SRPR Presents

For years now, poet Victoria Chang has been experimenting with various shapes and modes in order to understand the complexity of grief. In *OBIT,* she creates a new poetic form that replicates the shape of a newspaper obituary, and she fills that shape with various articulations of loss. In some poems, she mourns the loss of her parents; in others, the loss of concrete objects like teeth and dresses and chairs; and in others still, the loss of more abstract concepts like hindsight and hope and control and even poetic form. These losses are recursive, cumulative, and obsessive, and Chang never seems to be able to entirely contain them, no matter what shape she chooses for her articulations.

In this modified transcription of a recent *Poetry for Al*l podcast episode, Abram Van Engen and I closely read Victoria Chang's "My Mother—died unpeacefully." In this conversation, you'll see that we read the poem aloud, then carefully consider each word and phrase of the poem. As we do, we start to notice an almost Orphic desire for closeness with the dead and how that closeness can never be achieved. We hope when we return to the poem a second time, that readers and listeners can appreciate the restraint of Chang's tone, and how that restraint provides a powerful juxtaposition with the poem's heat. We hope you enjoy this conversation. We hope, too, that you'll get a copy of *OBIT* from the library or from your local bookstore so that you can enjoy this poem in its context; additionally, we hope you'll read *Dear Memory,* the book that follows this one, to see how Chang engages with found materials to create collages and epistolary articulations of grief. Also, we're delighted to report that Victoria Chang will be reading and discussing her work at Illinois Wesleyan University and Illinois State University on April 23, 2025. If you find yourself in Central Illinois at that time, we sincerely hope to see you at these events. Please follow *SRPR* on social media for more information.

—Joanne Diaz and Abram Van Engen

Victoria Chang
"My Mother—died unpeacefully"

OBIT
Victoria Chang
Copper Canyon Press, 2020
113 pages; paperback, $17.00

Abram Van Engen: Hello, I'm Abram Van Engen.

Joanne Diaz: And I'm Joanne Diaz.

AVE: And this is *Poetry for All*.

JD: And today, we're going to read a beautiful poem from Victoria Chang's book titled *OBIT.*

AVE: Joanne, would you be willing to get us started by reading the second poem in *OBIT?*

JD: Absolutely.

My Mother—died unpeacefully on August 3, 2015 in her room at Walnut Village Assisted Living in Anaheim, California of pulmonary fibrosis. The room was born on July 3, 2012. The Village wasn't really a village. No walnut trees. Just cut flowers. Days before, the hospice nurse silently slid the stethoscope on top of my mother's lung and waited for it to inflate. The way waiting becomes an injury. The way the nurse breathed in, closed his eyes, breathed out, and said *I'm sorry*. Did the blood rush to my face or to my fingertips? Did he reopen his eyes before or after he said *I'm sorry*? The way memory is the ringing after a gunshot. The way we try to remember the gunshot but can't. The way memory gets up after someone has died and starts walking.

AVE: This poem is amazing. Joanne, before we get into this poem, can you just say a word about who Victoria Chang is?

JD: Victoria Chang is an amazing poet, very prolific, the recipient of many grants and awards for her work. The poem that I just read comes from her book *OBIT*, but she has, in the time since she's written that book, published a beautiful nonfiction hybrid word/image collage book called *Dear Memory*. She also published a book called *The Trees Witness Everything*, and just this year, in 2024, her newest book of poems is titled *With My Back to the World*. In all of her work, she's very concerned with grief, with memory, with loss, and with trying to understand personal histories and how they relate to public histories. I just love her work.

AVE: You know, this is a poem about grief, it's a poem about dying, and it's in a book called *OBIT.*

JD: For the few of us that are left who still subscribe to print copies of newspapers, if you open the newspaper to the obituary section, you're going to see (not always, but often) a photograph of the person who's died and essential information about them: the date that they died, where they were living, where they're buried, and the loved ones of the person who's died. It's a fairly standard sort of template. That's interesting to me because it's a very official, public-facing document of a person's life, and what Victoria Chang has done is transform that into a poetic form. Many, not all, but the vast majority of poems in this collection appear as a narrow column of text that looks like any one of them could appear in a newspaper. But then, as you look at them more closely, you start to see that there's an interrogation of this form that's very powerful. There's a lot of repetition where Victoria Chang, throughout the collection, keeps returning to the death of her mother and to the illness and death of her father. They both died within a few years of each other. You get the impression from these poems that the poetic speaker is someone who is witnessing their slow demise, and the poems call attention to the pain of that. And, one last thing I'll say, I know I have a lot of thoughts about these…

AVE: Do you have a few thoughts about this book, Joanne? [laughs.]

JD: Yeah, I do! I think about this book of poems a lot. It's really a

stunner. And not only are the deaths of the mother and father being commemorated, but also the death of ideas. So, for example, there are numerous obituaries for her mother's teeth, for her mother's lungs, for civility, for the future, for America. There's all kinds of ways in which she is rethinking this inherited public template to articulate private griefs. It's really very powerful.

AVE: That helps me with a little bit of the form, the sense of what she's doing, because if you look at this on the page, one of the first questions somebody might have is "why is this a poem?" What it looks like on the page is a paragraph. There is no … you know, usually when you look at a poem there are line breaks, there are stanzas, there's things going on that say, "hey, this is a poem." When we look at this, it looks like a paragraph, but that's by design. That's in part to mirror the obituary in a newspaper. And then knowing that that's what it's doing, it's able to veer off in new directions. So, you expect a certain kind of thing, you expect an obituary, and then you get these lines like "the way memory is the ringing after a gunshot." We don't expect that line in an obituary, and so, where that begins is not where it ends. But it does in a certain sense play with that form because where it begins is where you might almost expect an obituary to begin. "My mother," and I'm going to skip a word here, "My mother died on August 3, 2015, in her room at Walnut Village assisted living in Anaheim, California, of pulmonary fibrosis." That's the first sentence; that's the first line of the poem. It's more than one line because it's this narrow column, but that's the first sentence. But there's one word missing: this word, "unpeacefully." And there we don't expect that kind of word in an obituary either, but it's the fourth word and she sticks it right in there: "My mother died unpeacefully." And then it goes on and gives you the basic facts of the situation.

Joanne, what do you see her doing from the very beginning of this *OBIT* poem?

JD: As I hear you talking, I'm reminded that ever since reading this book for the first time, when I look at an obituary page, I now look at it differently because of Victoria Chang's collection of poems. We've discussed this many times on this podcast, that poetry is the art of attention. It's all about paying attention and taking, perhaps, what

we take for granted and seeing it in a new way, and I think that's a major contribution of this collection. But to go to your specific question about the first sentence, "My mother died unpeacefully on August 3, 2015, in her room at Walnut Village assisted living in Anaheim, California, of pulmonary fibrosis." Just like you said, every word in that sentence almost feels like you could read it in a newspaper obituary, except for that word "unpeacefully." And I think what's so troubling about that word is you *want* it to read "peacefully"; you want to hear that someone has died peacefully, surrounded by family and friends, prepared for death. That is the ideal, isn't it? That's always the hope. But this is a mother who died unpeacefully. Strange word, though, because what does it mean to be "unpeaceful"?

AVE: Yeah, it's a striking word to begin an obituary. And then, the second sentence you would expect, when was this mother born? You go to the biography of the person, you go to the life that they lived. And instead of going to when this person was born, the second sentence says this: "The room was born on July 3rd, 2012." In other words, three years before she was moved into this home, Walnut Village Assisted Living. And so, suddenly, we're talking about space here; we're talking about the actual place and the next word kind of belies what's going on here. "The village," that is, Walnut Village Assisted Living, "wasn't really a village," and there were "no walnut trees," right? "Just cut flowers." And so she's bringing us into the actual space of the actual death and how we got here just three years before.

JD: She's also providing a series of corrections and clarifications. So we all know of different assisted living facilities, neighborhood subdivisions, and condominiums that often have these kinds of names. Walnut Village, it sounds like, perhaps has a connotation of community, perhaps something organic growing there. But it's not. The village is not really a village, there are no walnut trees. And that phrase is really interesting to me, "just cut flowers." If flowers are cut, they're in a vase. They're divorced from where they originated. They're perhaps brought in from some other location or context and there's something temporary about them, not enduring like a walnut tree.

AVE: And then the next sentence turns to the nurse, the hospice nurse. "Days before, the hospice nurse silently slid the stethoscope on top of

my mother's lung and waited for it to inflate." And then this line, "the way waiting becomes an injury." What do you see her doing as she turns? This is, by the way, if you're looking at it on the page, almost the dead middle of the poem, and suddenly it's going to start turning into fragments instead of sentences, and we're going to start turning into repetitions ("the way…", "the way…", "the way…"), and suddenly it feels like this poem is going to veer even more than it already has.

JD: I like what you're saying. That way in which she pulls away from full sentences and then moves toward these phrases: "the way waiting becomes an injury," "the way the nurse breathed in, closed his eyes, breathed out, and said, *I'm sorry*"; she's hung up on what's happening, mentally, and the repetition shows that. She's not even thinking about the facts of what just happened but the ways in which they unfolded. And I'm really interested in the nurse. He goes on, breathing in, closing his eyes, breathing out. This really calls attention to the physicality of the nurse, even as the mother's body is static, immovable. And finally, we're seeing the reaction of the nurse in this situation. There's something where the poetic speaker is trying to understand the fact of the mother's death through the nurse and the nurse's reaction to what's happening.

AVE: And as soon as he says that, the poem picks up with a series of questions. It is interesting how the mind starts to wonder. As soon as this happens, she's beginning to, first of all, try to reconstruct the moment and, second of all, try to remember the details as precisely as possible. "Did the blood rush to my face or to my fingertips?" "Did he reopen his eyes before or after he said I'm sorry?" I mean, that second question is so interesting because on one hand, what does it matter? And on the other hand, it feels like everything matters about whether he reopened his eyes before or after he said this. And so these questions that are really zeroing in on the moment of death and then back to this repetition, "the way memory is the ringing after a gunshot," these questions are almost like that ringing after the gunshot trying to get back to the moment itself but never quite able to grasp it.

JD: I like what you just said that everything matters. Every single little thing matters and this is not a tiny book. This book offers dozens of almost prismatic ways of looking at death and grief. And you know,

as I hear you talking, that quality of attention—there it is again. It may seem to an outsider like it doesn't matter whether or not the hospice nurse opened or closed his eyes before or after saying, "I'm sorry." I mean, who cares about such a tiny detail? But of course it matters. It's as if the poetic speaker wants to hang on to this very moment, this edge between life and death to kind of preserve every bit of it that she possibly can. Everything matters.

AVE: Can I ask, have you ever been there when someone has died?

JD: I have not. Have you?

AVE: I have not, but I have been to many funerals. And at many funerals that is such the right line for what happens. Memory gets up and starts walking. When you come to the funeral and they have died, memory gets up and starts walking. And that's why you have all these remembrances because they're all attempts to pay attention and to get back to that life before it ended; and precisely all the memories are what come to life after the person has died. And here she is, at the moment of death, and it starts to happen immediately: first she's trying to remember the moment of death itself. What exactly happened? How exactly did it happen?

JD: Wow. What you just said is really moving to me and now it sounds facile to suggest that she's personifying memory. That's not what she's doing. It's more complex than that. But it does feel like this is a poetic speaker who is working so hard to focus on every possible thing about this moment so it can be preserved, and memory just gets up and starts walking. And I can really visualize what you said about funeral services and memory just leaving, just going out the door.

AVE: But it feels like these are things we have to hold on to now, and so as it's walking around, you are trying to capture it and get it back. But it's also in a certain sense coming to life. I mean, you know, it's always striking to me the stories I hear about people that I never knew. When I go to a funeral, I learn about somebody I never knew before because speaker after speaker is saying *I remember this*, *I remember this*. Of course, I wasn't there. I don't remember those things. But they are all these stories that come to life and give me all these angles on a person that I never knew before, and so there is a kind of coming

to life of memory at the moment of death that is remarkable. This poetic line does an amazing job of getting us to realize or capturing in its own way.

JD: Well, elsewhere in this collection, there are so many different meditations on death, on memory, on grieving. But elsewhere in the collection is one poem titled "My Mother's Lungs," and to go to your point, there's a passage in that poem where Victoria Chang writes, "What if my mother never told me stories about the war or about her childhood? Does that mean none of it happened?" And then elsewhere, thinking about her last words, what dies with them. Also in that same poem that I was just reading from, this precipice between life and death, there's another passage that reads, "The obituary writers said the obituary is the moment when someone becomes history."

AVE: What the forum enables is a kind of room to breathe. Yes, we carve away. Yes, we keep only what is necessary. But these poems sort of build toward insights that can, in certain senses, stand alone. That she is coming to realizations as she goes, she's coming to recognitions as she goes, and she's keeping the space in there that built to that recognition. So in different poems she'll say something like "suffering changes shape and happens secretly" or "is language the broom or what is being swept?" These are moments where she's working through the poetry and coming to realizations, coming to insights, and then letting them stand, but not necessarily taking away all the structures that enabled her to get there.

JD: And this is where Victoria Chang's collection points to poetic practice in general. Yes, it's elegies, but it's not just about elegy. It's about writing toward discovery, writing toward knowledge.

AVE: And just to go back to the central sort of point of this episode, so much of that comes through in the form itself: This taking what is a standard, very ordinary form (the obituary in the newspaper) and using it to do something completely new.

JD: Yeah, that's great. With all that we've discussed, would you be willing to read the poem again?

AVE: Yes, of course. [Abram reads the poem again.]

JD: That was beautiful.

AVE: Well, for more Victoria Chang, you should check out her books. And for more about her, you can visit our website at poetryforallpod.com.

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JD: And thank you for listening.