Political Act and Poetic Act: An Interview with Poet Kimiko Hahn

"I want everyone to choose a person. Could be a family member, a friend, or anyone that comes to mind. And I want you to write down seven things that you would find in their junk drawer."

The spring evening was growing dark, but the atmosphere in the room was bright. Area poets, teachers, and students sat at tables arranged in a large square, shifting in their seats like it was the first day of school, peering at the faces of those around them. At the front of the room sat Kimiko Hahn, starting off the poetry workshop with a playful smile and introduction.

"Ah, you're just writing a list," she said in an easy tone, "No big deal. Very low stakes." Hahn walked everyone through the process of writing a zuihitsu, a poetic form that originated in *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon in 1002. It's a form Hahn is known for and that she has studied deeply and championed within the contemporary poetry community. At the workshop, she shared some of her favorite zuihitsus while describing how she came into conversation with that form, before setting everyone off to develop their own—by having them catalog objects in someone's junk drawer. As the evening progressed, she gave more and more prompts until everyone had composed a poem, almost effortlessly. And each poem revealed something profound about a person by way of the list of simple objects. In describing the zuihitsu form, Hahn says it is "not prose or poetry" and must contain "a feeling that it was spontaneously written."

Kimiko Hahn's poetry is rich in detail and expansive in range, coming from inspiration as varied as personal experience or scientific inquiry. She writes in a variety of forms, and her poems erupt from the page with a fascinating effect of controlled precision coupled with explosive honesty and emotions of grief, joy, lust, or regret.

Hahn grew up in the suburbs outside New York City with visual artist parents Walter and Maud Hahn, and she developed a love of language at a young age. An infant when her father received a fellowship at the American Academy in Rome in 1955, where they befriended Ralph Ellison and Fanny Ellison. Kimiko Hahn came of age in a setting infused with the arts and artists, of both western and eastern traditions. She is now CUNY Distinguished Professor at Queens College in the MFA Program for Creative Writing & Literary Translation. She has eleven published collections of poems, the most recent of which is *The Ghost Forest: New and Selected Poems* (2024). Nicole Sealey of The Poetry Foundation calls it "an evocative braided autobiography in poetry that welcomes miscellany and disorder …. and reveals a mind as vast as the terrains it traverses." Hahn is also a champion of the poetry chapbook, collecting them for herself as well as the Queens College Library Archive. In this interview, she talks about her life growing up with artistic parents in a mixed-ethnicity family, the blend of eastern and western influences on her art, her activism as a young feminist in the 1960s and '70s, and the roles of thinking and formal structures in the creative process.

Tracy Floreani: You grew up with parents who were visual artists?

Kimiko Hahn: Yes. My sister and I had art classes in so many different areas. Japanese dance, calligraphy, tea ceremony, and flower arrangement. We both played the flute. We had a lot of art classes, and then my father was in the visual arts. So, I think that writing eventually became the area that was *mine*. My father was very critical, which you don't realize as a kid or student that that's a gift, to have someone critique your work. I just thought of it as being critical! So, this was my area; it was out of his critical zone. Not that that stopped him from making comments. But I think it was my way of having my own space.

TF: All these classes in the different Japanese arts were while you were living in Japan as kids?

KH: We lived in Japan one year, and then I went back one summer on an exchange program. I had Japanese dance, calligraphy. I was young, but I had all of it. I mean, what kid takes flower arrangement? It's very strict.

Kate Ruffer: Did you dread these classes, or did you enjoy them?

KH: I took them with my mother, and I did enjoy them. I might have felt forced? But I've blocked it. (laughs). When we got back from Japan, this was 1965. A few years later, we started going from the suburbs to New York City to the Buddhist temple. And that's where we took calligraphy, and dance class, and Japanese language. So, every Saturday, similar to *schul*, we went to Japanese language class. And I think I *would* have resented it, but that's when I started checking out the judo boys!

TF: (laughs) It wasn't about connecting with your mother!

KH: Oh no, it was connecting with the boys.

TF: Were you also raised with Buddhist faith and spiritual traditions, or was that a more a community center?

KH: Yeah, that housed all these different classes. The only Buddhism I can remember—my sister might feel very differently—was a holiday festival in the summer called Obon. And it's a folk dance, a time when you commemorate your ancestors. So that was very, very special. You dress in kimono, everybody's in a circle and dances. And I still do that, now. My daughters do that, too.

TF: That's wonderful. But when you were growing up did you also celebrate Thanksgiving and American holidays?

KH: Oh, we did all that. I think because I was envious. My next-door neighbor went to church, and I saw her going to Easter and getting a bonnet and little white gloves. So I kind of forced my parents to take me to church; we weren't going to church until then.

TF: Earlier today you mentioned discovering a love of language in third grade?

KH: Love of poetry in third grade, but love of language from when I was a toddler, really just hearing foreign languages and being captivated by the idea that there were at least two words for the same thing. I mean, that's magical.

TF: I'm wondering if growing up with parents who are visual artists also helped you see the artistic potential in language? Can you pinpoint the process of thinking about language as a way to make art?

KH: My mother would make little books. She'd have me draw pictures, and she'd staple the little booklet together. I can picture it in my head, and that was so encouraging. It's like, "Oh, yes, I'm making my own little book!" So there was the idea that I could translate my ideas, my little tales, into something that you could actually hold. And I think that's very powerful. It gives a little kid a kind of agency to do that.

TF: Do you remember making a book on your own at some point? Without her help?

KH: Yes, I do remember that. I lived in a tree house, and I had a little bobbed haircut. I had animals. Yes, I remember that. I hadn't thought of it in years. Then in third grade, I started writing poems for *The Roselle Chatter*, our elementary school's little newspaper.

TF: And I was curious if your dad had opinions or critiques about your choice to study poetry deeply once you got to college?

KH: Oh, he was overjoyed that I was going into the arts, absolutely. And my parents, who were both visual artists, were very enamored by Gertrude Stein. They collected a lot of her first edition books, which I've inherited. (One is signed!) So, they loved that I was going into some area of the arts, and they helped me figure out what school to go to and all of that, because no one knew what to do with me in my high school. Which is probably a good thing—leave me to my own devices.

TF: So when you get to college, what year was that?

KH: '73.

TF: In the thick of the ethnic pride movement. How did you find yourself expressing self in ethnic terms once you hit college?

KH: Well, previous to going to college—talking about the judo boys again—I started dating. He was not in judo at the time, but he was in Japanese language class—and he was very involved in social movements: Chinatown Food Co-op, Marxist study groups, lots of Asian American movements. So, I got introduced to all that through my New York City boyfriend early on; that was really when it started. Then I went away to Iowa, but at that point I was going by my Japanese name, Kimiko. I was an English and East Asian Studies major, so talk about reflecting both sides of my identity, right? I very much identified with Japanese culture because we'd been in Japan, so it wasn't "Japanese American," I didn't know that much about [the concept of] Japanese American at that point. Then, when I finished college and went back to New York and

connected back up with my boyfriend, who I eventually married, his family was also very interested in Japanese American identity. His mother, who I'm still in touch with, was interned in the relocation camps. Very radical period for me.

TF: So, being immersed in New York and then going to Iowa—how was that transition?

KH: Well, I grew up in the suburbs, and my family was one of the few families of partial color—my mother, and then my sister and me—so it wasn't that much of a cultural difference as far as that went. And I have family in the Midwest, so I knew what the deal was in terms of cultural things, and in New York—obviously except for where I grew up—more diversity. But here's a funny story: I went to freshman orientation the summer before school started. I had long hair, and I'm wearing my hippie beads and bell-bottom jeans, and I have a tote bag that has a Chinese character on it. So, I'm walking through the airport, which is the size of several of these rooms (transcriber's note: it's a very small room), and these people come up to me and say, "Oh! Are you Kim?" And that was my childhood name, and I say, "...Yes?" Because no one had said that anybody was meeting me there. And they said, "Oh, Bill told us you were coming!" I have an Uncle Bill in Wisconsin, but no one told me that Uncle Bill or anybody was coming to meet me, so I said "Oh, well, that's great." So we're walking through the Cedar Rapids Airport, and I'm ready to go with them—wherever that was—and they finally turned and said, "Well, Bill said that you were going to bring the baby." I was like, "Oh, you have the wrong person!" So that was my introduction to Iowa. I think they thought I was a war bride or something.

TF: Woah. They're thinking, "There's not going to be more than one Asian woman in this airport"?

KH: Absolutely, and I don't know what happened to her, but that was really strange. I almost went home with these people. So that was alarming. (laughs)

"I sit at my computer to see where the words have taken the heart.

The brain enters now."

–"The Orient"

KR: At the workshop last night, there was a mode of "Don't think, just write." I was curious about how you made your way to this flippant attitude towards starting to write?

KH: When I first started taking some writing workshops in high school and then freshman year, I really thought "You have to have an idea before you start writing. You have to have a big idea, or something very important to say," and then I realized in the workshops that the opposite was true. It was better just to try and tap the unconscious, get to your raw material. I would leave the dormitory and go to cafes with a pad of yellow paper and a pen, and I would just start writing. So that was a pivotal point for me, to just jump in. And now I'll say to my students: "I might be the only professor who ever tells you *not* to think. Don't think." And I also might be one of the few professors who offers you a chance to use a skill that we don't fully value in academia, and that

is our intuition. So, say, young people who grew up in an urban setting, you know when someone is walking behind you. That is intuitive. Intuition is exactly what you need to use and value when you are writing and especially revising. So I'm looking at two different areas: not thinking, and using your intuition. And then for editing, you bring the brain back in.

KR: I like that, I feel like the zuihitsu really lends itself to that process. Was that a genre that you found later in your writing career?

KH: I had been reading *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shonagon and some other zuihitsu when I was an undergraduate at Iowa, and then later on in graduate school, but I hadn't tried writing one until the then-director of The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church—very famous poetry center in New York—he wanted to have a millennial celebration of Sei Shonagon, and he asked me and a bunch of other writers if we would come and read some of her work, or write something. And I thought, "Oh, I can write something. I've read her work a lot," and that was the first zuihitsu I wrote. And after that I just kept going.

TF: And you mentioned that you're now about to start co-editing an anthology of zuihitsu, can you tell us a little about that project?

KH: Sure, I have a co-editor Dana Isokawa who is Editor in Chief at *The Margins*, which is an Asian American writer's workshop online journal. She contacted me a few years ago because she was doing a zuihitsu portfolio for *The Margins*. I had never met her, but she was so delightful to work with that I thought, "If I do an anthology, with all her youthful energy and administrative and editorial know-how, and just being a nice person, she'd be great to work with." We spent over a year planning a book proposal, and sent it to my editor at Norton, and she snapped it up. We have two years, and now we're in trouble because now we have to do it! We're going to have some of the classics in a section, and then some more contemporary Japanese zuihitsu in translation, and then we're going to invite a couple dozen writers who we know are already familiar with the form to write. So, it should be American interpretations of the zuihitsu.

TF: And those will be brand new original poems?

KH: Some might be republished, but most of them will be original.

TF: What contemporary poets are you reading, and are you in conversation with them in some ways?

KH: I have been reading a lot of Lynn Emanuel's work, she had a "new and selected" that came out a few years ago, and she had a new book that just came out a few months ago. And she is super quirky, so unusual, and her poetics are similar to film noir, and that interests me: using another genre, another tone, another way of looking at things. I love her work, I think she's just so different, and her new book has incorporated some of the isolation from the pandemic, so she's written about that.

TF: That's a good segue into your new book that's coming out, if you could share about that project.

KH: These are poems I've selected from my ten collections plus about maybe a hundred pages of new poetry. In the past 10+ years, I've been writing poems mostly in form, which I had not really done before, Western forms. It took me twenty years to write a decent sestina. I was just overthinking! And when I stopped overthinking and I got the right set of words, it became very discursive, actually, which is a wonderful way to move in a sestina, because it's really more of a dance, you know, you just have to keep coming back to the same words, right? And then I used the sestina I'd written as a rough draft, so I trimmed, added, and they're no longer sestinas, but they have the ghost of a sestina. The *Ghost Forest* title comes from a sestina I wrote. A ghost forest is when the oceans rise due to climate change, and the coastal waters seep into the land and invade freshwater marshes, and those trees die and leave behind these ghost forests. Just timber, no greenery or anything, and the shrubs slowly die off also. So I'd written that poem, and then I realized more and more that there were other kinds of ghosts that I was writing about. So, ghosts of a sestina, the older poems are kind of ghosts from the past, and I have a thread of ruminating on craft. I wrote: running through the ghost forest is a thread of text where I'm ruminating about craft. And there are pictures, so there's a kind of braid of different elements in the book and I'm very excited about it.

{Nudibranch} from *Resplendent Slug*

We believe we're complex but not so much:
the sea slug, with both male and female apparatus,

attaches to another for a likewise fit and act—
then as they say on infomercials, "But that's not all!"

The slug sheds its disposable male organ

that is, incidentally, equipped with spines. "But that's not all!" because

the organ regenerates and the slug is good to go.

A complicated engagement even without the vicissitudes of marriage.

TF: I'd love for you to talk about your love of chapbooks.

KH: Yeah, I have a little anecdote about that. A number of years ago, I was in a meeting with other city university colleagues, poets. One from Brooklyn College, Louis Asekoff, kind of bragged off the cuff, apropos of nothing, that his students handed out chapbooks to each other on graduation day. It was just something they loved to do. I had thought of chapbooks as being sort of vanity press, and what you do before you get published, but it was then I realized how important chapbooks were for this generation. It wasn't just a vanity publication, but it was

taking control of your own work and your distribution, and how it looks and feels. I have a former student who, because of a chapbook festival that I helped organize for five years, became enamored of chapbooks and started a press, which published *Resplendent Slug*. And then, at the AWP conference book fair, I started outrageously buying beautiful, wonderful, fun chapbooks. Some would be Xeroxed and stapled, others would be hand-lettered press, limited editions, just all different kinds. Poetry Society has a chapbook contest, and they have a beautiful set of four that comes out every year. I accumulated probably about 300, and I donated 200 to the Queens College Library, so we now have a chapbook archive. And I have, myself, ten chapbooks, and I see it as a kind of outlaw area. It's a way of experimenting. For people who haven't published yet, it's a way for them to experiment just by getting out in the world and having control of actual distribution. So, it's fantastic—a wonderful area and arena.

TF: It sounds like you were saying the cultural attitudes around chapbooks are also evolving, do you think?

KH: Absolutely. And I think since I began really paying attention to chapbooks, there are some writers who only want to publish in chapbooks. They're not interested in having a book from a major press. They're very focused on what they want to do and getting it out in the world themselves. And I honor that. However people want to get their work out, that's up to them. And it's so important. For social reasons, economic reasons, and poetic, artistic reasons. I asked Pete Vanderberg from Ghostbird Press, I said, "You know, we're having Alicia Ostriker read at a little chapbook festival at Queens College, and would you be interested in publishing a chapbook of hers, so she'll have a chapbook at the chapbook festival." At the time she was the New York State Poet Laureate, so he was overjoyed. And she published a hybrid [chapbook] of photographs and poems, which she said she wouldn't have been able to publish otherwise. So again, it's finding a space for something precious to her, and important, and a gift to the community.

How not to adore extremes—

in scalding volcanic fissures

fathoms below our surface—

Those extremophiles, thriving and delighted?

Where else the ardent vent?

The ardent?

The venting?

"660 Degrees Fahrenheit," *Toxic Flora* (85)

TF: A lot of poets, because they're observers of nature, are producing poetry that's documenting and interacting with climate change. What role does poetry play in climate change as we think about it and process it?

KH: I was on the board of the Poetry Society of America, and then for a term I was President of the board, and the mission statement at the time was, "Our mission is to place poetry at the crossroads of American life." I said, it's already there. So our job is really to amplify. Look at all the young people who are writing poetry! Poetry is already in the crossroads of American life. We're so anti-intellectual—and oftentimes taught not to like poetry, oddly—that we don't recognize that it's all right there. It's already there. And I think that what the Poetry Society does is amplify by putting it in public spaces and having events, so I'm very proud of having been a part of that organization. And I think that, again, amplifying—that's what you all are doing here! You're giving people an opportunity to share, to listen to poets who come in, to listen to one another. We're already there. People read about what they feel passionate about, and a lot of people feel passionate about social issues. So that will be a part of it. And I think that's important, people really claiming what is important to them and sharing that.

TF: Yeah, it seems like poets engaged with scientific writing have a great opportunity to say, "Let's join that conversation."

KR: Well, while we're talking about the science language, you often put a lot of really beautiful language around really gruesome and kind of grimy things. And I was wondering if this comes from more of your love for language or if you're finding the beauty in these things that are so thoroughly un-beautiful? Or if they're inseparable, the beauty of language and the beauty of what the language is about.

KH: Yeah, I think inseparable. Some people who come to poetry think that it should only be about nice things, or beautiful things, but it should be about anything you want to write about. And I'm curious about things that are more in the underside, underworld, underbelly. Or just finding things I don't know about, so if it's about a slug that lights up in the dark, I mean, woah! How does it do that? And then I want to write about that slug. And I have (*Resplendent Slug)*!

So, my granddaughter is six, and from the time she could speak—which was very early, and she hasn't stopped since—she was really interested in these underwater animals that look absolutely horrific. I mean, some of them I would never want to see in real life. They're terrifying! But they're fascinating, and she would just want to look at the pictures more and more, and learn about it, and why is it toxic, and if I touch this spine what would happen to me—all of that. I think we're naturally interested, but then we're told, "This is ugly," or, "Oh, you don't really

want to know about that," or something begins to put a screen on our natural curiosity, or on language. But that's what art does, it finds ways of turning objects over and looking at them differently.

"Where do the gone things go

when the child is old enough

to walk herself to school,

her playmates already

pumping so high the swing hiccups?"

From "In Childhood" by Kimiko Hahn

TF: Here's a chicken and egg question: were you already interested in the dark, underbelly, ugly things before living with a crime writer, or has that enhanced that interest because serial killers are in your atmosphere?

KH: I think that was something that interested us in one another. Harold [Schechter] started writing about serial killers through his scholarly background, really, which is as a myth critic, and looking at archetypes. So the archetype of the witch, or the ogre, or what-have-you became a way of looking at murderers who commit horrific crimes. And growing up, my sister and I were completely surrounded by my father's paintings. Many of the paintings were of Satan, or Adam and Eve with the serpent, a woman dancing with Satan, so we had a lot of art around the house that was of a very dark nature. So, I was already there. And then growing up with fairytales which my mother would read, Grimms' fairytales, which I loved.

TF: The uncensored ones, the good ones, like the sisters in Cinderella actually cut their feet so they'll fit in the shoe.

KH: Yeah, they weren't Disneyfied yet.

KR: Speaking of the real stories, your poetry is very frank and honest and authentic, almost like a confession. I was wondering if you had any thoughts about the relationship between vulnerability and zuihitsu.

KH: I think the zuihitsu lends itself to that kind of authentic kind of expression. That's one of the hallmarks. For example, if you're just running brush, if you're just writing, tossing out something, it's probably going to be pretty genuine. So I think frankness is a huge part of that. And if you're really frank, you are making yourself vulnerable. My father stopped talking to me

for five years, he was so infuriated by things I had written about him. Then he came around, I came around, so we started talking again, but we all take a chance doing things. He took a chance making his art, I take a chance making my art, too.

KR: What convinced you to take that chance? Was that a reaction from your father that you were expecting?

KH: No, I was not expecting that. I think part of my frankness comes from my personality, but even then, girls born in the 1950s were really told, "Don't be angry." That if you showed anger, you were being a bad girl. Good girls would sit with a smile on their face, good girls wouldn't speak up, good girls would sit down and shut up, basically. Growing up in the Civil Rights movement, where women were expressing themselves, it was a political act for me to speak out. And I took that very, very seriously. It was part of my obligation as a woman to speak out and make my feelings and ideas and emotions known. And when I was in Marxist study groups, it was very interesting that we were kind of required to state our opinion. My first political act was actually selling a 35-cent copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Which is now a big, thick book, but it was on newsprint paper, and it was quite graphic, and it had information about women's body parts, periods, pregnancy, lesbians, STDs—you name it—it had all that in about a hundred pages. And I sold them in high school for 35 cents until I was told that I could not do that, so I told the girls to meet me in the parking lot by the library, then I distributed them from my friend's car. Political act, and a poetic act.

Books by Kimiko Hahn

Works Cited