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March 30, 2021 - Sally Wen Mao is the author of *Mad Honey Symposium* (Alice James Books, 2014). Her second book, *Oculus*, is forthcoming from Graywolf Press in 2019. Her work has won a 2017 Pushcart Prize, and is published or forthcoming in *A Public Space*, *Poetry Foundation*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Guernica*, *The Missouri Review*, *Tin House*, *The Best of the Net* 2014, among others. The recipient of fellowships and scholarships from Kundiman, the New York Public Library Cullman Center, and Bread Loaf Writers Conference, Mao holds an M.F.A. from Cornell University. She is the 2017-2018 Jenny McKean Moore Writer in Washington at the George Washington University.

As told to Thora Siemsen, 2401 words.

Tags: Poetry, Process, Inspiration, Identity.

On why honesty is more important than success

Poet Sally Wen Mao discusses the notion of finding buoyancy in her work, the creative liberation of travel, and why she prefers to never write about love.

About how often does a poem come to you?

The last poem came maybe two months ago. It really depends on what I'm working on at the moment. If I'm working on exclusively poems, I can try to write a poem a day for 30 days, and come out with maybe three poems at the end of the month. I find myself working better when I have a vision going into the poem. Not every poet is like that, but I'm like that.

What do you do to attain buoyancy in your routine?

Connecting with other people in my community is something that gives me buoyancy, because talking to other artists gets me excited, and it also makes me braver. Whenever I have conversations with myself about a project or an idea there's always that non-buoyant voice, that heavy voice that says, "You're crazy." Or, "You can't do it." But whenever I'm in a space where I can talk to my friends, who also have a creative practice, that creates a certain lightness and buoyancy.

Besides your friends, what else is an integral part of your creative practice?

I have a lot of ideas, and it's hard to juggle them all at once. Sometimes it's just that decision to *just do it*. That's always been the best thing that I've done as an artist, poet, writer, is to just do it,

because ideas can stew for years in my brain until they become stale. That happens all the time, but once I actually make the decision to do it, once I commit to it, then that gives me life.

Besides buoyancy, the opposite of buoyancy drives my work a lot. It's rage. It's the feeling of being powerless. It's the need to validate a feeling or an experience that has been erased by all the violence that surrounds us. I love that you use the word buoyancy, because I don't actually characterize my work as all that buoyant. I find myself thinking of buoyancy as this thing that pretty white girls can have, but not someone like me.

You wrote Inauguration Poem including words Trump used in his inaugural speech that a President hadn't used in that context before. When did that idea occur to you?

When an article was published with all the words side by side. As a poet, I just couldn't resist taking all those words, and putting them in a new formation. An inauguration speech is the definition of manipulating language to serve the interest of power. As poets and writers, we can really use that language to disrupt existing power structures. I've been thinking about so many other poets who have been using someone's words against them; using someone's words to disagree with them; using someone's words to defy them. I find that a lot of poets of my generation have been doing things like that. I'm thinking about Solmaz Sharif, who dismantles the terminology of the Department of Defense dictionary. I'm thinking about Layli Long Soldier, who recontextualizes the apology that Barack Obama made to the Lakota Tribe, and the ways that we can really disrupt these modes of language, that epitomize power and violence, and all the ways that our government fails us on this systematic level.

What words do you think about when you think about the future?

Water. I think about water. I think about what it means to move toward extinction. I think about magic. I think about space. I think about movement. I don't know what the future holds, but I hope the future will hold us, even though that might be a sentimental thought.

Your work involves a lot of travel. How does geography make its way into the poems?

I've traveled a lot in my life, and I think I've always been a very restless person. I love the feeling of walking in a new city, without a real plan and wandering, having kind of a vague destination, but going the slow route. I have one poem in Oculus that's based on a trip I took to Lijiang, China in 2012, and that was a very special trip to me, because it was the first time I went to China by myself, without being accompanied by family. I was wide open to adventure, and I made a lot of amazing friends. I pretended it was my birthday in June, and had a birthday party with my new friends in China. I rode on the back of a motorbike. I hitchhiked for the first time. I made friends with Triad members. I sang karaoke with the Triad.

I guess I just want to capture the strangeness of being both intimate and a stranger. That's the feeling you get when you're traveling, that there's a certain intimacy that's very natural when you're on the road. You're having conversations with people who are also on the road, or people who are transient. I remembered during this trip by myself, I showed up at a hostel that advertised that it would offer a free stay if you were an artist or a musician. I showed up and asked them, "Hey, are you looking for artists? Can I stay for free?" They said to me, "Yeah, you can stay for free, as long as you paint pictures of rainbow trout, because our restaurant's name is Rainbow Trout." And I said, "Of course, I will definitely paint pictures of rainbow trout, and narwhals, and killer whales."

I spent three days at this hostel where they'd housed artists and bad musicians, and built kind of this strange, transient community with the people who worked at that hostel, the guests, and the other musicians and artists. We would go out together at 11:00pm and eat barbecue skewers on the street. I remembered talking the most to the guy who was working the reception table, because he could speak English. He was just telling me his story of literally burning all of his possessions, and riding his bike across China with no identity.

I asked him, "Well, doesn't that technically make you a missing person?" And he said, "Yes." I asked him, "Aren't your parents worried about you?" And he said, "Probably, but I have to escape all the expectations." Then he told me, "Do you know what it's like to sleep next to the highway in the rain?" And

I said, "No, because I've never done that." I tried to imagine it. I think there's this level of intimacy that you crave in your daily life, that you find so naturally when you're traveling, but at the same time you're a complete stranger, and you'll never see or speak to this person again. That's something that I think is beautiful and magical, but at the same time so sad. I want to find this intimacy, but in a context that is not so transient. I think that's much harder.

Can you talk to me about the function of alterity in your work?

Alterity is another way to describe otherness, and that's something that I think about a lot in general, and how to negotiate otherness, because I think any writer of color, any artist, when you belong to a group that doesn't really belong, you tend to see yourself in the eyes of others all the time. In that sense, your identity is compromised. You're no longer an, "I" but a, "She" or a, "They" or an, "It." I've had to navigate that a lot. I began to write lyric essays on this subject, and it's an idea that I'm still trying to grasp. It's an idea that I haven't fully explored in depth, but one of my working arguments is that alterity creates or generates a failure of intimacy, and for people who are other, intimacy and connection are not givens. They have to do whatever it takes to be seen as worthy.

It's such an exhausting dance. I think of alterity as a state of permanent exile and disorientation. I guess my constant questions is: "How do you reorient yourself to that kind of disorientation?" I think exile extends beyond place. It has to do with just moving in space. It has to do with your movement. It has to do with your body, and when you feel that kind of isolation, and alienation, and lack of belonging, how do you forge home? How do you forge your own healing? How do you take root? How do you grow? How do you plant your seed? I feel like this is something I'm constantly grappling with, in both my creative process and my lived experience.

Is there any particular subject that you won't write about?

There was a subject that I refused to write about and that is love, or was love. I've been thinking a lot about the reasons why I never wanted to write about love, or the reasons why I've never written a love poem. I've only written aubades, elegies. An aubade is a parting song, so there might be elements of romance in it, but there's that inevitable parting in the morning, at dawn. The reason why I didn't ever want to write about love is because I think my biggest wound is love. That is a painful thing, you know? I resolved to write about my biggest wound, which is love, because if love or its absence is unbearable, then I can dress the wounds with words I carve into the space where it could fit into my life, and into me.

Your last book, Mad Honey Symposium, has a series of poems about honey badgers. Is your forthcoming 2019 book, Oculus, similarly scanning the terrain of virtual reality?

I am a poet that functions on my obsessions. I think that there's always some kind of kernel that drives me, a kind of kernel that starts and blossoms into things that are surprising. I don't know what kind of seed it is that I'm planting, but I'm planting it here, and it becomes this poison ivy, or it becomes this orchid, and then I'm surprised that the orchid has lived this long. I'm surprised that I can eat its petals and not be poisoned to death. I guess that's a weird metaphor for writing a book, but it is like that for me. Planting a single kernel and recognizing that from that single kernel so many different living things can grow.

I guess the kernel of *Mad Honey Symposium* was the honey badger, but it definitely transcended that animal. The honey badger is a magnificent animal, but it's not just the honey badger. It's the honey badger's relationship to human ideas of dominance and vulnerability, and its merciless consumption of dangerous things, is on par with what humans do to themselves. My first book examines the wild. It was raised in the wilderness, raised by honey badgers, and people who consumed a lot of mad honey that went crazy. That was my first book.

My second book was definitely born and raised in the city. It's obsessed with smartphones, and webcams, and this kind of gaze. It's obsessed with spectacle and being looked at, but it also is aware of all the violence that comes with being looked at. I think *Oculus* has a completely different set of obsession, but I still use the same process. If I plant this kernel, what can it grow into? A tree full of webcams.

What is your relationship to social media like?

Social media is kind of a carnival. What is my relationship with social media? It can be flat sometimes. I think one of the tropes that I try to explore in *Oculus* is spectacle. In the poem *Oculus*, I wrote about a girl who had an Instagram account, and the day that she died she uploaded a picture of her burning bed and the ledge. She essentially uploaded her own suicide onto Instagram. I remembered one night, I was just scrolling through pictures and pictures and pictures of this girl's, this stranger's Instagram, and how lurid it is. How obsessed we are with beauty, and the inviolability of other people's lives. I saw that burning bed and that ledge, and up until those posts is just this beautiful girl with this enviable life. I thought about all the ways that we try to create this spectacle. It's so much harder to document how we feel. I find that, for me, my Twitter is mostly angry. My Facebook is mostly author news. My Instagram is mostly me trying to pretend to be a mermaid. I think they all serve different purposes. In the end, I find that it helps document that I'm alive. I'm not one of those people who is allergic to social media. I'm also not one of those people who's an expert, or totally obsessed with it either.

Do you consider success in the arts part of your ripple?

I don't know. I don't think success really matters. I think it's how honest you are. I think it's how you tell the truth, and it's how that truth impacts the people who matter to you, even if you don't know they matter to you.

Sally Wen Mao recommends:

In the winter around sunrise, walk next to a river wearing a lot of layers like a nice thick wool coat but no underwear.

Collect seaweed and leaves and make yourself a cute outfit. Here is my example:



Make friends with at least one ghost who can talk to you about death without being weird about it. Write letters or songs to this ghost. It makes you more fearless.

Dance on the street next to all the trash bags on your way to the subway station.

Music made by women of color: Empress Of, SZA, Japanese Breakfast, Mitski, Jamila Woods.

Make resistance collages. Cut oppressive texts and images with scissors. Start with all the ubiquitous images of today's administration. Cut them out, cut them out, cut them out.

Name

Sally Wen Mao

Vocation

Poet, Writer, Artist

Fact

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