. You don't realize it until you leave that you are going to miss it. The M.F.A. experience is the time when you meet the people who will be your contemporaries. This is when you will forge those relationships and really open your eyes to your art and the possibility of everything. That first year after the M.F.A., I have students e-mailing me that they want to come back to the womb. And I say, "No darling. You can't go back to the womb. You have to go out there in the wind."

TT: *What are your feelings about workshops in general?*

MC: I see the workshop as a wonderful community in which you're all doing the same thing, right? You have a built-in readership. It's a community of ideas and sharing, and I think it's wonderful. Then from this community, you come out with your first book, perhaps. Perhaps you write only one good poem. Perhaps you find out you're not suited to be a poet after all. Perhaps you come out with lifelong friends and the love of reading. Writing is a lonely

experience. I often have terrible existential crises in the midst of writing a poem. I can't say enough about community.

There is the fear that because the workshop runs on consensus, one could end up with a tepid, overworked poem. What I find in my visits to programs nationally is that young poets tend to imitate what is "in" at the moment, what is trendy. When I'm reading for contests, I could delineate the various factions right away: Here's a Jorie Graham student, a Levine look-alike lyric narrative, a L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E student, a regional poet. It takes a long time to absorb our teachers and the poetry of our times and figure out how we can add to the moment. It requires the knowledge and experience and years of reading and writing and experimentation.

KGJ: *How is this kind of workshop different from poets who are out there talking to other poets, bouncing ideas off of each other? Other than the structure of being in one room and getting credit for it.*

MC: Robert Bly said that he faxes his poems to Galway Kinnell every day. I said, "You mean you workshop your poems together?" Galway and Bob—I think that's workshoping. It's about camaraderie and friendship, love. The truth is that most of us are disconnected from one another. Gertrude Stein's Paris is no longer a hangout, Shantipur is overgrown with weeds. The workshop is the new sanctuary.

TT: *One thing I talk with my students about is the opportunity to spend two years where the focus of their life is their writing. They may not have this leisure beyond the workshop. Other things from the world are going to intrude. They might have families or have to get jobs, and the expectations are going to be very different. Here they are for two to three years—eat it up! They are going to become much more than what's in that workshop, as writers and as human beings. They should indulge themselves, because they might not have the leisure to do this at another point in their lives.*

MC: Because life will take over. The attrition rate from poetry workshops is very high. I don't know how many from my class in Iowa continue to write and publish poetry, because life takes over. Why not indulge in poetry for a couple of years? No doubt you will become a better writer. Furthermore, you will become a lover of poetry. It's very necessary for the world of poetry. The poet-reader will keep the genre alive.

KGJ: *Any final words?*

MC: I am thankful for everything. I used to be a very cynical young thing. I am grateful for the gift of poetry. It has brought me into a world of possibilities, such a sweet fate for this immigrant child born out of an illiterate grandmother and oppressive feudalism. And I am thankful every day that I didn't become a lawyer, like my grandmother wanted me to be, and end up fat and corrupt! Those are my last words. ■

INTERVIEWERS: **Thom Tammaro** is professor of multidisciplinary studies and teaches in the English Department and the M.F.A. program at Minnesota State University Moorhead. He is the author of *Holding on for Dear Life* (Spoon River Poetry Press, 2004), a collection of poems, and coeditor of *Visiting Walt: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Walt Whitman* (2003) and *Visiting Emily: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Emily Dickinson* (2000), both published by the University of Iowa Press.

Kristin Garaas-Johnson completed her M.F.A. in

fiction at Minnesota State University Moorhead in May 2003, where she held a teaching assistantship for two years. She currently teaches English at Grandview High School in Greenwood Village, CO.

Tammaro and Garaas-Johnson's interview with Marvin Bell appeared in the January/February 2003 issue of *The American Poetry Review*.