INTERVIEW
MONICA YOUN
Monica Youn is the author of three books of poetry: *Blackacre* (2016), which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award; *Ignatz* (2010), which was a finalist for the National Book Award; and *Barter* (2003). Her poems have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including the *New Yorker*, the *Paris Review*, and the *New York Times Magazine*, and she has been awarded a Witter Bynner Fellowship from the Library of Congress and a Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University. A former attorney specializing in copyright and election law, she now teaches poetry at Princeton University. During her visit to Butler University as part of the Vivian S. Delbrook Visiting Writers Series, Youn took the time to speak with Manuscripts staff member Matt Del Busto.

I know you practiced law for a number of years and have talked about being on the clock and getting paid, whether it’s by the minute or by the hour, and the focus and efficiency that you have to have as a lawyer. I thought it was interesting to contrast that with how you were talking about how you write poems in an interview with Jeffrey Brown where you said the idea can fertilize in your head for months or even years before you actually start writing it. How is that process different—it can take so long to write a poem, whereas being a lawyer things would have to set within that hour?

When I have an idea for a poem, it’s often something that sits around for a very long time. The Peter Pan story that I read obviously is something I’ve known since I was a kid. The idea for the *Blackacre* sequence I was not able to write for years after I first had the idea, but I always think of that as back burner that you set at a slow simmer—I like to use the metaphor that it’s like supersaturating a solution. You just have this solution just sitting there on the stove and you just keep adding things until at some point you have enough and it just crystallizes out. That crystal is when the poem is born; it’s when the poem takes form. Until that you don’t have a poem, you just have an idea.

With law, it was a very different time frame both as a lawyer and as an advocate. When I was a public interest lawyer and advocate, if something happened in the news, I would have to have an op-ed drafted about it in
the next few hours. 1500 words in three hours—go; just start writing, and I could do it. I didn’t particularly enjoy it, I think people think writing op-eds is fun or interesting. For me, it was just miserable. I just thought I’m just churning out very pedestrian talking points, it just really doesn’t interest me, it doesn’t challenge me.

It sounds like a lot of the ideas take place in your mind before you actually start writing. Would you say that most of the poem is actually written in your head before you sit down to write?

No, not at all. Writing is a very engaged process for me. I just sit there and I wrestle with it and at some point I know I have enough to start writing.

Writing a poem is like you’re trying to peel some wallpaper off the wall and you sit there and you pick and you pick and you pick at this little spot until you find an edge and then once you have an edge you can start tearing, but it’s not like you can tear a perfect rectangle or a perfect circle off. You have to be engaging with the tension and the resistance of the medium and that is what writing or really any art-making process is. You are engaging with the medium; you are in a dialogue with the medium.

Given the numerous different types of writing that you’ve done from congressional testimony to a post on Twitter, how did you come to stick with poetry as opposed to fiction or creative nonfiction?

I mean, if I could write fiction I would—it’s certainly more lucrative. I don’t have that sort of story-making imagination. Non-fiction has its appeal. What I eventually like about poetry is that there are no rules or that there are rules but you set your own rules. One of the things that made me miserable about op-eds is that you know you have to have a lead, then you have to have your argument section and your analysis and then you have a conclusion. Writing those in that same structure time after time was so tedious and with a poem you can literally you can do anything. I could write a poem that was one line long or I could write a poem that’s fourteen pages long. I can take any form I want to and I think it’s the formal freedom that really draws me to poetry. You don’t have freedom to be that weird in really any other medium.
You had a phrase in one interview where you talked about how you like the “nonsemantic shadows cast by language” and I think that goes off the idea that as a poet you have the ability to play with language. But, at the same time you are a self-described “etymology geek” and you love the roots of words and how they come back. So, it’s interesting to me—this more analytical, etymological, lawyerly focus on the poem as well as being able to play with language and put phrases together that wouldn’t normally be together. Do you feel like those two complement each other in your work?

I think so. When you learn the etymological meaning of a term it really kind of opens the word up for you in an interesting way and it causes you to see even more shadows than you might have otherwise. It just opens up more opportunities for seeing resonances in that word. I often will start with a single word. I recently wrote a poem called “Mine” which is just based on m-i-n-e and I was thinking okay, well, it’s interesting that “mine” both means possession and to tunnel in the earth, to dig, or to undermine, and I wondered if those two things have anything in common. Is there a shared etymology that has to do with the grasping or hoarding? It turns out, no, it’s completely a coincidence but it’s so interesting that those two concepts meet in that word and so I ended up writing a poem about greed and democracy and the environment but it all started with that word. My first move when I’m thinking about a word like “mine”—how did that come about?—is I look up the online etymological dictionary—it’s something that is bookmarked in my browser because I end up going there all the time.

Sticking with the etymology theme, I was reading your interviews and one took me to an essay that you wrote about etymology and how fascinating it is, finding the roots of words, and how words interact and things that we say, we have no idea what they meant 400 years ago but they’re commonplace now. One sentence that you said really stuck out to me: “To use a word without knowing its history can be nearly as blameworthy as living in a nation without knowing its history.” I’m guessing that doesn’t mean you think we should look up every single word that we say but at the same time, how accountable do you feel like we should be held for the language that we use?

I think it’s important. We should be held to the same level of accountability as inhabiting the society that we live in. When you live in a society you think, “Oh, things are a certain way,” and if you think they’ve always
been that way, well, I’m not going to question how things are. Then you know you are not tending to challenge or to think of other ways of doing things. I think language is the same way. Right now we talk about the word “white,” like white people. That’s a relatively recent and profoundly ideological construction and one that 100 years ago, 200 years ago. Italian Americans, Irish Americans, they didn’t think of themselves in the same category as W.A.S.P.s. They you know they thought of themselves as being distinct peoples and this kind of monolithic tribalist whiteness that we’re all dealing with. The whiteness of white supremacy is something that is relatively recent, and I think it’s important to know that like it wasn’t always just that there were white people and there were people of color.

It’s the same with Asian American. Pakistanis and Chinese people would not have described themselves using the same words before the 1960s. That was a phrase specifically coined, and not to know that, to assume that there have always been these categories that we’ve set can be really problematic and can prevent us thinking creatively and critically about the way in which we’re living our lives.

In what ways do you think we should take action in our own lives to further explore words that we’re using or phrases that we may think are commonplace but 50 years ago wouldn’t have existed?

A lot of it just comes up through history, it’s not like you go around you know etymologizing every word. But, I think knowing something about the history of the place you live, these terms come up, and you think, “Oh, I didn’t realize that that used to be different.” In that particular essay, I used an example where I never realized that the that we say “pork” for meat and “pig” for the animal because the people who were eating the animal and the people who were raising the animals were not the same people—it’s a relative class and ethnicity that’s left over from the Norman conquest and we use these words every day.

Going along with an etymological aspect which can be a root for a lot of your poems, many of your poems also seem to be sparked by other work, like John Milton’s sonnet which inspired the long Blackacre sequence. Do you use other works of art as inspiration for your work, or are they more kind of a vehicle for you to enter into a certain discussion?

I don’t really see them as a vehicle. I think of myself as composed of
stories and lessons and patterns and art that I love that I’ve internalized in some way. So, when I’m talking about myself it’s not like I’m talking about myself separate from stories that I feel like comprise me. I’m not somebody who spends a lot of time looking in a mirror like I will spend a lot of time looking at a painting or reading a book and then I’ll see things in there and they may have some relevance to my life but they interest me and so I start writing about them. The idea that one’s self and one’s life is somehow this separate entity is not really true to the way I experience things.

That’s interesting.

I feel like, you know, how do I live my life? I live my life with always one foot in the book always with a novel open somewhere in my house, somewhere that I’m in the middle of.

Are there are books, whether they’re collections of poetry or fiction or nonfiction books, that have been especially inspiring to you as you continue to write?

I think two books I think in particular have been really important to me as a poet, two nonfiction books. One is called *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* by Roberto Calasso and one is a book of literary criticism called *The Pound Era* by Hugh Kenner, which is a kind of a history of Anglo-American literary modernism told through the figure of Ezra Pound. Those are both really formative and I reread them constantly.

That’s awesome. Going into your own writing practice, in an interview with Kirsten Chen, you called yourself a very infrequent writer. I hear professors say you need to be writing every day; or, if you’re not writing every day, then are you really a writer? How are you able to stay engaged with writing when you take periods of time off, and do you think this idea of needing to be consistently writing in order to be a writer is incorrect?

I think I don’t agree with that personally. I think you need to be doing something as a writer every day but I feel like me actively reading is just as important. I feel like students these days spend too much time writing and not enough time reading. I know myself to be somebody who, as I described my process, I am putting a lot of things in the saturation vessel. I feel like if I tried to write it prematurely I will ruin it and it’ll be thin.
It won’t have enough in it for me to start and at some point I know that I’m ready to start and that might be a little more actively picking at the wallpaper. I can make myself write every day. I can make myself write a poem a day, sometimes more than one poem a day, but I often feel like the poems get really threadbare by the end of it—I haven’t observed enough, I haven’t thought enough about the poem, and it’s not the mode I like to write.

In your writing, we see a variety of different forms whether it’s that long Blackacre sequence where it’s very analytical and prose poetry or some of the hanged man sequence with very short and tight lines. One thing you’ve talked about in previous interviews is your resistance to being just a single form poet. Can you explain that a little bit and how you try to be as open as possible to new forms?

The whole point, for me, of being a poet is that formal freedom that I talked about earlier. I think you restrain yourself artificially if I’m going to write the same sort of poem over and over again. Why do that? There are so many other possibilities out there, and what interests me and maybe one of the most fun and exciting parts of the process for me is figuring out what is the best possible way for me to bring this concept across, not just throw it out on the page but think—what is the best way I can do this? What is the way that is really going to bring this to life? Why would I give that up just to be able to write faster?

Going off the idea of being open to new forms, there’s an interview you had with Eric Farwell where you talk about resistance to treating books as projects and suggesting to your students to never just try to stick to a certain concept and always be open to new concepts. Why is that focus in being open to new ideas more important to you than maintaining a focus on a specific concept and really trying to dive into it? Is it the same reason for your being open to new forms?

I was just about to draw this distinction between concept and form. I tell my students feel free to stick to the same idea in terms of subject matter. I actually assign my graduate students often what I call an exhaustion exercise like, okay, we’re just going to write a poem about the same thing all semester so pick one subject. One student picked “egg.” And you’re going to write a poem about an egg, and then another poem about an
egg, and at the end of about thirteen poems about an egg, they start becoming really interesting. The poet has dug through all the obvious things to say about eggs and she’s really gone deep on the subject and the results are amazing. But, that is very different from choosing the same formal strategies for a poem, choosing the same way, choosing the same tone, choosing the same angle, the same lineation strategy.

I feel like a lot of students try to polish things prematurely and so I get a lot of these poems that are in regular rectangular quatrains and I call this “filling out the form”, like you’re treating the form like it’s some sort of after dinner accomplishment that your parents are going to applaud you for. That’s really not what it’s about. You don’t get extra points because your poem is rectangular or your poem rhymes, you get extra points if your poem is good. If you’re just using the line as a delivery mechanism for the rhyme scheme or if you’re just filling out your stanzas with all these little filler words that don’t need to be there, then you’re not writing a good poem, so what’s the point? And so a lot of times, students will be like, “Okay, well, I’ve written one stanza that’s three lines long, so all the stanzas will be three lines long,” and that’s not how to go about it. That’s what I call “Oh, I’ve decided not to make any more decisions about this poem, I’m just going to go kind of continue the way I started,” which is not a good thing.

Going back to Blackacre, the first time reading it there were definitely moments of confusion for me. It has a very high level of vocabulary and it’s very multi-layered—it’s a complex work. But, when I dove deeper into it and read some interviews, it really started to make sense to me. Do you ever worry about the complexity as something that may make it inaccessible to some readers?

I don’t think it’s necessarily going to be inaccessible. It takes time. I think that my work takes time for anyone—I would doubt that anyone could just skim it on the first read and get the whole thing. I don’t believe in that level of reader. I like to write things that reward multiple reads. I have taught my work to high school students—I just I don’t think it’s inaccessible. It’s not easy, but I don’t think that those two things are the same thing.

Sure, and from things that I’ve read and this discussion, it seems like that
complex layering of different kinds of meaning is something that’s really important for you, too. Could you speak on that a little bit?

I think that the whole the point of writing as a poet is that you’re not using language in its ordinary way. The ordinary use of language is language only for its meaning or language for a single meaning. If I ask my toddler, “Do you want an apple?” I just mean an apple like the fruit. But, if I put an apple in the poem—one of the advantages of the poem is you’re hopefully taking advantages of multiple meanings—it means apple, but it also means Adam and Eve, Garden of Eden, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, the computer company. All of these possibilities are latent in the term “apple” and hopefully you’re exploiting that. It works on different level because otherwise why are you writing a poem? Why aren’t you just writing an essay or a story or something like? If you’re going to be writing in genre, you should be taking advantage of the possibilities of that genre. I read a lot of poems where I’m like, why is this not just a blog post?

That is true. And looking at Blackacre again, I know the theme of infertility is woven into a lot of the poems. For you is there any kind of connection between the childbearing process and the process of writing a poem?

Not particularly. I think I might have thought so before I had a kid, but having a kid is like so specific that you’re just like, “Oh, okay, strange things are happening in my body. I suddenly have a line in my abdomen, why is that happening?”

Going back to your interview with Eric Farwell, you mention silence as a precondition for the poem, which I think especially speaks to a lot of the tighter poems where there’s so much white space on the page. Can you talk a little bit about the importance of giving silence room to speak within your poems?

I don’t think that I’m giving silence room to speak, I think that silence is giving me room to speak. You know if you’re a poet you’re always aware that the white space initially owned the page and you’re fighting against the white space and trying to make headway into it. Somebody who is not thinking about the line and not taking the line seriously will just be like, “Oh, a line is like a sentence, I’ll just splash it across the page.” If you were taking the line seriously, then you are treating it as a problem
in engineering or architecture and you’re thinking, okay, if I’m starting with a vertical that is the left hand margin and I’m sort of cantilevering something out horizontally, the longer that line gets the more vulnerable it is to breakage, to bend, to sag of its own weight, to not be able to sustain its momentum until the end of the line.

It’s easier to write a short, tight, well-constructed line. A long, well-constructed line is very difficult and few poets manage it well, one that really doesn’t have any weak points, one that should not necessarily be a shorter line, one that has enough energy to get it to the end of the line. I think taking that white space as if it is a gravitational field, as if it has real force, is the reason why we write in lines in the first place. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be writing in lines, we’d just be writing in blocks. The whole point of writing in lines to begin with is white space—that’s why we do it.

Looking to the future, is there a certain project or projects related to writing that you’re working on now?

I was thinking about deracination, about problems of authenticity within our racial consciousness. I’m Asian American but I don’t speak Korean, I’ve spent very little time in Korea, I don’t have I feel a huge affinity to Korean culture, and yet I’m defined in a certain way externally by people’s expectations of me. Thinking about that, it’s a complicated set of experiences and reactions. I’m chewing on that right now.

What would be one piece of suggestion or maybe one thing to avoid for an aspiring writer or an aspiring poet?

I think you should avoid only reading poems online and not reading poems in books. A lot of my intro students will come in and they’ve seen poems, they’ve liked poems, they’ve seen them on Facebook or Tumblr. It’s good that they’re reading, but for one thing, it gets into a poem’s merit being judged by the number of likes it gets, and they sort of get into this mode of trying to write poems that a lot of people will agree with. If you’re going to do that, write an op-ed. Even poets who have poems that have multiple likes on Facebook can have immense and multilayered complexity even though the poem that gets a lot of likes is a sort of kind of outwardly directed public poem. Even as the poet William Butler
Years wrote poems for the Irish resistance that were real rock ‘em sock ‘em political anthems that cab drivers will still sing you in Ireland, he also wrote some of the most complicated poems in the modern tradition. So, I feel like only to see the pop song version of the poems is really kind of impoverishing people. If there’s a poet you like, read their book. Don’t just read their single.

Going off that theme of a pop hit poem versus maybe one that’s more multilayered or not as many people would agree with necessarily, do you think that all poetry should be shared? Are there any poems you write that maybe are just for yourself or just for your family?

I certainly never write poems for my family. I don’t write poems just for myself because for me the point of a poem is the interaction with a reader’s expectations. I think of the medium of poetry not being the word or the page or even the sound I think of it as much as what is this doing in the reader’s mind? I think of it almost like you could think of a piece of choreography, like what is the dancer going to do with this? How is this going to look when the dancer gets it? I don’t think there are very many choreographers who write just for themselves. They could, but what would really be the pleasure is knowing that someone is going to, that is a reader is going to be engaging with it, like I put a jump in there—the reader can make that jump, but it’s an interesting and difficult jump. Let’s see if it happens.