

# Shirley Geok-lin Lim

## Quotes

*Writing, Thinking, Muse, Brother, Book, Body, Males, People, Female, Growing  
Up, Able, Way, Sex, Cancer, Sometimes, Teaching, Crow, Running, Desire,  
Teacher*

Writing a poem is unwriting a knot, like untying a shoelace that is clubbing your foot.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

New formalism is writing with language as flow, like the flow from a dam, running through a desert that has had no rain for decades.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Poetry must speak of others, in order to speak for the poet's imagination, in order to speak of itself; it is slowed down by poetics after its flight is over.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

As I grew older - and even when I was younger - it had puzzled me why I continued and continue to be heterosexual.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Poetry has roots, but they are sometimes cut off and still poetry is written.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

At a certain point, the struggles with teaching and mothering and so on and so forth, those decline, those lessen.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I'm in my 60s, and a cancer scare just makes you more aware of mortality.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Working women went through a time when they believed that.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

[My muse] she's impatient with me, because I don't do what I should do: sit down and write.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Free verse is chained in sentence-to-sentence links and breaks free in line breaks.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Now that I'm more middle class, I have access to consumer goods. I do enjoy feminine frippery, feminine doo-da, stuff like that.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

With so many brothers, I could always find a pair of shorts to borrow and run around in.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Agency over one's sexual self - and the articulation of that kind of agency - might seem transgressive to readers who don't expect it in a woman's text.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

The crows live in the world like you do. They are part of nature.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

The crows that are predatory are something you have to deal with. For me, they also become associated with cancer cells.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I had a couple of Asian readers and other folks tell me, "Oh, you have a lot of sex in your writing."

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

After *Fifty Shades of Grey*, I think my writing is pretty tame, isn't it?

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

It is true that my characters have sex.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Crows appear in many of my new unpublished poems. In these walks, they take on a symbolic life apart from their irritating, undeniable, interruptive presence. I figure them differently.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

In the poem "C," the crows are associated with cancer, because I had suffered a cancer scare.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

When I was younger, yes, there was a part of me - and I wrote about that bit in *Among the White Moon Faces* - that wanted to be a boy. I wanted to be accepted by my brothers and to be their peers.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

You've read some of the poems in this new unpublished book [*Walker's Alphabet*], e.g., the poem "C." I have a number of poems whose titles are letters of the alphabet: A, B, C, D, E, F.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I do want to do the entire alphabet. There's in [*Walker's Alphabet*] a poem called "A Life" in that grouping. I was going to change that title to "A."

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I only submit the poems I think are the strongest.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I have some weak poems in that new collection, which is why I'm not ready to send the collection out yet.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

You need to be distracted.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I'm much more comfortable in pants and shirts, running around. There was a typical construction about womanhood when I was growing up that I rejected.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I don't really get into the power sufficiently, and that's also a problem for me.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

The poem might come to you as you're preparing to teach a lecture, right? And when you say, "no" to that occasion, that poem is gone.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Even after the mothering dropped because my son grew up, the writing - the muse - was always the third wheel, the lowest on the priority list.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

It's why muse is so impatient with me. I don't ever go to her until after the teaching or whatever is over.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

In that way, I don't understand myself. It might have to do with my own conflicts, where to place my body as a child, which I have carried over to now. In this way I'm constantly dislocated.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I don't know where to place my body. Everyone notices that about me. I'm very restless.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Wouldn't that be wonderful if I could do that? And that way, I could walk with the muse, rather than walk without her. The novel would write

itself.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I came to realize this weird projection: you are much more passionate about hating something outside of you when you know that something is also in you.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

In a way, this kind of insight or recognition often permeates the way I think of character, how I plot action, and the way in which I use imagery, seeing binaries as false.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

[Cancer] didn't make me more intense about not working more and just having fun more. It didn't do that either.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I feel compassionate, because I know [students] all have to go down this road of suffering and it's going to be tough.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

The city and nature, the built stone and the found stone, concrete and slate, poetry addresses them all democratically.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

My recent retirement from full-time teaching to the status of research professor at University of California-Santa Barbara (UCSB) encouraged me to come out, so to speak.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

When I spoke at the 2012 Contemporary Women Writers' Conference in Taipei, I thought it offered an appropriate moment and site to announce my new manifesto<sup>10</sup> and profession - to be a writer.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

In actual fact, I have been an academic - a college and university teacher and scholar - for much of the last 45 years, and only rarely a writer.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I was nine when I first knew I wanted to be a writer, in particular, a poet.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

No one, evidently, except me has found "No Alarms" poem ironical that an obsessive theme in my writing was - and has continued to be - not being able to write.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Signs of a maddening system of writing and counting that calibrates the values of something the poet does not yet know. Praxis is therefore poetics.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Poetry has roots, and sometimes they are aerial. Sometimes they are buried.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Philosophy is a bad master for poetry; religion worse; and politics self-serving will never serve the Muse.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

When someone asks me now, "What do you do?" I will be able to say, "I am a writer."

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

In various memoir pieces, I have traced the trajectory of yearning through decisions made, good and bad, that had somehow kept the ambition on track.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Sometimes, in my published complaints about not being a writer, I have recalled the prospect - the yearning to be a writer - as it first formed for me.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

This condition [irony] has nothing to do with writer's block, a psychological syndrome, which is one of the few I have not diagnosed for myself!

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I want, I want, I want! We never grow out of it somehow. Unless we become Buddhists, maybe.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Saul Bellow has that character in Henderson the Rain King say: "I want, I want, I want!"<sup>9</sup> I remember reading this passage years ago and thinking, yes, that's the human.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

One arrives at a recognition that one needs to be distracted.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I always wanted to be pretty as a girl, although I believed it was not possible.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

My brothers were my peers, but they were not the preeminent male figures in my emotional life.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I did not write about that kind of insecurity and anxiety between myself and my brothers, because my father was the dominant male figure as I



was growing up in that home.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

As the only girl growing up for a long time with only boys, as you pointed out, it seems like I was always surrounded by guys. There was this sense in which my female body was a problem.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

The consciousness of one's physical self had to be repressed because, socially, the female body was so visible, an ongoing provocation and incitement of specular curiosity and fascination.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I guess my writing through time has focused on a number of dimensions that reflect separately on the meaning and social place of the female body.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

There are a couple of poems I've written with masculine muses, very often the muse to me is a female.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I'm not sure why my muse is female, except when I am deliberately playing against that figure.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I'm surrounded by men, and the muse is complaining that I have neglected her.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

It's as if I'm setting aside the husband and son, you know, the patriarchal world, for the world of the muse. This is the world of writing.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Singing has nothing to do with poetry, except as twins separated at birth.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Breath and brevity are sisters; the long-winded is an enemy who muffles your heartbeat.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

If the act of writing is the act of putting aside the masculine, then you might in that way, it may sound almost crazy to say this, say that the act of writing, for a woman, could be a homosexual act.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

When I write, I put aside the heterosexual world to admit a muse that is a woman-loving-woman female.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

When people say "the body," frequently they mean the literal body, the physical body.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

According to [Maxine Hong] Kingston, the prose writer is "a workhorse."

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

"Time" does not mean "occasion."

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

If you've been in a symbolic struggle long enough, even when the struggle is over, you don't know it's over.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I have a muse who's very powerful, but I'm still a hopeless deadbeat of a poet.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I'm always resisting [my muse]. I'm resisting her power.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

My muse is very often, in my mind, a nagger. She nags me.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Quite a while ago, I made a conscious choice to place my teaching first, so it was very ego-invested. That decision wasn't a good thing in some ways.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

One should be able to teach adequately and feel good about it.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I really felt neurotic - it was a neurotic reason - but I had to teach very, very well. That sucked up a lot of oxygen from my time and my creative thinking.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Of course, among the confused motives that spurred me toward being a writer was also the desire to look, to be above the trees and rooftops, beyond the Malaysian horizon that circumscribed my life.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I do not think a similar goal, to attain fame, drove me when I was a child and young woman.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

That desire to reach further is also where I ended my memoir, in 1994 in California, perhaps ironically, looking out to the Pacific and back to Asia, toward the not-yet-written.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

In some ways it is absurd for me to assert, counter to evidence, that I have not been writing.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Note, the reply will not be "I write," an act that I have, after all, been performing since I was nine.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

In recent poems, I have abandoned the theme of not being able to write for an even more obsessive subject, the nature of language, particularly English, in the formation of my imagination and being.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

I had to do the academic writing. At a top research university, publishing of a certain kind is very important. So your friend is right. You can't do three things well.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

What happens when a female writer invokes a female muse? Does something else happen? With Sappho's figures of desire, we have a different lesbian energy.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

"Stop Already" is a fairly new poem in a group that was just published by Feminist Studies, which is why I sent them to you.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Even today, I'm much more comfortable dressed in a male kind of way.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

The foot can march or it can dance, but it cannot stand still until end-stopped.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

If I could write a novel while I'm walking, I probably would.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

The things that I dislike passionately, I have come to realize, are also part of me.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Heterosexuality - whichever gender you are - says that the other gender is very important to you.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Poetics is a science for stammering poets.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

In the same way, the people whom I most abhor, I abhor them for elements that I abhor in myself.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

The poem is not a physical body. It's a textual body that has life only insofar as it can act symbolically. It cannot physically act.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

The problem of the female body is not something that I've studied, but my memoir does treat that theme.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Sometimes the taproot and the vines are far apart. Like English and the Asian poem.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Just because suddenly you have a sabbatical doesn't mean that the writing occasion comes to you.

~Shirley Geok-lin Lim

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