

[Header] And so, what is poetry?

[Subheader] Poet Marylyn Tan talks revolution, embodied trauma, and smiauly bits.

[Lede] Poetry, huh? Well, there is perhaps no other medium we can offer as a better remedy for our collective tech addiction – even museums are so goddamn Instagrammable these days. It's nice to be reminded of the simple, profound magic of words on a page, without thinking about the inevitable movie/Netflix adaptation to follow. But – you ask us – what is poetry and how to enjoy, ah? We sat down and asked poetess Marylyn Tan, whose own debut collection *Gaze Back* is by turns accessible and impenetrable; vulgar and abstruse; wise and streetwise; intellectual and also keenly felt.

JUNK: So, what made you want to write poetry?

Marylyn: I feel like I've always written poetry... When I was young my father would give me these assignments during the June holidays, and he would say things like, "Oh, why don't you write one poem a day..."

J: Was your father like a professor or teacher or something...?

M: No he was an accountant!

K: Okay, very interesting!

M: Very atypical, I guess... I don't know, I always felt poetry was like a free for all, you know? Like it was easy to write. It comes naturally to children, because you start off with nursery rhymes. I teach at a tuition centre, and the younger kids take really well to poetry... So I always found it more accessible than prose, for some reason.

J: What to you *is* poetry?

M: I haven't been asked that question for a long time... [laughs] What is poetry? I think that poetry is a feeling, a feeling that you get upon reading something that can't really be translated into prose or into simple English.

J: I guess the other thing is that some people just feel like, if I just put a bunch of line breaks in a sentence, does that make it poetry?

M: I mean, no, there's definitely bad poetry. There's the feeling of reading something terrible and it's like "Ehhhh... mmm..." You know, it's like when you've never seen a horse before, and you kind of try to draw it off someone else's description, and it comes out looking like this mangled mutated thing... I think that would be very different from like actually having seen a horse and then you kind of deconstruct the horse and put it back together in like a really fucked up way...

I think that we come back to the feeling of... "Holy shit, I've never thought about it that way or I've never seen it in that light and it's so honest and so brutal and so clear." I think it's very

hard to imitate. But ultimately it's still very subjective, like somebody might feel that something Lang Leav wrote was the best thing they've ever read in their lives... [shrugs]

J: And what to you is the value of reading poetry? Like why would I spend my time reading poetry vs watching a Netflix show?

M: For me, it's about the pleasure of ideas and the sensory experience of reading somebody else's words. I guess the kind of poetry that I have enjoyed has always changed me in a way? Like that sounds super faux-profound but it's always framed the world differently, in a way I'd not seen before. And it's put together certain connections that once you see you can't really unsee... That's what poetry is like... It's like humour; it's like stand up... You see the world differently.

J: You put things like nasi kang kang and "smiauly" vaginas into your poetry. But if poetry is supposedly this high-brow art form, how can these low-brow, vulgar or even obscene things be present in your work?

M: Two things... I think that poetry has the range to be used not just as... I don't know... some kind of high-brow ideal of what is intellectual and what's not – but it's also been used as a tool of activism, of revolution. So I guess coming from that tradition, my poetry seeks to be political in very consciously bringing in something that is to do with the feminine grotesque.

I believe that as a woman poet especially, you are always struggling against the aesthetics of female-written poetry, or even the idea of what it means to be feminine. So it's a very pointed decision to bring that ugliness out into the light because people need to know that it's always... your period doesn't smell like flowers. I don't like thinking of myself as purely this person who is academic or purely this person who enjoys watching porn on the weekends... It's always a mix. And I always love juxtaposing the profane, the mundane, and the sublime, all those things mixed together. I think that your point comes across more clearly better that way, when there's that shocking contrast.

J: Okay, yeah. Another thing that's in your work a lot is bodies – can you talk a bit about why you're so interested in presenting bodies in that particular way?

M: I guess I feel that everything the body experiences... everything we go through is imprinted on our bodies. In that sense we're embodied trauma, embodied experiences. And the fact is, our bodies are still policed... We're all kind of sanctioned in that way so I thought it was important to talk about being something so ephemeral as, like, your flesh husk...

You're just worm food... and people get very upset when I tell them that – you're just worm food – one day you're gonna be a corpse! And after that you're gonna be ashes, if you're lucky. So why is it so important right now that we see our bodies as extensions of ourselves? The way we perceive the world, the way we engage with the world, it all comes back to the body... so yeah, there's a lot to talk about.

J: Do you feel like your audience is female?

M: I mean, I'm sure there's something in it for everybody and I have mixed reactions from people... But it's interesting that a lot of the women who read the book are like "Yah lah this is what I feel"...

I envisioned it for an audience like myself which is not to say exactly like myself like queer Singaporean Chinese, but definitely in the sense that they kind of know what the female experience is like. Or have experienced some kind of sexual pathology or weirdness from living on the marginalities – of sexuality, or gender, or especially people with marginalised bodies.

For people who've had a lot of hate for their bodies, I guess I wanted to kind of rescue that and turn that ugliness into something that was bearing witness to that. I wanted to kind of say, "I see you. I see that we have taught you to hate your body and I'm sorry."

J: How does queerness factor into your work?

M: My queerness is something I hold very dearly to my identity so, yeah, I don't think I can extricate my artistic self from my queer self. Because so much of my art has been informed by what I have to say about queerness and the queer community and queer bodies. I don't think there's any way I can envision my audience as not being some form of queer. I've always regarded them as my people and I write for them because when are we going to read the kind of things we want to read if we don't write for each other? I kind of see that as the whole reason why I keep writing is also because I'm not seeing the kind of writing that I want to read as a queer person.