



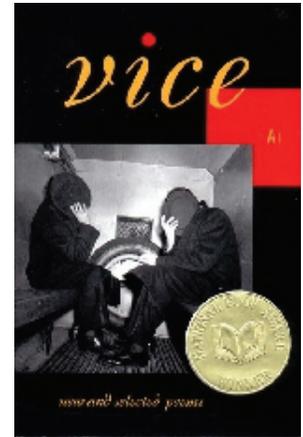
Voices from the Gaps

Vice by Ai

Capital vices occur in seven deadly forms - lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, anger, envy and pride - that gain particular notoriety when juxtaposed with their opposing moral virtues - self-control, temperance, generosity, zeal, kindness, love and humility. In essence, the latter moral virtues weigh and measure the actions of humanity, deeming that which is virtuous good and the former - vices or sins - as evil. Sin stealthily “creates [an inclination] to sin; it engenders vice by repetition of the same acts sin tends to reproduce itself and reinforce itself” (Catechism). Sin’s prolific nature, which visibly runs rampant across the American landscape in Ai’s *Vice*: new and selected poems, hastens the demise of a moral society by establishing roots that strangle not only the perpetrators of vice, but also the very nation defending them with closed eyes.

The acclaimed poet Ai, born in Albany, Texas, as Florence Anthony in 1947, grew up primarily in Tucson, Arizona, with her mother and stepfather. She legally changed her name to Ai, which means love in Japanese, in an effort to reclaim her identity: “Since I am the child of a scandalous affair my mother had with a Japanese man she met at a streetcar stop I feel I should not have to be identified with a man, who was only my stepfather, for all eternity” (Modern).

Ai describes her heritage as Japanese, Choctaw, Cheyenne, African American, Dutch and Scots-Irish, but has said “the insistence that one must align oneself with this or that race is basically racist” (Contemporary). In 1969, she received a B.A. in Japanese from the University of Arizona, followed by a M.F.A. from the University of California, Irvine, in 1971. Ai has served as a writer-in-residence at both Wayne State University and George Mason University and as a visiting associate professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Currently, Ai is an English professor at Oklahoma State University as well as the vice president of the Native American Faculty and Staff Association. Her numerous works include *Cruelty* (1973); *Killing Floor* (1979), recipient of the Lamont Poetry Award of the Academy of American Poets; *Sin* (1986), winner of the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation; *Fate* (1991); *Greed* (1993); *Vice* (1999), awarded the National Book Award for Poetry; and *Dread* (2003). Ai has also received recognition from the Guggenheim Foundation (1975) and the National Endowment for the Arts (1978, 1985).



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In *Vice*, a collection of seventeen new poems accompanies several selected poems from Ai's earlier works (*Cruelty*, *Killing Floor*, *Sin*, *Fate*, and *Greed*). Spanning well over twenty-five years, these dramatic monologues visualize the harsh reality of vice in America. Ai, however, does not define vice by the measure of virtue. In fact, *Vice* lacks virtue. Vice portrays all that bears semblance to the seven deadly sins without the reprieve of virtuous acts. Acts of sexual violence - rape, molestation - preface murder, suicide, prostitution and adultery. Spousal abuse forays into child abuse and ventures forth to the oppression of gender, race and class. There is pain and suffering through addictions that abandon the sense of self, while self-preservation assuredly lingers nearby to scatter greed, envy and pride. Showmanship absolves the betrayal of moral obligation or duty with the great icon of modernity - television - serving as the world's stage. Politicians, presidents and other actors intermingle with the crowded realities of inevitable and unending wars - abortion, AIDS and atomic bombs. Ai's collection presents an unrelenting assault of vice that need not be interrupted by virtue in order to serve as a moral compass for humanity.

The thematic succession of poetry in *Vice*, which becomes ever-increasingly grave and hopeless for the reader, parallels the effects of vice in society. In fact, many of the poems refer to a sense of drowning in an existence where "everyone is guilty" (*Vice*: "The Prisoner" 59). Whether one is a soldier, mother, hangman, child, starlet or religious fanatic, the triumph of vice pervades. Inevitably, it seems, vice takes on an innate form where "between the act and the actor / there can be no separateness" ("The Priest's Confession" 70). The actions become permanent extensions of the actor: "I'm the one dirty habit / I just can't break" ("I Can't Get Started" 39). While these negative extensions undoubtedly affect the perpetrators' victims, at some point the distinction between the two becomes cloudy. *Vice* multiplies, reciprocates and links generations indiscriminately, but not without the aide of prejudice: "You're damned in the cradle, / in the grave, even in Heaven. / Dying doesn't end anything" ("Pentecost" 41). Ai's attention to the many disparities of identity - whether race, gender or creed - with respect to the resulting effects of vice on one's identity complicate the matter further. Though none stands immune, a certain level of social hierarchy remains even within the bowels of vice: "We need them / they feed our superiority complexes" ("Evidence: From a Reporter's Notebook" 123). Vice infiltrates the waters of America. Some by virtue of identity drown, while others are spit back out of the pool to eternally cast judgment in the vicious circle portrayed in *Vice*.

Although dark in tone, the collection of dramatic monologues represented in *Vice* turns a piercing light on highly charged issues - the misuse of power and corruption in America at every level of society. Readers will immediately recognize the varying forms of such vice. Yet, many will struggle with digesting the reality, even though it may be seen with one's own eyes in black and white. Ai's *Vice* will forever alter the reader's view of the vice that builds America.



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