

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karen Long: Hello, I'm Karen Long. And you're listening to The Asterisk*, a production of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards. An asterisk is a reference mark indicating an omission. Today we are figuring out some of the holes in our knowledge with poet A. Van Jordan. He grew up in Akron, Ohio and is teaching this year at Stanford, although his permanent residence is Ann Arbor, where he is the Robert Hayden collegiate professor at the University of Michigan.

Professor Jordan won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in 2005 for M*A*C*N*O*L*I*A, his second book. Poet E. Ethelbert Miller said of Magnolia, M*A*C*N*O*L*I*A is storytelling at its best and poetry taken to new heights. You'll find a little Rita Dove and Marilyn Nelson in some of van Jordan's poems. It's there like Billie Holiday's gardenia. This book is biography, love story, and a riff on race. VAN is the man." Professor Jordan's latest book, to be published this year by Norton, is entitled, "When I Waked, I Cried to Dream Again." It addresses the police killing of Tamir Rice and others. We'll be talking about it. Welcome professor Jordan. Welcome.

A Van Jordan: Thank you.

Karen Long: On this podcast I like to get myself out of the way of the art. So would you mind reading us something from Magnolia and we'll move forward from there?

A Van Jordan: Sure. Thanks so much. Thanks for having me. I'll start by reading one of these definition poems that I developed for this book and it's in Magnolia's voice. It's shaped like a dictionary definition and it's nine definitions of the word "From," and this tells the story of the first night that she spends with the man who will later become her husband.

"from (→) prep. 1. Starting at (a particular place or time): As in, John was from Chicago, but he played guitar straight from the Delta; he wore a blue suit from Robert Hall's; his hair smelled like coconut; his breath, like mint and bourbon; his hands felt like they were from slave times when he touched me—hungry, stealthy, trembling. 2. Out of: He pulled a knot of bills from his pocket, paid the man and we went upstairs. 3. Not near to or in contact with: He smoked the weed, but, surprisingly, he kept it from me. He ~said it would make me too self-conscious, and he wanted those feelings as far away from us as possible; he said a good part of my beauty was that I wasn't conscious of my beauty. Isn't that funny? So we drank Bloody Mothers (Hennessey and tomato juice), which was hard to keep from him—he always did like to drink. 4. Out of the control or authority of: I was released from my mama's house, from dreams of hands holding me down, from the threat of hands not pulling me up, from the man that knew me, but of whom I did not know; released from the dimming of twilight, from the brightness of morning; from the love I thought had to look like love; from the love I thought had to taste like love, from the love I thought I had to love like love. 5. Out of the totality of: I came from a family full of women; I came from a family full of believers; I came from a pack of

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

witches—I'm just waiting to conjure my powers; I came from a legacy of lovers—I'm just waiting to seduce my seducer; I came from a pride of proud women, and we take good care of our young. 6. As being other or another than: He couldn't tell me from his mother; he couldn't tell me from his sister; he couldn't tell me from the last woman he had before me, and why should he—we're all the same woman. 7. With (some person, place, or thing) as the instrument, maker, or source: Here's a note from my mother, and you can take it as advice from me: A weak lover is more dangerous than a strong enemy; if you're going to love someone, make sure you know where they're coming from. 8. Because of: Becoming an alcoholic, learning to walk away, being a good speller, being good in bed, falling in love—they all come from practice. 9. Outside or beyond the possibility of: In the room, he kept me from leaving by keeping me curious; he kept me from drowning by holding my breath in his mouth; yes, he kept me from leaving till the next day when he said Leave. Then, he couldn't keep me from coming back.

Karen Long: Wow. Thank you. Thanks. I love the vessel you put those ideas in.

A Van Jordan: Thank you.

Karen Long: How did that come to you? Using the actual form of the dictionary to ignite your creativity?

A Van Jordan: Well, thanks for asking. That came to me kind of by happenstance. I had been spending so much time with the dictionary. To quote Harriet Mullin, was sleeping with the dictionary and in doing so, I had this bad idea that I was gonna use the words from the 1936 spelling bee, these big words. And I was trying to shoehorn them in different poems and it just was, it was a bad idea. It didn't work. But while I was spending time with the Oxford English dictionary, I would come across prepositions and I'd be shocked to see how long the definitions were.

Karen Long: How elastic they are.

A Van Jordan: I thought, do I actually know the definition of “to” and “with,” and “from,” so I just get lost in them. And as I was reading them, it almost felt like a little narrative was developing through reading the, the variations of the definition. And I started going back to the poem that was trying to write about that night. And I was trying to see how I was using the prepositions, which is something that for poets it's not necessarily the thing that's usually focused on because the nouns and the verbs are the image stars. And they often carry the stress and things like that. But the prepositions are kind of the connective tissue that kind of can lead you from one image to the next. And I thought, well, what would happen if I decided to privilege the preposition instead of the mountain of the verb, and this is the result.

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karen Long: And it carries so beautifully. I felt I could hear Magnolia trying to right size her notions of what love might be. . . But I also felt in that beautiful phrase about “the weak lover,” I felt Morrison, her voice saying, “Wow, watch for that.” Love all the way.

A Van Jordan: . . . I'll take it.

Karen Long: I also loved that line that I know you like from your very first book “Rise,” where you wrote, “The room was so quiet you could hear a gnat piss on cotton.” Where did that come from, Professor Jordan?

A Van Jordan: Well, that's the kind of language I would hear from one of my uncles, who's always had these very beautiful metaphors that were kind of colloquial and kind of vulgar. They were just perfect, you know? And so it was kind of a variation of one of those.

Karen Long: It's memorable. I'm not gonna forget that one. Thank you. And before we leave talking about MACNOLIA, I did discover that you have a great story about the serendipity of her as your subject in how you returned to Akron and found Macnolia Cox.

A Van Jordan: This is true. So I was living in Austin, Texas at the time, I believe. And I was traveling back and forth a couple times a year to see family, whatever, but mostly flying around the country doing readings and things like that. And my oldest brother was coaching a kid's basketball team and my nephew was playing. He was often telling me about the games and he started telling me about this high school kid who was really phenomenal. He says, oh man, you gotta come see this kid. And every time we would talk, he would bring him up. And he asked if I wanted to come to see this championship game of his, and I thought, “Nah.” One day I was going to do a reading and I was in the airport and went to Austin news and there on the cover of, I think it was either Sports Illustrated.

Karen Long: It was Sports Illustrated.

A Van Jordan: There was LeBron James and his St. Vincent St. Mary's Jersey. And I read the article. And as soon as I got off the plane and I called my brother, I said, I'm in. You know? So when I got to Akron the next morning, after watching that phenomenal game that he won — I won't go down that rabbit hole and start talking about LeBron — it was fantastic though. But what happened is that morning, I opened up the newspaper, the Beacon Journal and Mark S. Price, not to be confused with the point guard, had an article, this column called This Place, This Time. And it chronicled that day in history where Magnolia won the spelling bee. It was a pretty capacious article because it was two pages.

A Van Jordan: With pictures as a double page spread. Both of my parents were alive at the time. And as they each got up and came downstairs, I was asking them if they knew about this young

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

girl and they said no, and I was surprised because she would've been in their age group. And so I then thought, oh, this is really interesting. I was at the time writing about the Great Migration. At least I thought that's what I was writing about. And then when I saw her story, I realized that so much of her life and the life around her was emblematic at that time. And so the more research I did on her although I thought I was just gonna do a poem or two, it just sort of mushroomed into this larger project.

Karen Long: Well, you did an act of rescue in finding her and you actually found her niece.

A Van Jordan: I did. I did.

Karen Long: And through her niece, her mother's diary,

A Van Jordan: She gave me snippets of the diary.

Karen Long: Not the whole?

A Van Jordan: Yeah. I would ask her questions and then she would go to the diary.

Karen Long: What a blessing to have the family as part of the creative process.

A Van Jordan: I wanted to contact them and she was the only living relative. I had gone not far from where we are sitting right now, down to the Department of Vital Statistics and found her birth certificate, death certificate and, got the obit from the Journal here. So in this library. And found out about her niece and contacted her. And we met January of 2003 in a coffee shop in Akron.

Karen Long: You have such a visual memory. I can see it in your writing too. So you and I were back in touch in the summer of 2021 around the excitement for Zaila Avant-garde winning the whole kitten caboodle spelling bee. The joyfulness and the genius of that child and the supreme echo back to Macnolia. So tell us a little bit about how those events across time sit with you.

A Van Jordan: I was pretty emotional watching. And the thing about it was when I think about Macnolia the thing that really attracted me to her story was that she is that age as a child where it's sort of that friction point where you could go in either direction in terms of shifting into gear. And so she had all the potential to take off. Um, but this event just kind of snuff that out. I think sometimes we forget both how impressionable someone can be at that age, but also how indelible events can be for a person at that age. And seeing Zaila and the support that she had.

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karen Long: And her family.

A Van Jordan: And as you, um just mentioned her joy it was so evident that she had this great support system in her life and I couldn't help but to think wow. I wonder if Macnolia had grown up in a world where outside of her own household, she could have had the same kind of support, you know? Um, could she have won that...?

Karen Long: Yes. And could she have become the doctor that she had the idea of becoming? So you mentioned to, I think a journalist in Arizona, that you had kind of a, I think the word was crappy high school experience with reading. You didn't have novels, you had more like readers under-resourced, I guess, would be the word we'd use now. Um, how did you find your gear?

A Van Jordan: Oh, that's a great question. I think part of it was just living inside my mind a bit like sort of having a world onto myself and, and always sort of protecting that. And even having just small moments of encouragement outside, I had it at home, but it's so important to have it outside of home as well.

Karen Long: The validation of the world.

A Van Jordan: Right. I have to first say that I had no intentions of becoming a poet, never thought it was possible. I never had a dream of it. Even by the time I got to college. The thing that college did for me was solidified that I just thought, oh, I'll never write a book. This is not for me, you know? I became an English major and had very encouraging professors, but at that point I was still in that phase where you're sort of in reverence to the things that you're reading. And so I was a bit starstruck,, the anxiety of influence was there. Yes. And just, there was just no way in my mind that I saw myself in that, in that image.

A Van Jordan: And then I moved to DC. And in DC the thing that I was surprised by was the artists and the arts class of folks who were there making a living as artists off their art. And I met musicians, visual artists, poets, filmmakers, actors and they were just folks, I would just randomly meet in bookstores, or I go to an open reading and then suddenly this person is a friend and they're making art. And I realized that I didn't have that growing up here in Akron. There was no one in my life, like when I thought about someone being successful, I thought they were either gonna be an attorney or, or a school teacher or something like that. So all of the kind of artistic uh, dreams or whatever I had, I felt I had to tamp those down and be more practical. Ah and then coming from a very working class family, you think, okay, you're going to get a job, good salary benefits. Right? And so nothing in the art seemed to translate to that. As I met different writers they encouraged me. One of them was a writer, Joe Diaz Porter. It was one of the first people who said, look, I know you have some poems. Mm. And I want you to come to this microphone and share some, some poems.

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karen Long: Were you a student at Howard then? Or were you working?

A Van Jordan: No, this was many years later. I was actually working as a journalist right. Going to the microphone after Joe, at the time he was going by DJ Renegade, as a performance poet. He was encouraging me to get to the microphone. The first time I read a poem, it was a bad poem, but still the thing that surprised me was how closely people were listening. And so you would write something in the quiet of your room and you think this is, this is for you. No one else is gonna hear it. So there's this kind of unvarnished truth there. And then you're asked to kind of go out and share it and you get out there and you realize that there are these moments when people are gonna gasp or this moment when someone's gonna laugh at the right time.

A Van Jordan: And you realize, man, people are really listening to me. And it dawned on me that in the course of my day, particularly in this body as a black male, I didn't have people who were listening that closely and listening just to hear it and to take it in without judgment. And for the first time I felt like, okay, people are both listening closely and I'm getting affirmation back. And there are folks who are connecting to what I'm saying. So this thing that was in my head was not just in my head. It was in their heads as well. And that became very seductive. And I kept chasing that. I just had to come back for more. Um, and eventually I ended up going back to grad school to study creative writing and just taking it from there.

A Van Jordan: But initially I was thinking this was gonna be a hobby. And then the idea in my mind was that still with this very kind of Midwestern work ethic idea in my head that I had to do something else. I remember seeing my dad retire from Goodyear Tire + Rubber, and he worked at Goodyear for 50 years. And he started with 16. They found out how young he was to let him go. He came back when he was 18 and retired when he was 68. And with that, I realized it was the first time I had seen my dad kind of sitting at home. And I realized that everyone in my family has this, this great work ethic, but not much of a play ethic.

A Van Jordan: Because of their strong work ethic. There hasn't been time for, for hobbies and, and leisure and things like that. I really wanted to kind of break that mold. And I thought at the time that that's what this was gonna be. Poetry was gonna be this hobby, but having that, like I said, that kinda working class sensibility, I had to turn into a job. And and, and found that there were writers who were working at universities, getting paid salaries, getting benefits.

Karen Long: I feel like Robert Hayden would so appreciate that.

A Van Jordan: Oh. Absolutely.

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karen Long: It feels perfect. That's the name that attaches to yours.

A Van Jordan: Oh, I was very purposeful in choosing his name.

Karen Long: Yes. Oh, I didn't realize you got to.

A Van Jordan: There was a list of former professors who taught at the University of Michigan and I saw his name and I cannot believe it was available.

Karen Long: Did you ever meet him?

A Van Jordan: No, I never, never met him. You know, he died in 1980. And I was at Buchtel High School here in Akron.

Karen Long: Oh my goodness. You didn't overlap. Except in the Pantheon.

A Van Jordan: Exactly.

Karen Long: And now we'll pause for a short break. The Asterisk* is a project of the Cleveland Foundation to bring more readers and listeners into conversation with the best writers in English. In this case, recipients of the Anfield Wolf Book Award. We'll now return to the conversation.

Karen Long: I'm really curious about your work with students because you've been in so many places and you've been at Rutgers and of course, Michigan, and this year you're at Stanford. Does geography change the nature of the classroom?

A Van Jordan: I think geography and the institution both change. University of Michigan and Stanford are highly selective institutions. The students at Stanford are students who probably would not have gone to most public institutions. So they're very well prepared and what I've come to find is that they have as much soul as any student I've had anywhere else. But their preparation just makes for a smoother semester. At the time I've been at Michigan, it's been a bit more diversity in the classroom, both racial, cultural diversity, but also class. The most diverse campus and classroom I've ever been in and taught at was Rutgers University in Newark. And in that, on that campus is probably the most diverse state institution in America.

Karen Long: Did not know that.

A Van Jordan: I had a semester in which I had neither an African American student or a white student but had African students and Caribbean students and, first-generation Latinx students

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Asian students, Arab students, most first-gens in that class. Very, very exciting classroom to teach in.

Karen Long: The energy is so different, very different, very different. I think monocultures are bad. On the environment, they're bad for us.

A Van Jordan: That's true. That's a good parallel.

Karen Long: Well, I'm gonna have to take a course at Rutgers before I hang it up. Because that sounds so appealing. I was very interested to read professor Jordan that you were drawn to this, the art and practice of protest, even as an undergraduate at Wittenberg College in the middle of Ohio. That interest is finding some more voice in your upcoming collection. Can you talk about that?

A Van Jordan: So the upcoming collection is using Shakespearean characters, primarily black characters. Caliban from *The Tempest*, his mother Sycorax, who doesn't actually appear in the play, but who's mentioned quite a bit, Othello from that play and Aaron the Moor from *Titus Andronicus*. Those three or four figures are like a lot of the Jewish characters in Shakespearean plays. Um, their characters are often besmirched before they have an opportunity to sort of present themselves.

Karen Long: To speak.

A Van Jordan: To speak even. Yes. And so you have this, this maligning of their, their character to the audience and to one another on stage and among the characters. It reminded me of, of the ways in which we are first introduced to the victims of...

Karen Long: Police violence...

A Van Jordan: Police violence, and encounters of African Americans with police. Yep. And you first hear that, um this person possibly had a juvenile record or a warrant or something or some other sort of characterization of....

Karen Long: Or their mother, their boyfriend were bad people.

A Van Jordan: Exactly, exactly. You know, and so you hear these things and you wonder, okay, what's the, what's the larger story here? And you find out later because that person's mother or their spouse or their sibling, or someone comes out and they say, oh, well this person started a community garden here, or this person played trombone, their marching band or whatever you start hearing these stories about these people and you realize that that was not the character that was killed. That was someone else that they were sort of

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

justifying this kid. And when I read about Tamir Rice in Cleveland, it stood out to me because it reminded me of when I was a kid. I was with my brother going to a shopping Plaza in Cuyahoga Falls, which we call Caucasian Falls, when I was a kid.

Karen Long: Seriously. I can attest.

A Van Jordan: So we were there, my mom was seeing a seamstress and we were sort of killing time in this plaza cuz we were bored sitting there with her and we're walking around and these cops came and pulled up like hot up on the sidewalk of the plaza we were walking on, pulled their guns out. I was in third grade.

Karen Long: Oh my God.

A Van Jordan: You know? And we were in church clothes. But in their minds they said, oh, we got this call, someone called said you know, two suspicious men were walking around here shoplifting, you know? And so someone...

Karen Long: Had called that in?

A Van Jordan: Someone had called that in. And when I heard about Tamir rice one of the justifications was that they thought he was, they, they heard that there was a man mm-hmm, <affirmative> in the park carrying a gun

Karen Long: Man with a gun

A Van Jordan: Man with a gun. And then when you, when you see the video and you, you hear the audio to this, uh they initially said that they shot him within two seconds and they said uh, show me your hands three times stuff. But what happens is that when you see the video, the car doesn't even come to a full stop, hasn't settled.

Karen Long: It felt as if the car skidded farther than it intended to go and also greased the sense of panic.

A Van Jordan: And so from the passenger seat, he starts shooting this kid. And their justification was that, well, this gun looked like a real gun, but he didn't have a chance to even pull the gun out to show them the gun. It's almost like Schrödinger's cat at that point. You haven't seen the gun, so you don't know what this thing is that you have in your mind. So you hear all of this before you see the video evidence. Yes. Before you hear his mother talk about him. Before you hear anything else before you even see this cherubic picture of him which you see the kid it's like, this is a child, so all of that sort of played a role in shaping this new collection.

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karen Long: But what connected some writing more than 400 years old to this in your head?

A Van Jordan: Reading it now, reading those plays now and watching the news now. Also just thinking about early modernism and what was happening around race and the ways in which England in the late 1500s was going through a kind of “Make England Great Again” trying to get the black Moors as Queen Elizabeth says, out of England and it was the same kind of attitude towards skin color. This was where it really emanated from was not, um some people make the argument, oh, Spanish Moors, but no, she specifically said the black Moors. Hmm. And so at that time with not just Shakespeare, but other early modern plays, you hear these references to Moors, Jewish characters and they're often talked about in these disparaging ways, but it's also around humor and there's a good deal of scholarship now that's being done on this and that carries out into the streets. You come out of the theater and the folks in the theater don't look like the characters that they're laughing at and they go out into the streets and they see one of these people that's been represented in the play. And that's their idea of that person.

Karen Long: You know, and it's traveled for centuries,

A Van Jordan: It's traveled for centuries and we still see it now. And so when you, when you hear these stories and you, you read some of that early modern literature, and then you pick up the newspaper or your phone or whatever nowadays, and you read it in the news, it's very similar rhetoric being used.

Karen Long: I had a professor who used to say a joke is a truth that went out and got drunk. So when people say, I'm just kidding. You're actually saying what you want to say.

A Van Jordan: Yeah, yeah.

Karen Long: Well, I'm so excited about this upcoming collection, when will Norton publish it?

A Van Jordan: I, I have no idea. It just, it just turned it in.

Karen Long: Oh, might not even be this year then.

A Van Jordan: It usually takes about a year. I was happy to turn into them. I'm just happy to be at this stage

Karen Long: Congratulations on that. Before I ask you to read us something from “When I Waked, I Cried to Dream Again,” which is from *The Tempest*, would you speak for a minute about your fellowship with the other Anisfield-Wolf poets? Victoria Chang told me you reached

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

out to her when she won in 2021 and that you said this is a different kind of acknowledgement.

A Van Jordan: Well, Victoria is great. Just a wonderful poet and it's like someone who I often read for inspiration. I still read poets of other generations for inspiration, but it's great to have peers who I can turn to, they have a body of work now that I can turn to. Um, and Adrian Matika is one of my closest friends.

Karen Long: And Peter ho is, oh, Peter

A Van Jordan: Ho Davies is in the English department. He's like, he's a very close friend.

A Van Jordan: Having friends, like Victoria and Adrian and, and Peter um, I'm always inspired by what they're doing in their work. Peter's last book. I remember reading it and telling him how much it meant to me because my wife and I also went through IV Fand knew what that experience was like. And it's just great having peers who kinda keep you going.

Karen Long: And so remarkable to move from a time and place where you didn't imagine an art life to having a fellowship.

A Van Jordan: Exactly, exactly.

Karen Long: Good on you.

Karen Long: So I think you brought with you the first poem from "When I Waked, I Cried to Dream Again." It. Is there a setup you want to give us?

A Van Jordan: So the first half of the book is primarily talking a good deal about The Tempest. And this is, Sycorax is supposedly uh, as powerful of a, I guess for lack of a better term, a witch as Prospero is a warlock. But she doesn't appear. And so I wanted to give her a voice to kind of kick us off and bless the journey of the rest of the book.

Karen Long: Thank you.

A Van Jordan: So this is called Hex.

The day of the spell was the day of cast shadows,
of diaphanous figures whipped clean of fear,
angels ablaze sailing a coastline of hushed tête-à-têtes,
adagio tenor wails laced with rage, smoke rising
from the wails, from the laughter; just when

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

the last local trains crawled into stations;

just when televisions grew verdigris in homes, obsolete
from indolence; just when black signatories erased
their names and put on their boots, cirrus streaks formed
on the skyline of the city. A mother held her
barely alive son, the son to whom she vowed
protection from harm. Having thrown a circle

of goofer dust to enclose her enemies, she raises
a totem over her head. It's now time: Let her wield
the words of black declensions, new vowels,
the best nouns of home training, of damn good sense.
Let her sit for a spell, wipe sleep from her eye.
Let her obtain a license for what's lethal

from whatever God has taken her image,
whenever the sun comes over the buildings,
whenever the moon weighs more than the sun,
more than Pisces and Neptune. Walk to
a street corner with plenty of witnesses,
where you'll bear no isolation,
sing your words facing North or even higher.

Now, walk backward through the chains
of time from each past and current hindrance
to our future. Invoke the names of those
not ceding privilege in boardrooms, the ones who oppress
to their graves. Now summon each forgotten spirit,
each fallen son. Bless each prayed-up grandmother,

each open door and vivid corridor. Bless the pains
spared you, vicarious to you, passed down in your blood,
carrying you through the dangers and the echoes of time.
Remember: family echoes within your body; history
pulls through you as you move through a day.
Raise them in this... prayer, let's call it,

to that God who took your image.
Go to the tree, to the home, to the street corner,
and spread these words—tossing wreaths,
spinning incantations—where torn

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

life collapsed under a last breath.

Karen Long: Thrilling.

A Van Jordan: Thank you.

Karen Long: The ancestors joined us in that conjuring. Thank you.

Karen Long: So before we say goodbye, please let our listeners think about what you are reading and what you might be recommending these days.

A Van Jordan: So the book I'm spending the most time with right now is John Keene's new and selected poems, Punks. It's incredible. It's incredible. I can't recommend it enough. I haven't been able to read anything else.

Karen Long: The MacArthur foundation got it right when it came to him.

A Van Jordan: Yes. Yes they did.

Karen Long: That's a wonderful note to end on, and I thank you for all you do for us narrowly as Anisfield-Wolf readers, and all you do broadly.

A Van Jordan: Thank you so much.

Karen Long: The Asterisk* is brought to you by the Cleveland Foundation. The executive producer is Alan Ashby with help from producer Tara Pringle Jefferson. Cleveland public school students working with the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society wrote and performed our original score. I'm Karen Long, manager of the prize. Visit anisfield-wolf.org to learn more on the history of the award, about previous winners and upcoming events. And thank you for listening.