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## In Conversation with Saara Myrene Raappana and Jennifer Tseng, Winners of the 2023 Juniper Prize for Poetry

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This April, we're celebrating the 2023 Juniper Prize for Poetry Winners, which publish April 1, 2024. One of our marketing interns, Hailey Furilla, crafted the questions for the poets.

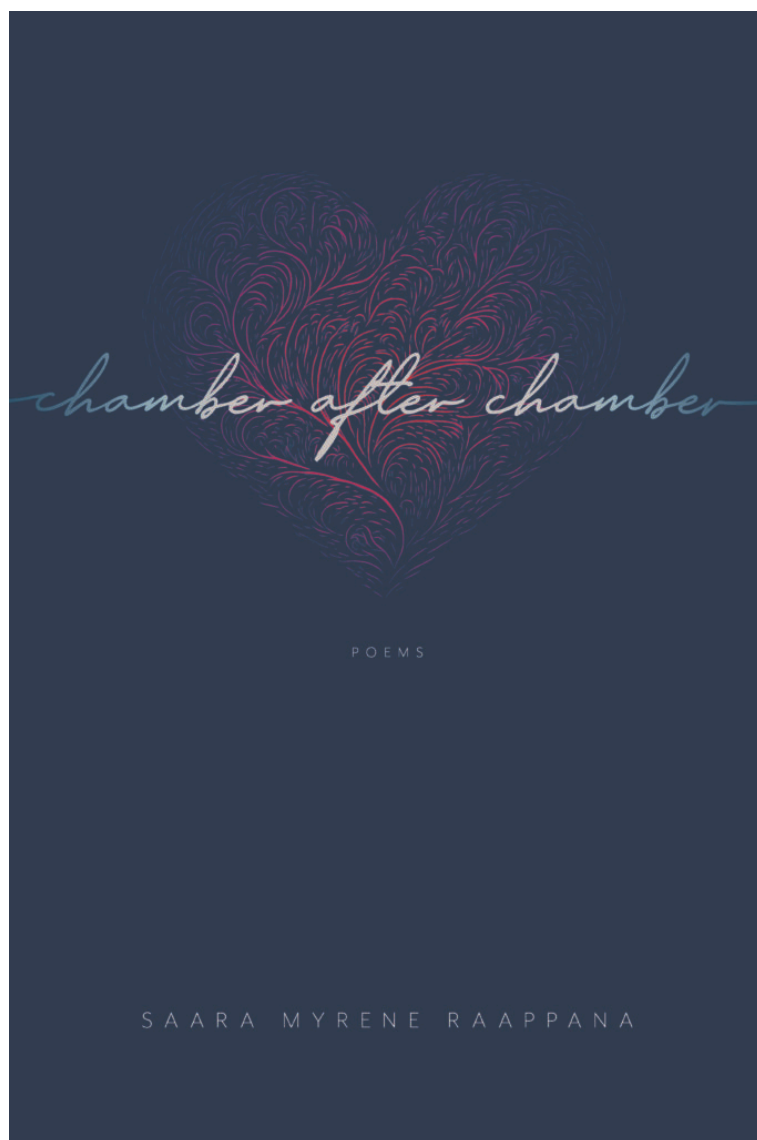
Saara Myrene Raappana's debut collection, *Chamber after Chamber*, is about what fractures, fixes, and refills the hearts of two girls as they grow into women. A loose narrative in three sections, the poems follow a speaker and her cousin through their hardscrabble, backwoods childhood to their separation—both physical and emotional—as adults. From the make-believe apocalypses and cut-and-paste valentines of elementary school to the stadium-seating classrooms and multiplexes of southern China, our speaker tries to leave the shame and dysfunction of her family behind. In China, she begins to see America—and herself—clearly for the first time, and in doing so discovers that both her cousin and her country are inextricably woven into

[her body] part                      that never sleeps                      the blood  
and chambered meat              that's like a rock squeezed  
in a fist                      rapping its knuckles  
on the sweet door                      of the body.

Jennifer Tseng's *Thanks for Letting Us Know You Are Alive*, crafted with lines from her late father's letters, is a portrait of an immigrant, a rootless person whose unspoken loss—that of his native geography, family, traditions, language—underlies every word. Though her father's first language was Mandarin, for more than

twenty years he wrote these letters in English, so that she could understand them. Some are riddled with errors, some nearly unintelligible. Lines from his letters appear as titles and are scattered throughout the poems, blending voices of father and daughter. This collection enacts what it means to lose someone and commune with them simultaneously—the paradox of grief and all it gives us.

*Please note that the answers from Saara Myrene Raappana were compiled over a series of short conversations between her and her husband Eric Doise, serving as her amanuensis. Eric has done his best to capture these answers as accurately as possible. Saara passed away on March 27, 2024.*





**HF:** When I read your book, the first poem hooked me. I'm curious, how did you come to the story of Lionheart? Did you always intend him to be a part of this study of the heart, or was he some of the inspiration for it?

**SMR:** *I wasn't familiar with that story initially and came across it when I noticed the theme of the heart developing and started researching heart stories. I was really drawn to the preservation of the heart.*

**HF:** You are juggling a lot of different forms in your book, and you do it very well. Particularly the way you use white space to me is beautiful. What drew you to these various forms? Why do you feel this variation in form is important?

**SMR:** *That was an innovation I didn't initially expect, to be honest. At first I just wanted to experiment writing without punctuation and so needed the white space to do the punctuation's work for me.*

*Then at some point I was rereading and figured the white space and words were like the heart contracting and opening and thought, "That's exactly what I was trying to do. Yeah, let's go with that." 🤔*  
*Then I got a little obsessed and started to use the white space more intentionally. And probably my ADHD was a big reason I ended up with the different forms: I got bored with more conventional forms, turned to something that was novel, and then hyper focused. I wasn't diagnosed until after I'd finished the manuscript, so I'm just now putting that together.*

**HF: In this book your narration comes from two drastically different places: the Great Lakes and southern China. Through your poems, you can tell that these places had a significant impact on your writing and life. What drew you across the Pacific, and what brought you back to the US?**

*SMR: I was raised in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, so Lake Superior has always been important for me. I think she's so beautiful and strong and violent. My husband and I served in China in the Peace Corps for a couple years. We were able to build important relationships in that short time there, and some of those people show up in the poems, although the stories themselves didn't always happen or didn't always happen how they're portrayed or didn't always happen with the people in the poems. We came very close to staying in China, had not-quite-finalized job offers and everything. We would have been living in the same city as our host family, whom we adore. But in two years, we'd already missed so much back here with our other friends and families that we returned to the US. Since then, though, we've had the occasional pang of the choice we didn't make.*

**HF: You have two poems referring to an instance where you discuss this accident in your biology class where your class received bovine hearts that had been prepared to be eaten rather than examined by students. Would you mind elaborating on that story a bit more?**

*SMR: That moment happened when I was in high school in northeast Wisconsin. I remember being really confused and not knowing how to dissect the heart in that form. But also, I didn't really understand what was going on in that class even on a typical day, so maybe it's possible to dissect hearts that have been prepared in that manner? I should note that none of this should be seen as a reflection of Mr. Barry, whom I really liked and remember being a good teacher.*

**HF: Along with a lot of lions, lion hearts, and lionhearted people in your poems, there are also many wolves. There is also the mention of the haunting "canticle" of their nightly howls. How do wolves fit into your narrative of the heart in general? Do you**

**feel that wolves fit with the concept of the heart as much as lions do?**

**SMR:** *I've never considered this idea of being wolf-hearted, but I love it! I'm going to steal it. Now that you mention it, I think of wolves as brave and majestic but less regal than lions, more playful. It raises an interesting question: why do some animals get a specific kind of heartedness and others don't? And maybe that's one thing the book is doing that I didn't realize exactly as I was writing: arguing that we all have our own admirable characteristics, but only some of us are fortunate enough to have them seen by others. (A somewhat related side note: when I received feedback from Emily Hunt, the contest judge, my response to my husband upon reading her description of the book as violent was, "I didn't think my book was violent. . . . Oh, I guess it really is!")*

**HF: How long have you had the idea for this book? Was it something you always wanted to do and only recently completed, or did this idea come to you as a surprise?**

**JT:** *I carried the idea with me for almost as long as I carried the box of my father's letters from place to place, about twenty years. But my idea of the poems was very vague & the real poems surprised me. I always had the feeling that there was something to be discovered but I wasn't sure what. It was a wonderful sensation of simultaneously knowing & not knowing.*

**HF: I love the way you format your book, alternating between blended pieces of poetry and quotes, broken up letters, and haunting italicized lines standing alone on the page. What motivated these choices? What was the process like of piecing these lines together and adding your own voice?**

**JT:** *At first, only the titles were italicized, but that felt lopsided and imprecise. I wanted it to be clear how many of the words belonged to my father, that I couldn't have written the poems without him. I have the advantage of being alive, capable of generating more language whereas he can't add to what he's already written. Of course, this was part of the allure of the project, to be permitted to speak. Even so, I felt compelled to let him speak insofar as that was possible.*

*As for the process, I read the letters & wrote down sentences that stood out to me. I typed up the sentences & cut them into strips then moved the strips around like Mahjong tiles. Then I responded. It became a conversation, an argument, a dream. Although I did it once or twice, I wasn't entirely comfortable making poems using only his lines, i.e. arranging his words in a sequence he didn't intend. This discomfort led me to letting some of his lines stand*

*alone on a page. It was a way to give his words more weight without exerting quite as much control over their context and meaning.*

**HF: Throughout your poetry and in your notes, you reference kites, specifically the idea that “imagination is a kite one has to fly,” from a Chinese saying. Would you mind sharing why you chose to incorporate the image with these letters from your father as well as how you came across the phrase?**

*JT: How strange. I wasn't aware of the kite image appearing in any other poem than the one that plays with the idiom though I did just write a kite poem last week! Our father, who almost never gave us material gifts, once gave us a kite & he also gave me the idiom. To me, a kite is a bittersweet image. There's something beautiful about being launched, held, & flown yet the presence of the string complicates matters. What does it mean to be flying in the sky and tied to the earth at the same time? What's the difference between flying and being flown? A kite on a string is like a cat on a leash. It wants to be free. Isn't every child born of their parents' imagination, borne up by it, & yet doesn't every child also long to be free? I'm not sure if I agree with the idiom & as with all the idioms my father gave me, I'm not sure I fully understand it.*

**HF: When reading this collection, I saw a couple of instances where you mentioned your sister, like when she changed the ending of Little Women for you so that Beth lives. What was the role of your sister during your childhood? Did she hold a similar attitude towards your father's letters as you did?**

*JT: I love the idea of my sister changing the ending of Little Women for me—she would certainly do that—but it was the writer Helen Oyeyemi. My sister did, in fact, help me create a narrative of our childhood that helped me survive it. She's a visual artist. She drew & I wrote. We understood each other the way artists often do. We made our way out together. & yes, she has her own collection of letters from our father & her own relationship to them. You would have to ask her what her attitude toward her letters is though I think it's safe to say it's different from mine.*

**HF: As you note, in one of your poems, “a father never ends,” like Anne Carson said, “a brother never ends.” Do you feel that your father will forever be with you? Do you think that you will forever carry pieces of him? For you, how do you feel your father will “never end?”**

*JT: Anne Carson said it best. Yes, he will forever be with me. Yes, I will forever carry pieces of him. I am a piece of him. It couldn't be otherwise. When he died, we entered a new phase of our relationship. We began talking more. I began listening more. It never ends. He's alive in me. He's alive in my sister. He's alive in my daughter. He's a woman now!*

**HF:** This collection is very emotionally charged, not just the words themselves but also, I imagine, the process of creating these poems. Was the making of this collection healing for you? Did it offer closure?

**JT:** *Healing, yes. Closure no. It was the beginning of something. Love never ends.*

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