Classic Poetry Series

Ai Ogawa

- poems -

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Ai Ogawa (21 October, 1947 - 20 March, 2010)

Florence Anthony was a National Book Award winning American poet and educator who legally changed her name to Ai Ogawa (Japanese: ???). She won the National Book Award for Poetry for Vice.

Ai, who has described herself as Japanese, Choctaw-Chickasaw, Black, Irish, Southern Cheyenne, and Comanche, was born in Albany, Texas in 1947, and she grew up in Tucson, Arizona. Raised also in Las Vegas and San Francisco, she majored in Japanese at the University of Arizona and immersed herself in Buddhism.

Career

She has received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and various universities; she has also been a frequent reader-performer of her work. Ai holds an M.F.A. from the University of California at Irvine. She is the author of Dread (W. W. Norton & Co., 2003); Vice (1999), which won the National Book Award for Poetry; Greed (1993); Fate (1991); Sin (1986), which won an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation; Killing Floor (1979), which was the 1978 Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy of American Poets; and Cruelty (1973). She has also received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Bunting Fellowship Program at Radcliffe College. She teaches at Oklahoma State University and lives in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Ai considers herself as "simply a writer" rather than a spokesperson for any particular group.

Much of Ai's work was in the form of dramatic monologues. Regarding this tendency, Ai commented:

"My writing of dramatic monologues was a happy accident, because I took so much to heart the opinion of my first poetry teacher, Richard Shelton, the fact that the first person voice was always the stronger voice to use when writing. What began as an experiment in that voice became the only voice in which I wrote for about twenty years. Lately, though, I've been writing poems and short stories using the second person, without, it seems to me, any diminution in the power of my work. Still, I feel that the dramatic monologue was the form in which I was born to write and I love it as passionately, or perhaps more passionately, than I have ever loved a man."

She legally changed her name to "Ai," which means "love" in Japanese. She said "Ai is the only name by which I wish, and indeed, should be known.

Since I am the child of a scandalous affair my mother had with a Japanese man she met at a streetcar stop, and I was forced to live a lie for so many years, while my mother concealed my natural father's identity from me, I feel that I should not have to be identified with a man, who was only my stepfather, for all eternity."

Reading at the University of Arizona in 1972, Ai said this about her self-chosen name: "I call myself Ai because for a long time I didn't want to use my own name, I didn't like it... it means love in Japanese. But actually I was doing numerology, and A is one and I is ten and together they make eleven, and that means spiritual force and so that was the name I wanted to be under. And it also means the impersonal I, the I of the universe. I was trying to get rid of my ego. I can also write it as an Egyptian Hieroglyph."

Death

The Guggenheim- winning poet, died on March 20 at age 62, of complications from cancer, in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Eserleri:

Cruelty (1973)
Killing Floor (1979)
Sin (1986)
Fate (1991)
Greed (1993)
Vice: New and Selected Poems (1999)
Dread: Poems (2004)
Why Can't I Leave You?
No Surrender (2010)

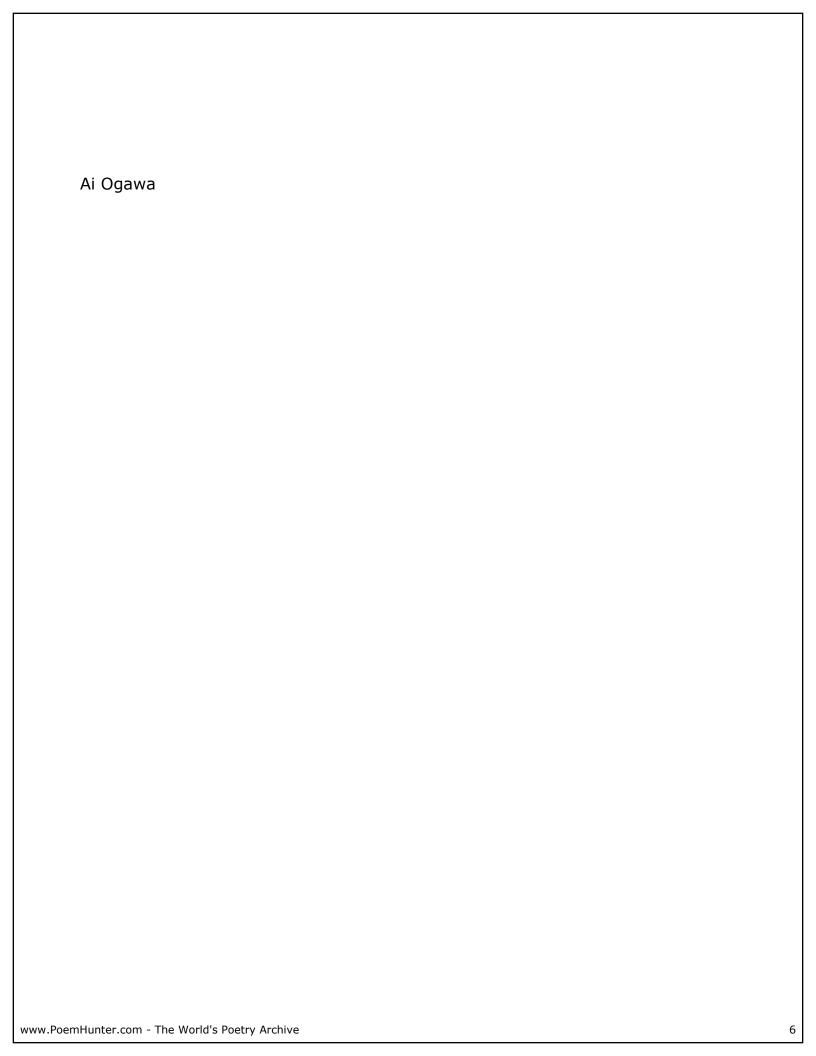
Conversation

We smile at each other and I lean back against the wicker couch. How does it feel to be dead? I say. You touch my knees with your blue fingers. And when you open your mouth, a ball of yellow light falls to the floor and burns a hole through it. Don't tell me, I say. I don't want to hear. Did you ever, you start, wear a certain kind of dress and just by accident, so inconsequential you barely notice it, your fingers graze that dress and you hear the sound of a knife cutting paper, you see it too and you realize how that image is simply the extension of another image, that your own life is a chain of words that one day will snap. Words, you say, young girls in a circle, holding hands, and beginning to rise heavenward in their confirmation dresses, like white helium balloons, the wreathes of flowers on their heads spinning, and above all that, that's where I'm floating, and that's what it's like only ten times clearer, ten times more horrible. Could anyone alive survive it?

Anonymous submission.

Grandfather Says

" Sit in my hand. " I'm ten. I can't see him, but I hear him breathing in the dark. It's after dinner playtime. We're outside, hidden by trees and shrubbery. He calls it hide-and-seek, but only my little sister seeks us as we hide and she can't find us, as grandfather picks me up and rubs his hands between my legs. I only feel a vague stirring at the edge of my consciousness. I don't know what it is, but I like it. It gives me pleasure that I can't identify. It's not like eating candy, but it's just as bad, because I had to lie to grandmother when she asked, " What do you do out there? " " Where?" I answered. Then I said, "Oh, play hide-and-seek." She looked hard at me, then she said, " That was the last time. I'm stopping that game." So it ended and I forgot. Ten years passed, thirtyfive, when I began to reconstruct the past. When I asked myself why I was attracted to men who disgusted me I traveled back through time to the dark and heavy breathing part of my life I thought was gone, but it had only sunk from view into the quicksand of my mind. It was pulling me down and there I found grandfather waiting, his hand outstretched to lift me up, naked and wet where he rubbed me. " I'll do anything for you, " he whispered, " but let you go. " And I cried, " Yes, " then " No. " " I don't understand how you can do this to me. I'm only ten years old," and he said, " That's old enough to know. "



Motherhood, 1951

Dear Saint Patrick, this is Peggy, Or maybe it's Pegeen to you, Well, I'm really Stella Mae. Peggy's my nickname, But anyway, will you please tell me What to do about the rattlesnake That's in my room? I know it's there, But I can't find it anywhere I search. I've ransacked the closet more than once, Because that's where we found the skin it shed. I even put the cat in there and shut the door, But he only went to sleep on my new dress Which he had clawed from a hanger. My grandma, Maggie, says you drove the snakes from Ireland And they came here to Arizona. She's right, you know For didn't a rattler kill our cat, Blackie? There he was beside the porch, stiff as a board And baby Florence saw it. She's only three and doesn't need to see death like that, not yet. If you can, let her believe for now That we will live forever. Anyhow, I'm pregnant again. I know I've sinned But I am paying for it. Don't make my girl suffer Because her mother used poor judgment And got herself in trouble out of wedlock. My mother's disappointed in me. My father doesn't care And says I don't have to marry Just to have a name for this one in the oven. Father says there's nothing wrong with our name And will serve the babe as well as any other, But mother is determined to give this one a legal father Like Baby Florence has, but only on paper. She doesn't have a father either, But she's got her granddad, he says And goes to work. He is a barber. Mother is a cook and she works longer hours, So I'm here with Baby Florence And that infernal snake all day. Outside, the new cat, dogs, chickens and hogs Roam about the yard, But they can't help me, can they? I keep praying, but you don't answer. I guess you've got no time for me, So armed with a shovel, I go in the closet once again And succeed in smashing a wall. Bits of plaster fall on my head,

But I don't mind. I'd rather be dead than never find the thing That crawls about the room Without fear of discovery. This morning, I woke up to find a coiled imprint At the foot of my bed. They say I am protected from harm Because the Virgin Mary put her heel Upon a snake's head and crushed it For the sake of all pregnant women. I am safe, I say to myself and pray for mercy And recall the dead baby diamondback we found last fall. It glittered like a tiny jeweled bracelet And I almost picked it up, Before I remembered my own warning to my daughter To never, ever pick up anything suspicious. I wish I'd done that with the man partly responsible For the mess I've made. The diamondback was like the lust I felt for him. It glittered so beautifully I had to pick it up and wear it for awhile, Then like some Lazarus, it came to life, By striking me with its poisonous fangs, Leaving me to pay for my crime Once by lying to myself And twice for good measure. Now I must suffer for my pleasure. I curse, slam the wall again And feel pain radiating from my navel Down through my bowels And am not able to get to the telephone To call my mother. I hear a splash and all of a sudden, The snake darts from the hole I made in the wall And crawls forward to slake its thirst. I grit my teeth, but stand stock still As the pain gnaws at my vitals. I try to show no fear As the snake takes a long drink of my water Then slithers away, But not fast enough to escape, As screaming with pain and rage with all the mother instinct I can muster, and in the Virgin Mary's name, I raise the shovel and smash the snake, Crushing its head, As I double over and fall beside it On the red, concrete floor. For awhile, a ripple runs through its body, Then it is still. When my pain subsides, I fall asleep And dream I'm dead

And hundreds of baby snakes are gathered at my wake. They crawl all over my body And I try to shake them off, Until I realize they're part of me.

At Saint Mary's Hospital, the nurses and my doctor Tell me how courageous I am And the nuns even come to visit me. They claim I have performed a miracle And should be canonized.
Saint Peggy. 'How does that sound?' I ask Saint Patrick aloud When left alone to hold my child. I smile at her and tell her she is blessed. The nuns have gone off to light some candles And in the chapel. They say they're praying for special dispensation But I don't need that and neither does my girl.

Back home, after a few days, I realize

That I made a mistake in thinking I could take away my sins When Mother tells me my new daughter is cursed Because I killed a snake the day she was born. 'What a cruel mother you are,' I tell her And she says, 'Yes, I'm just like all the others. I should have smothered you when you were born. I was so torn up inside, I nearly died for you And you repay me with not one bastard, but two. I never thought I'd call a whore my daughter. When I protest, she says, 'There's the door.' After that, I decide to ignore her And in a state between agitation and rest, I remember something I had forgotten. As I lay beside the snake. I saw a tiny bunch of eggs spill out of her And realized she was an expectant mother too And simply wanted a drink to soothe herself One desert afternoon When mothers must decide to save Or execute their children.

PASSAGE for Allen Ginsberg

Sunflowers beside the railroad tracks, sunflowers giving back the beauty God gave you to one lonely traveler who spies you from a train window as she passes on her way to another train station. She wonders if she were like you rooted to your bit of earth would she be happy, would she be satisfied to have the world glide past and not regret it? For a moment, she thinks so, then decides that, no, she never could and turns back to her book of poetry, remembering how hard it was to get here and that flowers have their places as people do and she cannot simply exchange hers for another, even though she wants it. That's how it is. Her mother told her. Now she believes her, although she wishes she didn't. At fifty-three, she feels the need to rebel against the inevitable winding down. She already feels it in her bones, feels artery deterioration, and imagines cancerous indications on medical charts she hopes will never be part of her life, as she turns back to the window to catch the last glimpse of the sunflowers that sent her thoughts on a journey from which she knows she will never return, only go on and on and then just go.

Riot Act, April 29, 1992

I'm going out and get something. I don't know what. I don't care. Whatever's out there, I'm going to get it. Look in those shop windows at boxes and boxes of Reeboks and Nikes to make me fly through the air like Michael Jordan like Magic. While I'm up there, I see Spike Lee. Looks like he's flying too straight through the glass that separates me from the virtual reality I watch everyday on TV. I know the difference between what it is and what it isn't. Just because I can't touch it doesn't mean it isn't real. All I have to do is smash the screen, reach in and take what I want. Break out of prison. South Central homey's newly risen from the night of living dead, but this time he lives, he gets to give the zombies a taste of their own medicine. Open wide and let me in, or else I'll set your world on fire, but you pretend that you don't hear. You haven't heard the word is coming down like the hammer of the gun of this black son, locked out of this big house, while massa looks out the window and sees only smoke. Massa doesn't see anything else, not because he can't, but because he won't. He'd rather hear me talking about mo' money, mo' honeys and gold chains and see me carrying my favorite things from looted stores than admit that underneath my Raider's cap, the aftermath is staring back unblinking through the camera's lens, courtesy of CNN, my arms loaded with boxes of shoes that I will sell at the swap meet to make a few cents on the declining dollar. And if I destroy myself and my neighborhood "ain't nobody's business, if I do," but the police are knocking hard

at my door and before I can open it, they break it down and drag me in the yard. They take me in to be processed and charged, to await trial, while Americans forget the day the wealth finally trickled down to the rest of us.