From Cell to Organism: 
An Interview with Karen An-hwei Lee

Poet Karen An-Hwei Lee visited Chapman University’s campus on October 6, 2009. During her visit, Lee gave a poetry reading and a talk entitled "Dreams and Visions: Micropoetry During an Economic Crisis."

Natalie d’Auvergne: Your works consist of open-cycle, almost repetitious poems that reference myriad natural elements (water, seas, oceans, gems, minerals, trees, birds, fruits, salt, microscopic life, etc.). These references create a circuitous collage of similar, yet seldom exactly alike, images that leave the reader feeling embraced by nature. Is this intimacy with nature that you create an attempt to give your readers the experience of the embrace of God? Or something else they can feel without necessarily understanding fully?

Karen An-Hwei Lee: Imparting the pleasures of thingness and things in language, the objects reveal their intrinsic natures, living or inanimate, in whimsical juxtapositions. I think of tones in a piano composition by Ravel or Satie: auditory colors or emotions in a stream of impressions, even a sequence of liminalities. Essayist Junichuro Tanizaki’s In Praise of Shadows explores Japanese aesthetics from the nuanced perspectives of shadowed objects. I appreciate everyday details wherein God is sensed as awe: in a fiddlehead fern or sprig of wild clover, the transient yet sublime.

d’Auvergne: You mention Japanese aesthetics as influential, and your poems have been included in anthologies of Asian-American literature. How does your cultural background inform your work, if at all?
Lee: The first poem I presented in the reading at Chapman University, "Petty Skills Like the Carving of Insects," is more commonly what audiences might identify with an American ethnic poet, in my case, Chinese American. My poem is dedicated to the Chinese immigrants detained on Angel Island at the turn of the century. It refers to their calligraphy painted by brush and hand-carved into cell walls. "Petty Skills Like the Carving of Insects" is specifically historical with regard to Chinese immigration, and it raises social justice concerns about the detainment.

All my work, to some degree, is related to my cultural heritage, although not all in explicitly traditional ways. The innovative language partly arises from the margins of difference and otherness in my poems. I hope it moves to the default center of the texts, weaving multi-layered hybridizations, displacements, and migrations.

d’Auvergne: You have fun demonstrating your technical skill by methodically playing with language and structure, you use mathematical equations and make precise scientific statements, yet your work is abstract and experimental. Do you ever worry about alienating readers? Do you consider your readers when you write?

Lee: The reader’s listening presence inhabits the space of my poems. You, the reader, are someone I know, even if you are a stranger. Writing is a relationship on many levels: writer and reader, words and the writer, the reader and the words, the cultural modes of a text, interpretations deriving from a matrix of codes, and so forth. To answer the question simply, I always write with the reader in mind: sharing a world with the reader, saying, see what we found today, remember when we visited this place together, and you said, what is the name of this new thing? A persimmon leaf, a silk purse turned inside out, a single-string instrument from overseas.
Perhaps this is true: I am referring to an ideal reader.

So, what sort of reading is required of this reader? Poetry, by nature, is characterized by poetic compressions whose elliptical pauses and oblique phrases could be less transparent than, say, a flea paper. A flea ad, like a poem, also exhibits a certain degree of codification and (even poetic) compression, but its function is strictly denotative—a failure if too obscure. As Emily Dickinson puts it, "Tell the truth – but tell it slant." Not in a flea ad, but rather, in poetic language, a delight.

My intent is rarely to alienate. A kernel of truth or eccentric turn of phrase might unsettle assumptions or raise awareness, even in the shared experience of language itself as a form of knowing. Or poetry may inspire us to look at hard realities—what Maya Angelou refers to as "a brave and startling truth." Even if poetry can be startling, difficult, or linguistically intricate, it is a relationship. I seek to connect through language, even in linguistic play, with readers.

How, then, does a reader navigate a seemingly difficult poem? A case in point: I encourage my students not to trip up on every single word in a lovely Dickinson poem or luminous Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge sequence, but rather, on a first reading, to enjoy the poems as wave-particles—the particles as words, musical experience as the wave—moments of light and being, to adapt a Woolfian phrase. Make lists of the interesting words in a poem and ask, why these choices? What are their functions in the poem? What appear to be the poem’s concepts? If this poem were a constellation of words, which ones would you make the sun, the earth, the moon, other planets? Which words are orbiting the other ones, or vice versa? What does your arrangement reveal about your interpretation of the poem? Or does the poem resist interpretation? What are the politics and poetics of representation?
The poet-novelist Rigoberto González asked me a similar question in his "Small Press Spotlight," to which I replied: "I answer this question with one raised by a poet. Anne Carson muses, ‘What makes a poet, accident or attention?’ Both experimentation and linguistic attention can make poetry challenging. Indeed, poetic compression, complexity, and poetry’s elliptical qualities—accidents or surprises while paying exquisite attention to language itself—may render poetry and experimental prose difficult, but to paraphrase Toni Morrison, that is what reading is."

**d’Auvergne:** The image of the blind woman appears in your chapbook and both of your full-length collections. Why is she a recurring image for you? Is she an archetype? Is she based on certain aspects of yourself, or women you know? Is it possible that she keeps appearing because you’ve not quite figured her out yet, or because she has yet to reach a state of enlightenment?

**Karen Lee:** The blind woman prays in the long silences—at times, literal blindness, other times, figurative shadows—between miracles. There is a faculty of sight granted as a form of grace, to live by light while in darkness. Is this woman, who wishes to remain anonymous, all of these evolving mysteries? Is she a woman or women, the ideal reader or readers, women waiting for their bodies to heal, or women who live by the unseen substance of faith?

She desires to exchange beauty for ashes. In the Old Testament, through the prophet Isaiah, the Spirit of God describes the coming Messiah who will bestow "a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair." The blind woman embraces this scriptural promise.

**d’Auvergne:** In *In Medias Res* you give beautiful definitions of household items. Why this attention to the domestic, to the ordinary? Is it in some way linked to ritual or religion?
What does this say about how the individual comes to understand God, how God understands the individual, or how the individual understands him- or herself? Or, to return to the blind woman, is this attentiveness simply a result of the blind woman’s need to define the everyday things she cannot see?

Lee: The quotations and snippets are intended to represent excerpts from the blind woman’s library: books she collected before her vision was impaired by a rare and debilitating eye condition. To read her beloved books, she must use a large magnifying glass or listen to the books read aloud. Sometimes she reads only a few lines of prose before she sets down the lens to rest her eyes, hence the fragments.

The world is also a text, one that radiates from its surfaces. She reads her home through the familiar objects she touches. People who experience mental or physical changes in their ability to navigate the world may experience the divine grace of being empowered in unique ways once taken for granted. It is good to have a loved one nearby to assist, but if a woman prizes autonomy over dependency, it can be difficult to ask for assistance, and loved ones are sometimes afar—or else one is at the mercy of strangers.

The woman resists the label of blindness because she actually perceives a lot of things intuitively, spiritually, and through other senses. But all are new ways of seeing the world, requiring time and patience to learn. Embodying vision in diverse senses, she exists in stark tension to her name, which is no name at all, but rather, a mode of anonymity which, perhaps, gives her an archetypal air.

d’Auvergne: In Ardor, dreams, letters, and prayers are structurally announced in the left margin of the text. However, I noted at your reading here that you did not read those designations out loud as a part of the poems. Are they there only for a structural purpose? Do you hear the voices
of each of the three forms of communication as definitively distinct, or do the headings make some other distinction? What do those headings imply about the way we communicate? Is it possible to group these poems under their various headings and have each of these three smaller collections tell its own story? In other words, do the prayers, for instance, have some sort of through-line?

Lee: The headings provide visual structure to the poems. The dreams are things to come or things in the past; the prayers are desires, supplications, other utterances; the letters are earthly expressions to people, real and imagined. Assembled categorically, the fragments might form a mosaic or kaleidoscope rather than a triadic cycle of stories with a beginning, middle, and end. The novelist Meredith Steinbach once said to me—about lyrical prose fragments by a favorite Caribbean novelist—"If you follow the ants, you’ll follow the mother’s sorrow." Fragments in my book may echo, stylistically, this sense of "following the ants."

d’Auvergne: The elements of your collections and the way you discuss aspects of your poems implies a thoughtful process. Can you describe your writing process and writing background?

Lee: I keep my writing process simple. It’s a little like prayer with a bit of salt. You keep salt in a vessel and sprinkle it here and there for seasoned preservation. That’s the nature of discipline. You pray unceasingly, as the apostle Paul says—or aim to do so—and this is the nature of inspiration with discipline. Process requires a balanced measure of creativity and practical economy. Our lives generate enough bizarre complexity on their own. Austerity is a blessing, continuity is a precious refuge, and free time is rare.

A poet acquires fruitful writing habits, but a writing life is not static. I’ve written in empty classrooms, while conversing
volubly in writing circles, at artists’ colonies in fields, under trees after rain, in the same chair daily or never in the same place, on scraps of paper whenever inspiration strikes, in the kitchen among red onion peels, at the dining room table, lying on the floor with paper. One habit that’s stayed with me is writing longhand first, and for as long as possible, before typing a draft. I love to write by hand.

There are also seasons for trying new processes. I’ve tried writing with my left hand (I am right-handed), making contour sketches with words, and reading in a different language (other than English) before writing.

Everything is written longhand first in a notebook. Nowadays, I can’t afford the time I used to have, so I make do with simplicity: notebook, ink pens, a level surface. My time is fragmented; solitude—half an hour to gaze at a single line, playing it this way, breaking it that way—is a treasure. There was a time, up to about a few years ago, when I would sit at the desk every single day and write at least a paragraph of prose. I produced a lot of raw material I haven’t used, and it’s all there waiting in a box, if I ever wish to return to it.

Perhaps more valuable than the material I generated over those years, though, I gained discipline. Since other projects require a lot of my attention all hours of the day, poetic economy and insight are of the essence. Discipline not only saves hours spent shilly-shallying at the zero (which is a joy, if there’s time) but also includes perceptive discipline—to see a worthwhile inspiration or idea, put it down, and refine it.

Writers discover when and where to write—how often, how long, with whom or without. And how will one afford to write? Do you desire to teach? Do you wish to work with your hands? What labor will enrich rather than subdue your creative senses? If you have a family, what role will your
loved ones play? Some writers pound out their novels on typewriters in the garage while the dogs are barking; other writers need rooms of their own.

And a reliable salary, of course, always helps.

d’Auvergne: As a graduate student, I participate in workshops, but, of course, writing is also an individual act. What is the role of isolation and community in your writing process?

Lee: Ever since moving to this coast—where the sky is so immense, a bright margin, a line break—I prefer to write alone and circulate the work to virtually no one while composing. I withhold sending pieces of the work to journals until the whole book is finished. After composing, I may read aloud parts of the work to myself or to a reader.

In terms of writing communities, however, I am never isolated. Whether at artists’ colonies, at the university, or among people of shared faith and cultural heritage, a sense of community has been important to me. Since I teach, I’m often in workshop settings where I take on a facilitator’s role. Workshops provide a structured community of accountability for writers. Learning to critique well is a valuable skill in many settings. A writer applies knowledge of forms, vision-making, and constructive criticism to improve an idea and its execution. Workshops are also fertile ground for discovering one’s lifelong writing associates—an instructor, a sister, a friend, or a writing circle.

d’Auvergne: Do you first have an idea for a book and then write poems that fit? Or do you accumulate poems and then notice, perhaps upon revision, an emerging theme and proceed to develop a book from there?

Lee: So how do the books emerge? In hindsight, when I turn the pages of the large notebook, inner lines surface.
When I look back at what is written, I see patterns and structures—shifting architectures. Process is open to change; how I write depends on what the writing project desires. Shapes loan their structures to the forming work, like the sequential cardioids in *Ardor*. Maybe there’s a pattern to follow in the weave, a woman who’s cutting a bolt of cloth, the warp and weft in the core of a book. I work holistically and atomistically at the same time. Eddies, tide pools, and currents in the sea are other visual metaphors. When words come alive in a poem, it is a *cell*; sometimes, the cells form a large organism, a collection.

One example of such a cell, which isn’t part of a book yet, is the poem "In Praise of Amarillo," which I wrote after I learned the Spanish word for yellow. It is an eddy of words alone in a sea whose name—and new shores—I don’t know yet. One day, I might collect all the loose cells or eddies into a single book.

Here’s an excerpt of this new cell:

**IN PRAISE OF AMARILLO**

... yellow in a water orchid at the live museum exhibit, dwarf orchids, moss orchids on driftwood or bark suspended in air with roots trailing, lily rust pollen on my sink bleeding red sienna to ochre on my elbow, a grieving prayer warrior who says, I’ll eat only one ripe plátano a day until my child returns, healing in the word, linalool, a soothing element in aromatic flowers... *la silla* for chair instead of staircase, our shore-bird egrets walking on stilts when we not only walked but ran, so young, we were all light...

**d’Auvergne:** Do you have any advice for aspiring writers developing their own writing process, perhaps a process that can sustain them through a book-length project?
Lee: Things to consider: Learn to cultivate honesty with your writing. Does the writing do what it needs to accomplish? Is it finished? Where are the weaknesses? How do you know? Learn to be your own critic; it’s guaranteed that, as long as you write, you’ll be the one who’s always in your lifelong circle of insightful readers—those who offer you a chisel with love.

Discern what works for your process. Not every writer is the same, and no process is perfect. This is life itself: Cultivate empathy and listen. Be open to change. Build bridges. Be trustworthy, nurture others, and earn your own merit as a writer who is a reliable critic. Take your instruction from people who make wise choices and share the truth in love.

If you try to please everybody, you’ll be pulled apart in a hundred different directions. Listen to the inner voice that spurs us on, sets us free, and inspires new generations of poets.