



Voices from the Gaps

Ai

*She must know the weight of a man's hand,
the bruises that are like the wounds of Christ. Her blood that is black at
the heart
must flow until it is as red and pure as His. And she must be pregnant
always
if not with child
then with the knowledge
that she is alive because of you. That you can take her life
more easily than she creates it,
That suffering is her inheritance from you
and through you, from Christ,
who walked on his mother's body
to be the King of Heaven.*

— “The Mother’s Tale,” Sin (1986)



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1947
- * Writes poetry
- * Multiethnic background, but states she does not want to be categorized as part of any race

Biography

In 1969, Ai – a word meaning “love” in Japanese – became the pen name for Florence Anthony. Over two decades earlier, Ai’s mother, then divorced from her first husband, was pregnant with Ai after an affair with Michael Ogawa, a Japanese man she met at a streetcar stop. When her former husband learned of the affair, he beat Ai’s mother. Although she subsequently attempted to abort the child, her family intervened and on October 21, 1947, in Albany, Texas, Ai was born. The surname recorded on her birth certificate was that of her mother’s first husband – Anthony – not her biological father – Ogawa. However, her mother soon was remarried to Sutton Haynes so throughout Ai’s childhood she was known as Florence Haynes. Ai, unaware of the details of her mother’s first marriage, returned to using her legal name – Florence Anthony, which she believed sounded

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more poetic – during graduate school. Her mother, horrified, then revealed the hidden past to Ai after twenty-six years. As a result, Ai legally changed her name to Florence Ai Ogawa: “I was forced to live a lie for so many years...I feel that I should not have to be identified with a man, who was only my stepfather, for all eternity.”

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Ai is the only name by which I wish, and indeed, should be known.

— (Modern American Poetry)

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Raised primarily in Tucson, Arizona, Ai also lived in San Francisco and Los Angeles as a child. “There were good times, but they were always eclipsed by bad times,” Ai recounts. Impoverished in San Francisco, her stepfather often spent entire days borrowing money in order to feed the family. Ai reiterates, “...my experience is not ‘the black experience’ – it’s simply the experience of having lived as a poor person.”

Ai’s multicultural background – a Japanese father and a Choctaw, Cheyenne, African American, Dutch and Scots-Irish mother – is, according to the poet, “so interesting that [she is] not bored with it” (*Pedestal Magazine*). Still, Ai refers to herself as “simply a writer”: “I don’t want to be catalogued and my characters don’t want to be catalogued and my poems don’t want to be catalogued. If a poet’s work isn’t universal, then what good is it?” Yet, Ai acknowledges that race is an important medium of exchange in America, which she seeks to transcend through her poetry.



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At the age of fourteen, while attending Mount Vernon Junior High School in Los Angeles, a poetry contest advertisement sparked Ai's interest. She began writing, but her family moved back to Tucson before she could submit her entry. Still, Ai discovered her talent for writing poetry, which later became a means for "express[ing] things that [she] couldn't do otherwise" (*Modern American Poetry*). In a 1978 interview, after the publication of her second book, *Killing Floor*, Ai attributes her greatest inspiration to fiction, primarily from Latin America. Yet, her taste for the works of older poets', such as Randall Jarrell, Galway Kinnell, Phil Levine, Cesare Pavese, Louis Simpson, and Gerald Stern, also guide her writing. In fact, in *First Loves: poets introduce the essential poems that captivated and inspired them*, Ai discusses her first encounter with Galway Kinnell's "The Bear," a seven-part, poetic representation of a bear hunt. She was a junior studying at the University of Arizona when Kinnell's poetry reading seemed to have "allowed [the audience] into some secret magical kingdom" (28) where the audience assumed the poet's identity. Ai appreciates the poem not only for this power of transformation, but also its "music of language and the beauty of the image, captured as if by camera." Kinnell's "The Bear," from which she readily recites lines, remains a source of guidance for Ai in her own creative process.

"My poems come from the unconscious – I'm irrevocably tied to the lives of all people, both in and out of time" (*Modern American Poetry*), Ai explains. Ai's unconscious produces both living and dead characters whom she introduces in dramatic monologue form to the reader: "This approach allows me to become someone else, like an actor...[People] think they're just masks for me, when in fact these are characters I'm creating" (*Pedestal Magazine*). Ai's use of the first person encompasses a multiple-voiced reality uninhibited by gender, race or creed. In addition, historical personas, such as John F. Kennedy and Imelda Marcos, as well as events, like the Manhattan Project and the 1992 South Central Los Angeles riots, often provide the premise from which Ai may "create an entire psychology" for many of the poem's narrators. Admittedly, Ai prefers scoundrels "because they are more rounded characters" (*Modern American Poetry*). Ai adds, "I'm not afraid to look a character in the eye and see his whole life." She lends a voice to characters otherwise unable to speak. She strives in the end for transcendence: "no matter what the characters go through, no matter what their end, they mean to live."

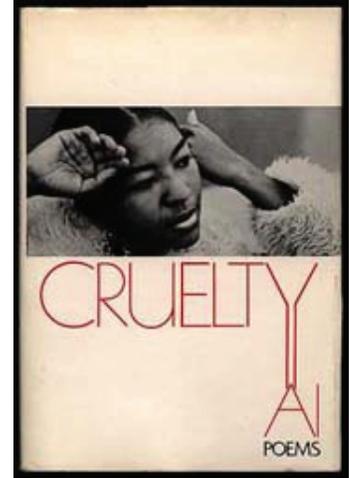


Biography continued

After receiving a B.A. in Japanese from the University of Arizona in 1969 and a M.F.A. from the University of California, Irvine, in 1971, Ai published her first book of poems, *Cruelty*, in 1973. The book's original title, *Wheel in a Ditch*, symbolized the chariot's wheels in Ezekiel's vision where the "spirit of man [is] trapped, stuck and not able to pull himself out" (*Modern American Poetry*). The collection, which abounds with sex and violence, expresses these trapped feelings of desperation as well as a sense of inevitable loss, which at times remains unidentified by the characters. Ai's intent is for the reader to recognize not only how people treat each other but also themselves, hence the title, *Cruelty*.

Over the next thirty years, Ai not only received recognition from the Guggenheim Foundation (1975) and the National Endowment for the Arts (1978, 1985), but also held fellowships at the Radcliffe (now Bunting) Institute (1975) and the Massachusetts Arts and Humanities (1976). She received the Ingram Merrill Award (1983) and a St. Botolph Foundation grant (1986). Ai also expanded her body of dramatic monologues into numerous acclaimed works including *Killing Floor* (1979), recipient of the Lamont Poetry Award from the American Academy of Poets; *Sin* (1986), winner of the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation; *Fate* (1991); *Greed* (1993); *Vice: new and selected poems* (1999), awarded the National Book Award for Poetry; and *Dread* (2003).

Ai dedicates her latest collection, *Dread*, to survivors of childhood trauma. Frustrated with the progress of her memoir – an on-going work in which Ai explores her self-proclaimed, "brushed aside" (*Pedestal Magazine*) racial heritage – she wrote these poems: "It's like the pressure was building, and I'd just say: 'I'll write a poem about it!'" As a result, some of *Dread*'s fictionalized characters originate for the first time from Ai's family history, including her mother and Japanese father.





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Biography continued

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*Mama says she was lost,
says she asked directions from my father
and doesn't know how they ended up in bed,
...
When I look in the mirror
sometimes I think I can see his face
imposed over mine,
although it's only an outline really
with a bare fact, a detail
my mother doled out grudgingly. I truly only see what he
left
going faster than any $E=mc^2$ formula
could take him,
escaping fatherhood like any other man
who hadn't planned on staying long,
my otosan, traveling light,
traveling at the velocity of darkness.*

— “Relativity” (2003)

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While contemporary culture often attempts to construct categories of identity, Ai – by emphasizing her own ethnic multiplicity – disturbs the cultural boundaries and destabilizes the positions of both the characters in her dramatic monologues and their readers. According to critic Claudia Ingram, the exposure “threaten the distinctions which that culture prizes as fundamental to identity and order” (“Writing” 174). In other words, the reader’s perception of violence through culturally marginalized voices connect the reader to the system of exclusion. While the narrators seem to be “trapped in social roles” (178), the reader’s recognition of this alienation “works to revise the limits on the meanings that may be made” (182) by forcibly feeding the reader a dose of the abjection that afflicts the “feared ‘outsiders’” (176). Ingram further suggests Ai’s poems may induce a shift in the public’s receptiveness of the narrators’ voices of violence, thus creating an awareness through which “disarmament of phobic violence” will ensue (190).



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The dramatic voices of violence in Ai's monologues also "reveal what happens to bodies that fail to live up to cultural ideals and norms of gender, race, and class. " According to Therese Catherine Irwin, the marginalized word spoken in the present tense creates a performance that, through repetition, produces meaning and a sense of self. By calling attention to sacrifice, Ai creates a narrative of voices that not only challenge traditional canonical literature, but also "the notion of what makes a viable body."

Ai's dramatic monologues defy the canon by questioning the American national identity. The emphasis on tragic violence – rape, murder, incest, suicide, abortion, and abuse – parallels her own belief that "violence is an integral part of American culture" (Modern American Poetry). In fact, in dealing with this seemingly inextricable cultural violence, Ai's preference for Shakespearean tragedies guides much of her work. This seems counterintuitive, however. For in a tragedy, the protagonist's moral struggle often ends in his downfall, whereas Ai's characters often remain in power, wielding vice across the landscape for generations. Consider, however, a line from *Measure for Measure*, which more accurately assesses Ai's portrayal of the collective American experience: "Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall" (2.1-38). As Ai suggests, the vice of violence must retain a systematic voice in order to maintain societal balance with virtue. The voice becomes, then, an essential part in a cultural circle of violence. Exacerbating this circuitous nature of violence is the notion of national entitlement: "I'm an American. / I shall not want. / There's nothing that doesn't belong to me" ("Blue Suede Shoes," *Sin*). In other words, we are a nation created, balanced, entertained and fueled by as much vice as virtue. We rise and fall when no one is listening. Ai's dramatic monologues provide a stage that enables us to hear each of our nation's tragic voices.

Ai has served as a visiting poet at both Wayne State University (1977-8) and George Mason University (1986-7), writer-in-residence at Arizona State University (1988-9), and visiting associate professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder (1996-7). She held the Mitte Chair in Creative Writing at Southwest Texas State University from 2002 to 2003. Currently, Ai is an English professor at Oklahoma State University as well as the vice president of the Native American Faculty and Staff Association. The poet continues to work on new poems as well as her first memoir.



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