

“Remember, the lemons speak”

Obit: Poet Victoria Chang’s meditation on loss

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As of this writing, 375,000 Americans have died of the novel coronavirus. This toll is equivalent to the loss of the entire city of Aurora, Colorado. Nearly 2 million people worldwide, a total greater than the population of Phoenix, Arizona, have died of the virus. Death on such a scale is hard to comprehend. The loss of even one friend or family member can be difficult to absorb.

This ongoing catastrophe forms the context in which *Obit* (2020), the latest collection by poet Victoria Chang, was published. Chang wrote most of the poems in this volume in response to her mother’s death from pulmonary fibrosis. Other poems describe Chang’s efforts to come to terms with the aftermath of her father’s stroke, which destroyed his frontal lobe and left him unable to communicate coherently.

The general context has a certain significance. *Obit* was published in early April, and the verses were likely written before the pandemic erupted. One cannot possibly expect the writer, in the immediate sense, to have anticipated such a development. However, we live in a convulsive epoch in which, even before the pandemic, social tragedy had struck tens of millions. The themes of collective mourning, outrage or injustice that poets responding to widespread devastation are called on to take up are absent from Chang’s poems.

Of course, intimate lyrics always have an absolute right to exist and, in fact, fulfill an irreplaceable human need. Nonetheless, experience teaches that to prove affecting and enduring, even the most personal lines must be alive *at some level* with the concrete “here and now,” with a feeling for the world as it is more broadly. Because the reader who absorbs the creation lives under definite circumstances, with a psychology resulting from those circumstances, and, consciously or not, will

need his or her conditions, even treated on the smallest scale, to be weighed up. This is a limitation here.

Chang does not bring in much of social actuality while nonetheless training a keen, self-critical eye on her own emotions. She frankly admits, for example, her reluctance to visit her father and her failure to feel anything when a doctor discusses the seriousness of her mother’s condition. Chang does not attempt to justify herself, nor does she indulge in self-pity. By presenting her individual, yet understandably human, reactions honestly, she indirectly reassures others in mourning that they are not alone and that their feelings are not shameful. This is a valuable service.

Chang was born in Detroit to Taiwanese immigrants. She grew up in suburban West Bloomfield, Michigan, and earned a bachelor’s degree from the University of Michigan. After completing an MBA at Stanford, Chang worked at Morgan Stanley and Booz Allen & Hamilton. She now lives in Los Angeles and teaches at Antioch University. Chang’s previous volumes of poetry include *Barbie Chang* (2017) and *The Boss* (2013). She is also known for her picture book for children *Is Mommy* (2015) and a novel in verse for children in the middle grades, *LOVE, LOVE* (2020). Chang was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2017.

Most of the poems in this collection are written in the form of newspaper obituaries and printed in columns. Four of the poems memorialize Chang herself. The subjects of many of the poems, however, are not people but things, either tangible (e.g., “My Father’s Frontal Lobe,” “My Mother’s Lungs,” “The Blue Dress”) or intangible (“Appetite,” “Friendships,” “Optimism”). These details indicate the mixture of gentle humor and sorrow in Chang’s approach.

The poems often begin with a specific incident before developing into general observations, often informed by hindsight, on Chang's relationships with her family or on the nature of grief. Her diction is ostensibly neutral and declarative. Chang skillfully uses familiar, concrete images to convey subtle and specific shades of emotion and to speak about things that otherwise might be difficult to put into words. At times, Chang asks speculative questions (for example, about the fall of a raindrop or about the relationship between a fruit and its nearby leaves) as an indirect way of seeking meaning in experience.

"Ambition," a remarkable poem about her father, illustrates Chang's style and shows how moving and effective it can be. After his stroke and his wife's death, Chang's father became so restless that he was given an ankle bracelet to restrain him and keep him safe. But the bracelet failed to stop him from trying to walk to Chang's house. "They found my father in the middle of the road last month, still like a bulbless lamp, unable to recall its function, confused like the moon. At the zoo, a great bald eagle sits in a small cage because of a missing wing. Its remaining wing is grief."

Another poem describes a mishap that occurs when Chang takes her father shopping for clothes. "I heard him quarreling with the pants. He came out of the dressing room with his pants on backwards. Two pockets facing forward, like my mother's eyes mocking me, as if to say, *I told you so.*" The bittersweet humor soon gives way to grief. "I entered the men's dressing room and picked up all the pants on the floor because one of them had to be my missing father."

Many of the poems suggest how difficult Chang's relationship with her mother was. "*How much money will you get* was my mother's response to everything," Chang states in "Approval." "A photo shows my mother holding my hand. I was nine. I never touched her hand again. Until the day before she died." Chang trims her mother's nails while the latter is in a morphine-induced sleep. "Her nails weren't small moons or golden doors to somewhere, but ten last words I was cutting off."

In *Obit*, what is lost seems just beyond reach, and this elusiveness makes the poems especially poignant. "His mind is always out of earshot," Chang says of her father. Since his stroke, he has had only second and third thoughts and is "unable to locate the first most

important thought." Chang's memories of her mother become "like a night animal racing across the roof. I know it is an animal, but I will never be able to see it or know when it will come again."

Chang often confronts the inadequacy of language and representations. "Darkness is not the absorption of color but the absorption of language," she observes. "A sketch of a person isn't the person. Somewhere, in the morning, my mother had become the sketch."

Every so often, a pair of *tanka* is interspersed among the obituary-poems. A *tanka* is a five-line Japanese verse form in which each line has a fixed number of syllables. Although a few of these poems seem like sketches, others are affecting crystallizations of thought or feeling. The following *tanka* should be quoted in full:

My children, children,
remember to let me go,
delete my number,
save the number of the trees.
Remember, the lemons speak.

One section of the volume is devoted to a long poem titled (after a line from a poem by Sylvia Plath) "I Am a Miner. The Light Burns Blue." This poem is freer than any of the others and does not relate, at least not in a concrete way, to Chang's own experience. Perhaps for these reasons, this poem seems less focused and has less impact.

As a whole, within the limits noted above, *Obit* is a forthright and artistically valuable attempt to understand and express loss. Chang's language is wonderfully clear, her images evocative and her remembrances untainted by sentiment. Although these poems describe Chang's particular experience, they should resonate with many who have grieved, and may provide a measure of solace to anyone now in mourning.



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