



PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER STEMBER.

VICTORIA CHANG

Victoria Chang won the *Crab Orchard Review* Award Series in Poetry and the Association of Asian American Studies Book Award for her first book, *Circle* (Southern Illinois UP, 2005). The book was a finalist for the *ForeWord Magazine* Book of the Year Award and the PEN Center USA Literary Award. Other awards and fellowships include a Breadloaf Fellowship and Scholarship, Taylor Fellowship from Kenyon Writer's Workshop, Sewanee Fellowship, and *Ploughshares* Cohen Award for the Best Poem of the Year.

She recently published her second book of poems, *Salvinia Molesta*, as part of the *Virginia Quarterly Review* Poetry Series (U of Georgia P, 2008), and her work has appeared in *Best American Poetry 2005*. She is the editor of *Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation*, an anthology of contemporary Asian American poets (U of Illinois P, 2004).

Victoria Chang lives in Irvine, Calif., with her husband and daughters and works as a business researcher and writer for the business school at Stanford, where she received her M.B.A. She also received an M.F.A. from the Warren Wilson Program for Writers and an M.A. in Asian history from Harvard.

The Split Life, Poetry With Perspective

AN INTERVIEW WITH VICTORIA CHANG

Conducted by Robert Stewart

NEW LETTERS: You have an unusual story, because you have a master's of business administration degree from Stanford University. Most poets who go to Stanford University aspire to that Stegner Fellowship.

VICTORIA CHANG: Yes, that's right.

NL: After Stanford, you worked mostly as an investment banker; so what got you to drift in the direction of being a poet at all?

CHANG: I like that you used the word "drift," because it suggests free drifting toward something or away from something. I've always written poetry, but being the child of immigrants, there's also the pressure to have a job that's more secure than your parents' jobs, and I've always felt that pressure. I actually didn't write much in my 20s, however, because I was working hard in business fields, but

I did return to poetry. In college, I took poetry workshops, and even while I was in business school continued to write and think about it; though, you know, I never had the guts, I suppose, to go get an M.F.A. in poetry at a traditional program, like an Iowa or a Houston, but I eventually did get a low-residency M.F.A. at Warren Wilson College, North Carolina, which is a great program, and I was able to keep a business job at the same time.

NL: I read that your parents are happy with your being a poet as long as you still continue to earn—

CHANG: Absolutely.

NL: —earn a living.

CHANG: Right. My parents are from Taiwan, but my mother came originally from mainland China. It had been a shame in their eyes that I didn't become a doctor or a lawyer. So, I'm already kind of a disappointment in that way. But I found a balance for myself, and I feel really happy. I did a lot of those traditional business jobs before, but it's not my cup of tea. I now have enough time at least to continue writing poetry, so for me, it's about finding that right balance between economic means and the greater, pure art of poetry.

NL: What actually moved you to feel you had the guts to get that M.F.A.? At what point did you feel like it was the time to do that?

CHANG: When Edward Hirsch was at Houston, in the 1990s, I almost decided to go, but I just couldn't do it. I couldn't move there and leave my job and everything. So finally, in my 30s, I heard good things about the M.F.A. program at Warren Wilson; it has a traditional idea of mentorship, so

you get to work closely with the faculty—I mean, one on one—which is actually, I found, better for me. The faculty is stellar there. They offered me a full scholarship. So all those things combined. Also, being in my 30s, I said, I just have to go because I want to learn more about the craft of writing, and I want to be in that community of writers, now. I already had established myself in the business world, had made enough money to live a pretty good life and bought a house—all the things that an immigrant’s child is supposed to do—and I felt, this is my turn, now. I can do whatever I want.

NL: I want to ask you something somewhat topical, in the sense that you worked for an investment banking firm at one time. Right now as we speak, the country is going through a severe financial crisis, which I hope, by the time this interview appears, will all be behind us.

CHANG: Ha. Good luck.

NL: Nevertheless, I’m wondering if your life as a poet now, or your life in poetry, affects your response to all this, and if it gives you a different kind of perspective in the world, as opposed to where you might be if you were strictly in the business community.

CHANG: Being a poet and also having a business background gives me a different perspective, period, and that combination actually appears a lot in my work. I can move back and forth into the poetry community and then move into the business world, which makes me feel like I have more knowledge than I might otherwise.

NL: You do put a lot of business experience into your poetry. In some ways, it gives you a niche as a poet. The title poem of your second book, *Salvinia Molesta*, has this banker on

speakerphone in the middle of the poem, and there's the authenticity of somebody who actually has been there, looking at that world.

CHANG: If you think about it, there's Wallace Stevens and even Ted Kooser—although they both worked in the corporate world, they didn't always write directly about it. Ted Kooser will have poems where he's looking out the window of his office at the raindrops; for me, I like to go more into corporate life and deeper into it, versus kind of around it. I don't think there are any topics that can't be talked about in poetry, just like I think a poet can be anything she wants to be outside of poetry—she can have a day job. A poet can be an investment banker if she so chooses, and I think that idea of non-mutual exclusivity, where you can do lots of different things and still be an authentic poet, gives me less shame, I suppose, writing about business, and less fear that people are going to think that that's not poetry because you're not supposed to write about certain things. So, I enjoy it. It gives me an angle to look, a lens to look into human nature.

What I've learned, being in such different roles, is that poets are really no different from business people in many ways. They have the same life goals, but they have just focused on different areas. Poets can be just as competitive. They can be just as hard on themselves. They can be just as ethical or unethical, and that's kind of what I explore in this book *Salvinia Molesta*—that, ultimately, we're all paradoxical, and we're all the same, in many ways, in these different spheres, whether it's being Asian-American, or having different kinds of friends, or being in business. Traveling back and forth between poetry and business has made me realize that there are more connections among people than I previously thought.

NL: The experience of reading both of your books, *Circle*

and *Salvinia Molesta*, illustrates a sense of unity; one sees all sorts of things brought into the poems.

CHANG: The title poem “*Salvinia Molesta*” includes an epigraph: *salvinia molesta*, “Known as the world’s worst weed. It lives in water and doubles its numbers every two days, eventually becoming a continuous green mat over the water surface.” I should mention, I initially became attracted to this weed because—one of my friends said—it’s both kind of creepy and beautiful at the same time, which becomes the trope or the metaphor that kind of ties the whole book together.

I also mention Frank Quattrone, who was, a long time ago, an old boss of mine in investment banking. That is all part of the narrative there; I incorporated splices many different poems of mine that I felt like weren’t working. I collided them into one big poem. Part 2, says,

Name: Frank P. Quattrone.

Dubbed: *God’s banker*.

As if God too needed
a portfolio adjustment.

NL: Your strategy for putting that poem together is interesting, almost like working out of a notebook. It includes foliage, e-mails, bankers, and so on. Is that how you work in general?

CHANG: Yeah. I think a lot of poets have stacks and stacks of poems that they just hate. And I have no problems throwing poems away. I have so many poems that I hate. But sometimes I get attached to parts of them or images and words and ideas, and I like the idea of collaging things together, because it brings surprise for myself as a writer. That, *Oh!* This was a poem about blank. Or that was a poem that had a completely different title. If I put it into

that poem, it gains a whole different feeling and a whole different perspective.

NL: You have a series of poems called “Ars Poetica”: one is “Ars Poetica as Birdfeeder and Hummingbird,” for example. I like the image early in the poem:

. . . No
 hummingbirds, no
 humorous little body with a tent stake
 as a nose.

CHANG: Thank you. There’s also the “Ars Poetica as Corporation and Canary,” yes. I think I have three ars poeticas. I like the surprise of poetry; for me, poetry is about mystery and surprise, and the collision of different ideas and different things that might never otherwise come together. I think that is the function of poetry, to some extent—or not the *function* of poetry, but for me, the fun of poetry. It’s also probably telling of my own personality, a little bit A.D.D. and interested in just about everything, everyone, to the point where anybody I’m talking to might think that that’s the only thing I’m interested in, because I just get excited about everything, and I read voraciously every single magazine you could possibly see on the newsstand and beyond. I think that interest shows in my work.

NL: What we’ve been talking about, also, is the split life, with the poet and the corporate work, as in the poem from *Circle* called “Five Year Plan.”

CHANG: Being an immigrant’s kid, you have funny pressures on you to succeed, and the poem deals with that.

. . . A good Chinese American daughter washes
 windows and retains

curvatures. And when I'm finished, I revise my five-
year plan
to exclude windows-

washing, to include speaker of the house in two years,
in four,
maybe president.

NL: That poem is poignant and humorous at the same time. It makes me think a poem of yours in *New Letters* magazine, called "Before," which we published it in 2004, and is about a young woman getting ready for a date.

Somehow, you got that poem to move from shaving your legs to the phrase, "I wonder why death is worth talking about." I remember reading that in manuscript, and losing my breath a bit. The transitions happen so quickly and so smoothly, that move from one subject to the next. I wonder if this comes to you in the natural course of writing, or if you really think hard about how to do that.

CHANG: I think naturally that's how my brain works. It fires, and it moves quickly, and it looks for connections, and I think because I have such a life of disparate existence, in every way, there's even kind of a disparate quality between what happens in my mind and what I allow to come out for others to see. People always comment on that when they read these books. They're like, "You seem kind of normal," when they meet me, or, "You don't seem like you would be so dark," or something like that. They're like, "You seem kind of optimistic."

That poem moves from the time before you go on a date to the TV in the other room, that quick movement from the silliness of preparing for a date to death; and I think that's how I operate on a daily basis. That's how I think about things. Foolish things quickly turn to something that seems dark and brooding, and then back.

I was thinking yesterday that I must have changed about 50 diapers, and then I'll sit down and try to write a line or two, and then all of a sudden I move to an entirely different space, and then the kid's screaming upstairs, and I want to run upstairs. I think the reason why I can still write poetry now, with two young children, is because, in past years, I naturally would jump from poetry in the morning to an interview with the CEO of some major company by 9:00. I had to close my notebook, and then I get on the phone at 9:00.

NL: Some of your poems are funny, but in flashes. I wonder if you have a sense of trying to be humorous in poetry.

CHANG: I don't consciously try to do it, and I've never actually thought my poems were funny until I started reading them aloud, and people started laughing. But I noticed that I have a nervous habit of making jokes in general. I think people like Heather McHugh—and Billy Collins, to some extent—those poets do believe in humor. Heather McHugh strongly believes in humor in poetry. But for me, it just sort of happens, and I don't even think things are funny. But you know, they are. Like "Seven Changs" is about the fact that I have the most popular surname in the world, and that, within itself, is kind of goofy and funny.

NL: That's a really wonderful poem. I think many of us have that kind of experience on a smaller scale. Of course, Stewart is a common name, too, so I keep waiting for some poet by that name to come up and eclipse all of my particular ambitions.

CHANG: Or not even a poet—now that we have Google, right? How many of us have not Googled ourselves? You get to see who else has the exact same name as you. There's a violinist; there's a runner whom I mention in "Seven

Changs," who went to Stanford as an undergrad. It's weird to think that people have the exact name as you; and as time goes on, there's more and more and more people. It can be scary, too. The poem starts ruminating on this goofy, humorous concept, but I think it ends darkly, as a lot of my poems do—to think that you're really not that special, and there are really a lot of people out there like you, whether they have the same names as you or not.

NL: There's also the quality in that poem that at least comes through to me, of merging yourself into one great human being.

CHANG: Right, but you're still just a part of that. So there's the pessimism coming through.

NL: You did something else in that poem that I noticed in a lot of your poems, and that is this incredible verb choice, where you use the word "fist" as a verb—"Their fevered footsteps persist / fist me into midnights." I noticed that in several of your poems where you have stunning verb choices.

CHANG: What poet doesn't labor over every word that she chooses? That's the fun for me of writing. If I'm not surprised by my own language, then I just beat myself on the head with a stick until I literally can find the right word that no one's ever thought of before. I do that with almost every single word or line—just work at it. So, I have drafts a foot high of just one poem because it's not good enough; it's not interesting enough. *This has been done before. This has been said like this.* And I like using words in weird ways or in ways different from what people might think. So I do labor over that a lot, actually.

NL: Another poem in which you do that is the "Ars Poetica as Corporation and Canary." It uses transitions in that way

that we've been talking about, and also wonderful word choices and verb choices.

CHANG: That poem I wrote out of the frustration of not feeling that I was ever good enough, and I continuously feel that way about being a poet. You're just dying to be this brilliant poet, and it's just so hard.

NL: You found that verb in, "The building bunts / the birds." That's not a verb I've ever before heard used in that way, and yet, as soon as I read it, I could hear the little bunt. You know, it's funny, but not too good for the bird.

As we mentioned earlier, the canary, and the corporation, and the building, and everything come together in one poem. It seems to me that there's this sense, in every poem, of things coming together that aren't normally seen.

CHANG: No topic, no subject matter, no words are off limits in my mind at least, and that makes it more fun. Writing poetry is hard enough as it is. I already banged myself against the wall, trying to write poems, and limiting myself would make it even harder.

NL: I want to ask you, too, about what could be called historical poems. I happened to come across an article recently by poet Major Jackson about the growth of historical poems in contemporary poetry. He mentions poets like Rita Dove and Natasha Trethewey, but you have historical poems in both books. I'm wondering what your impulse is behind those poems, and maybe what it is that caused you to write them, or what you're trying to achieve with them.

CHANG: My undergraduate degree is in East Asian studies, and then I have a master's from Harvard in Asian history. So, as you can see, all the elements of my life go into the poetry. There are also many stories that I've heard from

my parents, only snippets, though—it's not like my parents sat down and said, "OK, I'm going to tell you a story about your great uncle." What my parents tell me comes up in the weirdest times in conversation. I'm like, "Wait! Wait!" But I have to be careful, because it's sensitive to them, so that personal history is fragmented and combined with history from an academic perspective. It all comes together in that first section of *Salvinia Molesta*, and I try to draw connections between my personal history, the history I learned in school, and then my reaction to all of that.

NL: What is so sensitive for your parents in those stories?

CHANG: My father was born in Taiwan, as we mentioned. My mom, you know, went over to Taiwan with her family, six or seven kids, early, and followed the KMT government, which was losing and was heading to Taiwan. There's some scary stories there, because she was only 7. They left the mainland because my grandmother, my mother's mother, was educated, which is unusual, period, for a woman at that time. She left a sister who said, "Oh, no, no. The Communist government's good. We should stay here." That one point split the family in two, and what a difference in their lifestyles as a result! My mom's equivalent of people like her are still in mainland China, and they did not have an easy life. I really can't even understand how rough it was. I grew up here and was raised here, and had a relatively easy childhood compared to my equivalents over there. It's sad, but I'm fortunate, so I feel some interest and obligation to write about it, I suppose, or to at least provide my perspectives.

NL: Your poem "February 28, 1947," starts with an epigraph: "Thousands of Taiwanese protested the killing of an old street soldier by a Kuomintang soldier. Protesters were allegedly killed by troops from China." The last phrase in

the poem is, “as if one body could be beaten in isolation.” There seems to be a sense in many of your poems, in which individuals become emblematic of a larger view, or they become part of a community of people who are all experiencing in some ways the same thing, like the many Changs, I suppose. I find it thematically uplifting to read that sensibility about things. I’m wondering if it’s something that you grew up with or that you developed through poetry?

CHANG: I like to think that we all experience good things and bad things together. It’s what we talked about earlier—that poets and businesspeople aren’t really that different. I think about people *en masse* as much as I can, and it’s because I tend to be a bigger-picture person. I like to be that bird hovering at the macro level versus getting caught up in the details, which is weird because poetry is about the details, right, but they’re just the building blocks to the greater themes, the higher level.

NL: I read a number of previous interviews that you had done, and it seems to me that they asked you about your life and your background and your family, but almost never actually asked you about the poems themselves. I’m wondering about your thoughts on the poetry world itself. I read somewhere that you always felt yourself outside of the mainstream of poetry. How do you feel about that now that you probably are being drawn into the actual poetry world.

CHANG: I don’t work in academia; no desire to. Don’t like the idea of having to go for tenure and those types of things. I like just writing poetry and having nobody know that I do it, because then that allows me to be kind of pure, I guess; I like being outside of that poetry world, so I don’t feel that I have to schmooze with the right person, or sleep with the right person, or anything like that, which happens

in the poetry world. I'm just not that kind of person. I like it that way because then, if people like my work, they like it because they like it, not because I did anything for them or because they know me. I think of poetry as my special thing that I get to do on my own. I don't want to taint it. I don't care if I win any prizes. I'll work really hard, but if nothing ever comes of it, it doesn't matter. I want to keep trying to have that mentality as much as possible.