

**Interview with Poet Pui Ying Wong:  
Fanling in October**

*Interview by Doug Holder/Co-President of the  
New England Poetry Club*

Recently, I had poet Pui Ying Wong read at the Newton Free Library Series, a series that I have curated for over 22 years. Her poems contain lyric beauty; and she is a master of metaphor. Pui Ying Wong's new poetry collection **FANLING IN OCTOBER** is from Barrow Street Press. She has written three other full-length books of poetry: *The Feast*, *An Emigrant's Winter* and *Yellow Plum Season* —along with two chapbooks. She has received a Pushcart Prize. Her poems have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Plume Poetry*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *New Letters*, *Zone 3* and *The New York Times*, among many others. Born and raised in Hong Kong, she lives in Cambridge Massachusetts with her husband, the poet Tim Suermondt.



***Why did you choose the setting of Fanling, a section of Hong Kong--  
for your title and the focus of your poetry collection?***

Fanling used to be a rural neighborhood until development in the 1980s brought in massive housing blocks. My father, who was estranged from the family, lived there after his retirement. The poem describes the period when he was ill. While it was about a personal experience, it was also about the changing times.

Hong Kong got into my poems, given that it was my birth city. When I put this collection together, Hong Kong was going through an unprecedented time in the 2019 democracy protests, my father had ultimately died from his illness. This particular moment when the personal and the public interacts is meaningful to me.

***You quote poet Eavan Boland in your introduction: Stars rise/Moths flutter/Apples sweeten in the dark./ In your poems there is a sweetness in spite of the dark clouds around us.***

Evan Boland is one of my favorite poets. She wrote about Irish history and challenges women like herself confronted in this history. Who got to write history in a society where bronze statues of male writers and orators lined main streets but no women? She had an intelligent understanding of her subject matters which were weighty ones, and yet she was not afraid to embrace moments of tenderness and wonder.

I think we can't not know about human tragedy in our time, it's there and has to be acknowledged. On the other hand we shouldn't deny love, joy, beauty, the very things that make our lives worth living. In my own writing I try to be aware of these different forces.

*In your poem "Great Lawn, July" you recall a line "Sit long enough and something arrives." Your poem are deeply meditative—is this something you do when approaching a poem?*

For the most part that's true. I am interested in the inner life of the poem, how it becomes aware of itself and reacts. Let's say I want to write about a tree, the question to ask myself is what is the essence about this tree, about this city, about this summer day, and so on. Maybe this practice is a way for me to comprehend the world, to grasp something beyond the surface. Obviously, other poets have written poems out of contemplation, and they serve as a model for my own. I particularly like the advise from the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski who said about writing, to rely on the tangible reality as long as we can.

*Your poems are stripped down for the most part— each word seems curated—an essential part of the whole. How hard is it to say so much with a few words?*

Some poems need to be expansive, others sparse, it all depends on the particular poem and the poet's intention. Yet most poets would agree that each word counts, whatever the style. On the other hand, I am mindful of the reader who comes with her own experience, imagination and intelligence. Poems I like give room for the reader to interact, excessive details snuff out curiosity and make the reading of it passive. In writing, what to leave in or leave out is part of the artistic process, and naturally reflects on the poet's point of view and temperament.

*Why should we read your book?*

My book is one poet's take on the world she sees. It hopes to resonate with the readers who will ultimately decide its worth.

*Great Lawn, July*  
We are on a bench, idling  
like the poets we love.  
A softball team goes home,  
a young father pushes a pram,  
two joggers compare numbers  
on their wristwatches.  
The air light like the instant  
we left a crammed cinema  
after seeing a heavy drama.  
"Sit long enough, and  
something arrives," a line  
that is egoless,  
whose author we forgot.  
Dins of the day fade,  
the world restores to peace.  
Something comes back  
like first love,  
like hearing again the concert  
once played in the fullness  
of summer, altos  
and altos —

*Half-nodding, half-listening,  
we sit like dinghies  
in a no-wake zone,  
finding what we lost,  
losing what we found,  
and neither one wants to leave  
'til towers of lights arrive,  
bright and owlsh.*