



PARLIAMENT | PARLEMENT
CANADA

Parliamentary Poet Laureate



POETRY CONNECTION: LINK UP WITH CANADIAN POETRY

Rita Wong (1968-) grew up in Calgary, Alberta and currently lives in Vancouver, British Columbia where she is an assistant professor at Emily Carr University of Art and Design. She is the author of two books of poetry, *monkeypuzzle* (1998) and *forage* (2007). In 2011, *forage* won the Canada Reads Poetry competition. Wong's work investigates the relationships between social justice, ecology, decolonization (the dismantling of structures of power imposed by one set of people on another through colonialism), and contemporary poetics. She is especially interested in what she calls "the poetics of water," and works to educate her community on human interdependence with local water systems. She holds a PhD from Simon Fraser University.

Larissa Lai (1967-) was born in La Jolla, California and grew up in St. John's, Newfoundland. She is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of British Columbia. Her work brings her interests in feminism and Asian-Canadian identity together with her science fiction/fantasy imagination. Her first novel, *When Fox Is a Thousand* (1995) was shortlisted for the Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award. Among her works are a second novel, *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), and a solo book of poetry, *Automaton Biographies* (2009). She holds a PhD from the University of Calgary.

Wong and Lai met in 1992, when they were both in their mid-twenties, on a bus to Orillia, Ontario. They were both headed to a conference on cultural appropriation. Wong had a list of Asian Canadian women writers she wanted to share with Lai. "We ... were coming into an anti-racist awareness," says Lai. "I was so happy to meet Larissa!" says Wong. "[I]n my heart, I felt we were going to read and write our way through and out of colonization, word by English word, paradox by paradigm, in the company of our sisters." They have been friends ever since.

Poem for discussion:**Excerpt from *sybil unrest***

From: *sybil unrest*

LINEBooks, 2008

Note: in the book, each stanza, or block of text, is on a separate page, the author of which is never identified.

televised revulsion
 armed patrols
 against anadromous androgynes
 pixellated shot at black hair
 signals amber, red light
 distract the gaze
 from canada's expert destruction corporation
 littoral spectators
 witless repeat-rich history
 repelled, rusted, repressed
 undertow: rudderless economy
 bodies adrift
 flail against smug myopia
 continental shrift

utopia by distraction
 interaction scripted
 relief without prevention
 continuous content confessional denominator:
 i slept with my lycanthropic boyfriend's teenage feral son
 in a high security nuclear facility
 while high on crystal meth
 accompanied by a sixteen piece brass band
 in hopes of winning a million dollars
 while other contestants waited in a sweatshop in shenzhen
 decorated with apsaras and buddha heads etc.
 agon of capital
 mechanical repetition + survival wages

big brother's other sister
yours was the weakest wink

drink the vision
watch the scream
dream the snuff
congratulate the contradiction
we couldn't have done it without you

quotidian terror
knifed and niked
our backs
tromped and stumped
stunned by spectacle farce
realty teeters
middlefingers
dystopia by subtraction
marked economy
stabs false prices
onto water, air, land
stuck pig grunts
pumped full of antibiotics
psychotic bacon
beckons
know thy enzyme
transgenic estrogenic _
effluvium transfers
into your porcine gut
glow-in-the-dark hashbrowns
come with the order
spudmuffin
let's haunch

grow in the park hallucinations
 corn born corn
 the colonel's boys lick and sniff
 stiff coiffed southern fresh .
 off the flight
 the border's horders
 in starched shirts
 unicycle the re-
 interpretation of travel documented
 to suit the spiffy
 while cirrus clowns »
 intone
 give the dog a bone
 old man laughs up his sleeve
 fishes for the kernel
 of ruth and her book flaps open
in the same place that you die
i will die
 we travel
 over and over
 it's just another holy roller

charged happenstance
 in the wake of
 tidal genocide :
 thousands of turtles roll over in
 that mass grave, the oceanic bedslide
 trawled and mauled
 oh palimpsest of crushed shells
 succour a queer sorrow
 unappeasable and viral
 vestiges of heads that will not
 erupt through hallowed skin
 into dizzying love
 swim in the wake of your death, .
 my death, our deaths, soaked
 in cumulus disturbance
 long for electric release

but pent in transnational circuits
 await more deaths
 as capital's corpses accumulate

housed on rooftops
 feet fete without earth
 spirit of the weak
 raised poolside
 fifteen famous porn stars stimulate
 economy
 abstraction escalates
 cash as concept
 waxes material
 corporate cops regulate muscular flows
 tear perforated strip
 to detach soul at point of entry
 nation's heart triple bypassed
 tremblequivers
 senses nervous surge of global power
 brokers shudder
 as social organism flips right out
 alternate current gushes to haunted gap
 now you see it
 now you don't

robocrop distrot
 slimed and stymied
 port of sentry
 incriminate testosterone gentry
 disgruntle suburban complacency
 crumpled crestfallen
 falacious fellatio
 primetime news
 redundant moneyspeak
 derivative divergence
 divulging dischord

demonic harmonic
of the cocacola commercial
tinny addictions
mass collusions collapse
denuded

lesser collisions slide sideways
overpass grows over
moss lichen prairie grass
tomatoes on vine '
in big sun
in hot rain
the lyric panegyric returns
glorious mutation
the same but
gorgeous gorgon different
all tongue and lip
and hair and there
outrides dogged apocalypse
follows wet night
twist twining
slip gliding
into the cricked cracks the hallowed hollows
left after the last flesh has rotted and returned
to earth
i'll glow if i have to
adapt the toxin
adopt the biological discontinuity
adore the exhausted
embrace the uranium depleted
loving the alienated
purity skids on pink lake
birds rock
to their own conference
after the fire

For discussion:

1. Wong and Lai believe that each time we say "I," we use a word that has a long history in the English language and that conditions us to see ourselves as separate individuals, rather than as interdependent beings. Where in the poem do Wong and Lai criticize the ideal of an autonomous, separate I? In what ways does Wong and Lai's poem make us think twice about our own ambitions for ourselves?
2. *sybil unrest* started as a "back and forth conversation conducted by e-mail over the course of several months." Its form is inspired by an ancient genre of Japanese collaborative poetry called *renga*, in which two or more poets contribute stanzas to a sequence of "linked verse." How does the poem's coauthored form hint at the themes and values Wong and Lai are interested in?
3. In *sybil unrest*, Wong and Lai use a practice called *collage*, whereby they cut and paste bits of text from sources like TV commercials, pop songs and philosophy into their long poem. We could interpret this move as the authors stealing ideas, or echoing old memories, or showing how much pop culture saturates their awareness. What does this technique suggest about what Wong and Lai think of the idea that a poet must, or can, speak in one unique, original voice?
4. Both Wong and Lai have written at length about Asian-Canadian identity, and about the movement of people, products and ideas across borders. What does *sybil unrest* suggest about how much "East" there is in our idea of what is "the West"?
5. The collaboration, the *working together*, involved in the writing of *sybil unrest* is part of its ethics – its "poethics" – challenging the idea that a poet's work is the product of simply being alone in his or her head. It could be said that we collaborate constantly with the earth, within ecosystems, in order to live and work. How does writing poetry involve a collaboration with the earth?

Writing prompts:

1. Work with a partner to write a poem "in renga spirit." Decide together what topic you will address. Let each person write one stanza, on their own, to begin. Then show each other what you have written. Write another stanza in response to your partner's. Do this trade-and-write procedure at least four times (more if you like). Then look at the material you've got and decide together how to arrange it into one poem.

2. Work with a partner to write a collage poem. Decide together what topic you will address. Each partner makes a list of 10 recognizable quotes or lines from popular culture. Trade lists and write a poem that includes your partner's quotes. Get back together and try to cut and paste your two poems into one. Decide on a technique of reading the poem aloud where you don't stick to each poet reading their own words.
3. Ecology is the study of organisms' interactions with each other and their environment. *sybil unrest* is the product of interaction between two writers and their environment. Work with a partner and come up with one focused plan for both of you to interact with some aspect of your living non-human environment (visiting a local waterway and recording sounds; both writing for five days straight about the same weather; both keeping a journal about the same tree or animal, etc.). Together, create one poem in any form that documents the interaction you both participated in.
4. Work with a partner to write a mutation poem. One person writes a line with at least eight strong image words (i.e. strong nouns, verbs or adjectives). Person two must use at least four of those words, from the previous line, in the composition of the next line. Person one now writes line 3, which must keep at least four words from line 2. And so on. Don't worry too much about making sense. Write a poem of at least twenty lines that plays with this process of reproduction and mutation.
5. *sybil unrest* is full of puns and words playfully used for their double meaning ("littoral spectators") as well as over-the-top alliterations that make words with very different meanings still feel like they are related ("derivative divergence," "fallacious fellatio," "anadromous androgynes," "gorgeous gorgon"). Work with a partner. Each person makes a list of ten strong nouns or verbs that could be used in a poem that looks critically at consumer culture. Trade lists. With the words from your partner's list, create weird puns or heavy alliterations. Trade lists again. From your partner's puns and alliterations, make sentences. When you each have ten sentences, get together and arrange the sentences into a poem.

(Notes prepared by Sonnet l'Abbée)