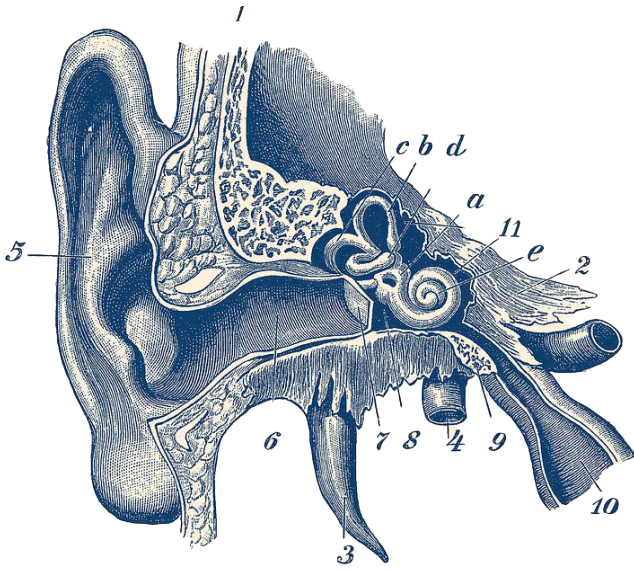


# THE UNSUNG MASTERS SERIES

*presents*

## POETS YOU LOVE



*unsung*  
V

## READING POETS THEY LOVE

READING #7

## **THIS IS A FREE E-CHAPBOOK**

produced for  
The Unsung Masters Reading Series  
on Tuesday, November 28, 2023  
at 8:00 PM Eastern / 5:00 PM Pacific

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The Unsung Masters Series brings the work of great, out-of-print, little-known writers to new readers. Each volume in the Series includes a large selection of the author's original writing, as well as essays on the writer, interviews with people who knew the writer, photographs, and ephemera. The curators of the Unsung Masters Series are always interested in suggestions for future volumes.

*Reading*  
**THE UNSUNG MASTERS SERIES**

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**CHEN METAK**

introduced by Tsering Wangmo  
Dhomba

**MARK CONWAY**

introduced by Nick Flynn

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**AI**

introduced by Paul Tran



**CHEN METAK**  
**1970 - 2022**



Chen Metak (which means ‘fire spark from Chentsa’) is the pen name for Sonam Tenpa who was born in 1970 in the Chentsa District in Amdo Province, Northeastern Tibet. He is a well-loved poet inside Tibet and known for expressing the absurdities and pain of life under Chinese occupation. In his blog Chen Metak wrote that the relationship between writing and society was one of ‘blood and flesh, sword and arrow, father and son.’ His books include *Ngatso Tinzhin Cho (Like Clouds We Float)* and *Lhozhud Kyi Chuzin (Southbound Clouds)*. Chen Metak passed away in September 2022 at the age of 52.

I chose to read Chen Metak because writing about freedom and writing about being Tibetan come with penalty inside Tibet. I admire his work for the subtle use of metaphors, puns, and styles, like other Tibetan writers, to escape censorship in Tibet. I am especially moved by the poem “A Stranger” where the speaker turns to the interrogator to confess the truth of a surveillance state. Having heard the pain, the listener cannot forget easily.

These poems are translated from Tibetan by the poet Bhuchung D. Sonam in the collection *Burning the Sun’s Braids*. (Blackneck Books, 2017)

—Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, author of *Revolute*

## A STRANGER

This is my guesthouse  
Where I close my eyes for a day.  
Stranger,  
Please come in,  
Sit on this chair,  
Enjoy a cigarette.  
I have a bottle of white wine  
A plateful of sunflower seeds  
Topped with two apples.  
This is our small feast.  
Please relax,  
Why do you stand up?  
I will never ask where you come from or  
Where you are going.  
Likewise,  
I will not ask why suddenly you knocked at my door.  
No interrogation here.  
Ah, stranger  
Drink your wine  
Nibble on sunflower seeds,  
Have an apple, and  
Then you can leave.  
After you go away,  
Shutting the door tightly  
I will have to cry –  
For that person  
Whose shadow the moon erased

Whose color the rain washed away  
Whose name the crow plucked out,  
For people like me, and  
For the ownerless who survive outside the door.  
Without a sound  
I have to cry once.

## GRASS PEOPLE

I turned into a grass man  
Without blood, without a heart  
Without a nervous system.  
On the way  
I met many other grass people like me,  
They made  
Strange sounds as  
Wind moves through haystacks,  
They vacillated left and right  
As if without spines.  
Passing by a mental health hospital  
An outrageous person rushed out of the iron gate  
Laughing and shouting –  
'Look! A grass man! A grass man!'  
Two grass people like me chased him inside.  
Knowing I was not him and  
Moving freely  
Outside that iron gate,  
I was happy  
Like the man who was happy  
Not being  
Turned into a grass man.



## THIS MORNING

This morning the light went off  
A dim sunlight shone with  
Dull chirping birds,  
Suddenly, suddenly  
This morning I forgot to charge my battery  
This morning I forgot to have my breakfast  
This morning I forgot to wash my face  
This morning I forgot to change my shoes  
This morning I forgot to ask ,‘how are you?’  
After arriving at the halfway mark  
There is no way to finish this poem  
I started yesterday with the same feeling ...  
There  
Is  
No  
Way  
To  
Finish  
It.

## HALF A POEM

Whenever I get free time

I write half a poem and

Store it in my bag.

A single poem cannot take me to the Pure Land

Nor can it drag me to hell.

A finished poem

Would be taken away by friends and strangers, and

To those who may like or dislike it.

An unfinished poem gives me

Pleasure and satisfaction, for now.

## IN NAKCHU

This evening,<sup>1</sup>

I am in Nakchu,

The crow is in Nakchu,

The ant is here too.

This evening,

Nakchu is our only common ground –

A long narrow street

A mound covered with prayer-flags

A statue of a Tibetan shaped from bronze

A fifty-step-long thangka of a civilization.

Three or four houses at regular intervals

With roof tiles falling off

Stand in the snows and wind over 4000 meters high.

The month of July appeared suddenly and then vanished,

It seems the clouds and rain have gathered in the balconies of houses,

Dragon and other such creatures

give voice to summer's laments

sticking their heads near my ears.

The crow has politics of propaganda

The ant has politics of government money

I have politics of poetry –

Sometimes together

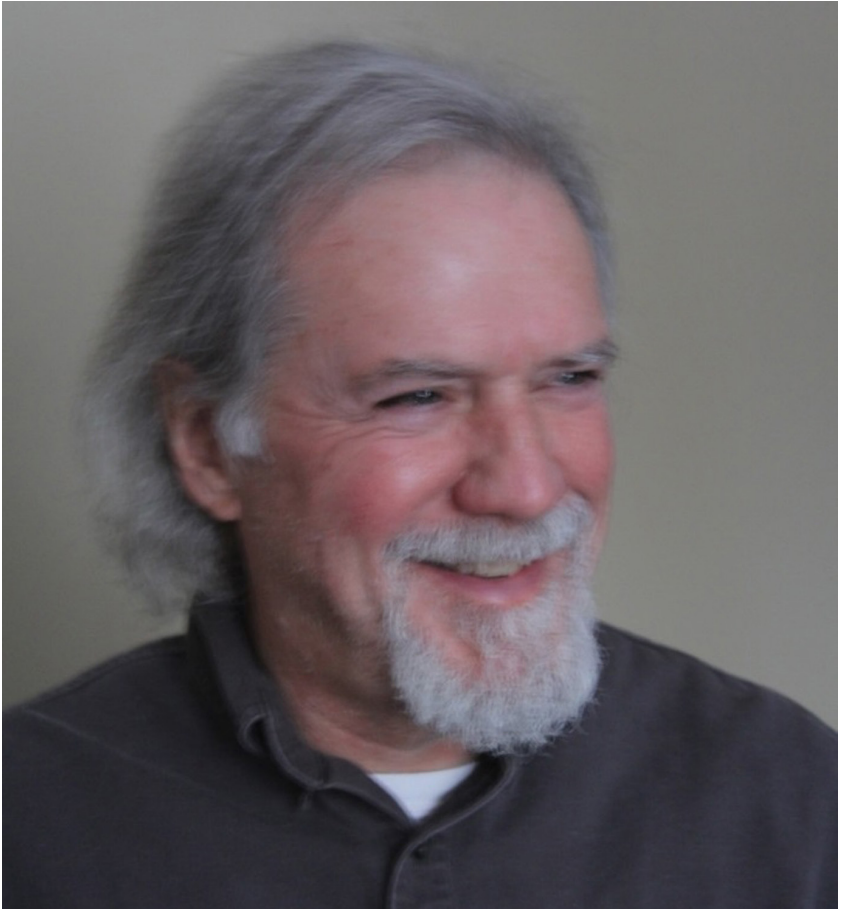
We sit

To debate some current issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Nakchu is a town over 300 kilometers to the east of Lhasa, Tibet's capital city.

<sup>2</sup> Thangka is a traditional Tibetan painting/art genre believed to have originated in India. The subjects may include buddhas, bodhisattvas or enlightened beings, meditational deities, great spiritual masters and mandalas. Most thangkas are scrolls usually mounted on silk brocade with a thin veil to cover the image.



**MARK CONWAY**



Mark Conway is a poet of the midwestern plains, as well as a poet (in the Blakean sense) of eternity. The prairie is his landscape, and he sees things in it that only one who has lived there forever and beyond could see. Beauty, and the shadow woven into that beauty. So death hovers at the edge of nearly every poem, not in a morbid way, but with an openness, a deep curiosity, often even with wry amusement.

—Nick Flynn, author of *Low*

Dreaming Man, Face Down



MARK CONWAY

Winner of the 2009 APJ Book Prize



## in the ruins

we drank in the remains of ruined buildings  
we sat in caves or wrecked houses  
on farms given back to the bank  
listening to men who'd been raised  
in ways that were lost  
we strained to make out the use of their news  
they were crazy or passed out white pills  
notched on the face with an x or the cross  
they drank from the flask and the mouth  
they came in and shook off the rain  
dismayed and inflamed :: calm and arcane  
the least one seethed chanting whitman for hours  
then wept at the dregs of the fire  
foam formed at the edge of their lips  
we drank and looked for something to drop  
waiting and sifting for signs  
inscribed in black chalk  
we were young we were sure  
we knew how to die but not how to last  
a small man who claimed he was blake  
raged all night and probably he was ::  
he had god in his sights  
white crosses shone in our eyes or maybe bad sunshine—  
in the ruins the men talked: seraphic and broken  
glowing with knowledge and garbage  
we sorted their mad sacred words  
these dog-headed guides to the life-after /  
and the life after that

## in the light

but still down  
the plain back road  
your un-lived lives hive  
and clog the trailing mind . . .  
to see as if the light  
went right through you :  
to hear as if words  
went through you :  
to see the dream—  
to see it's not a dream  
of what's to come  
but what came . . .  
your exhausted breath  
is sucked up by the pines  
you go on :: breathing  
as if you didn't know  
you were breathing  
walking the road as if  
you had no idea what it's like  
not to be alive

in the blizzard

the horses are filthy in their winter coats  
grubby and matted  
manes mended with hay ::  
they shuffle /  
heads down—flickering :  
limping homeward between  
snows like medieval pilgrims: seen  
and invisible /  
unseen and real . . .  
the blizzard continues and the world is the wind  
our eyes close to slits  
inside the drift and the howl  
the horses aren't ours / not even broken to ride  
still they help us get home  
as we look into the wind  
seeing nothing but whiteness ahead  
with them dark inside





# Any Holy City

Mark Conway

WINNER OF THE 2003 GERALD CABLE BOOK AWARD

## Day of My Dead

so the cicadas drone louder  
for the dead too  
are busy

I believe in the communion  
of the loving  
and the bitterly forgiven

I saw you here  
with these eyes  
the eyes that swear

you're no longer  
your body – it's true  
your spirit didn't rise

out of its gray  
casing but its smoke  
rose into orange

trees and clock-towers,  
cellophane  
and trash autographed –

briefly – by a parish of bone  
now divided  
on itself – all

depends on the body, though  
it's made to fail: still  
the spirit remains,

stays as long as suffering  
lasts, then seeps  
away, but



while there it pays and pays  
the surcharge  
of pain, remains

like a dog, barking,  
refusing to leave  
its cold master:

and then you're surprised  
to see the dead?  
though they often arrive

in grocery lines, in six frames  
of film, in part  
of a face that turns

away and turns almost  
into the face  
you love,

not the one  
you go down  
toward in dreams,

another, bafflingly  
alive, enjoying  
its time

which rides behind  
the present like a boat  
its wave;

we close the eyes  
of the dead  
because they open again,

staring for us  
up in the sky-filled instant,  
eyes brimming

with rain, all that remains  
from the time  
of our fine passing

## Has Been

If you're dead  
and you

are,  
go back to the forest  
where they make  
the green  
trees  
that burned you, go back  
to the smoke;

you can  
go

inside.  
What's your problem,  
that it goes  
away?

Heaven is nothing,  
a small place,  
a small price  
to pay for being,

and you my friend  
have been.

It's said

some even  
cling, I mean  
until cleavers  
lop their red  
talons at the wrist,

I meant

in vain  
they gripped  
to stay,  
here.



## The Book of Isaac, Burning

*I will let him come freely into my presence  
and he can come close to me;  
who else, indeed, would risk his life  
by coming close to me? Jeremiah*

### 1. Coming In

Before this life,  
there was another, so  
convincing in its ignorant display  
of rain and lowlands  
we thought it might  
go on forever. We were  
mistaken, in fact,  
forgiven, you see, in that life  
we were young.

Now nights  
my son wonders  
what was here before he came,  
I could tell him  
it was March. I remember  
pitted snow,  
the rotten roads.

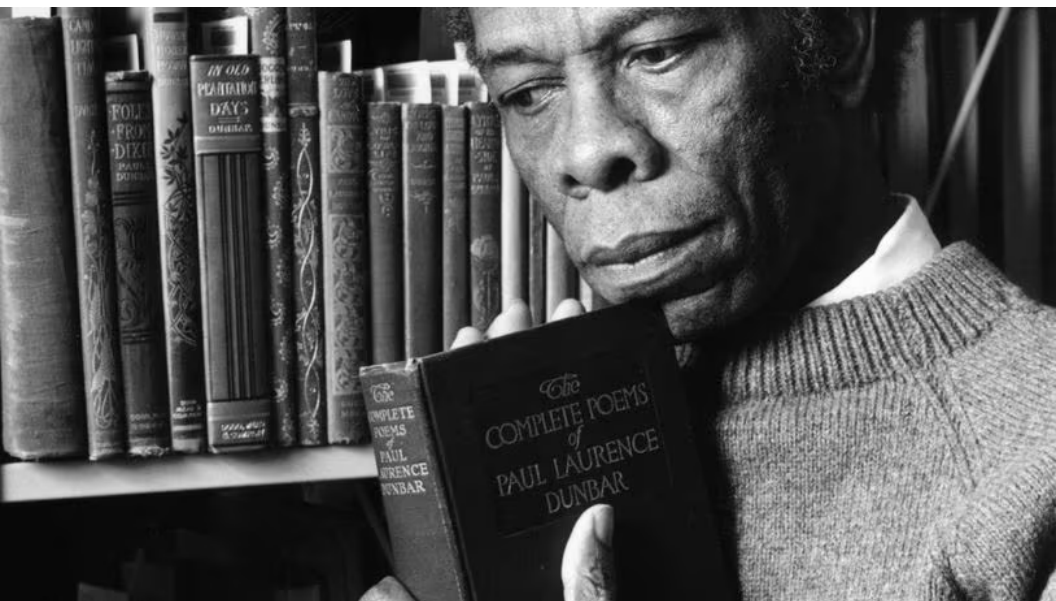
For weeks the prairie sky  
was the dead-color of clay  
gashed by firelight – flames  
from the distant  
burning cities, remember?

There was a turmoil in the broken snow

fields, like the narrowing  
in the coming night. He is young, once  
I was young and from the slim  
candlelight of late dinner  
he became.

Red, red the opened mouth,  
shaped-valentine – laughing,  
and then he came.





**HERBERT WOODWARD  
MARTIN**



The Poet Herbert Woodward Martin is a pioneer of the Contrapuntal form that has become popular in circles I move through. Unfortunately, the poet isn't as well known in those same circles. I wanted to highlight this living writer who has had so much quiet influence on my peers and me.

—Jamaal May, author of *The Big Book of Exit Strategies*

## CONTRAPUNTAL PIECE NO. 2

A Smile, a Hand, a Heart: Love Begins This Way

You are on the right.

I am on the left.

Opposition.

Counterpoint

THIS HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH MORALS.

Are you saying?

Recommending.

Is it...?

Sorrow?

Gravel against grain.

We Counter

THERE IS NO MODERATE GROUND.

We stand at too far a distance

The distance is too far for hands

BEST, THE HEART SPANS SPACE.

Does it?

Does it.

I contemplate you on hectic

ground

Yet if the heart gestures, the element is in the sound

No, in the graph that moves up, moves up,

moves down

Speak individual, not for other men

Where truth resides

Emotion is a word

The ear positive to hear

The eye is sure to see

The tongue definite to speak

TRUTH THEN IS A STATE OF MIND



## **RWANDA #1**

This woman's body is blistered with death.  
Soon her swollen arms will break her bonds;  
The heated water of her body will splay  
The ground where she lies and bless it.  
Her head lies five feet away from her body  
Screaming silence. The dust of revolution  
Chokes her mouth. Her eyes bleed sunlight.  
Sweet death is the harvest of this land.  
This woman is but one victim who ran  
As far as she could to escape the machete  
Which with one immaculate swing severed  
Her body from its intangible soul.  
Who in this village, seeing such a sight,  
Dare speak, with a civilized tongue  
Forbidding the earth to welcome another  
Living being into corruption?

## RWANDA #9

This salve of youthful blood  
Balms the sores of the country  
Still she does not heal;  
The wound is too great.  
The pulse runs in halting breaths  
Too hard to draw.  
The trees weep their leaves;  
Water washes over dry tubers.  
The tender wood is exposed  
To lice and vermin;  
Gray worms exit the body.  
The river gives an embrace  
To the floating bodies.  
Who among the dead  
Can bury the dead?  
The land has lost  
Its sweet negotiations.  
We turn the earth;  
Nothing is there.  
Slowly the land  
Recedes into water.  
There are no sacred prayers  
Found in its folds.  
The sun, the last  
Of our martyrs  
Is dead.

## IN MEMORY OF ETHRIDGE KNIGHT

(1931-1991)

Death walked up close to me  
Through the mud and mines of Korea.  
His voice became my white prison;  
his touch my exquisite fear.  
So when the doctors approached  
with that medicinal air which  
prevents them from speaking truth,  
I demanded nothing less. They said:  
“You are terminal, Mr. Knight.”  
I replied, “I came here with that fact  
slapped indelibly on my ass.”  
Words are sharp like a surgeon’s knife  
Cutting near the bone of diagnosis;  
they must be as invasive as this cancer  
which has the morals of a rapist.  
My grandmother’s words  
Rounded the corners of her wisdom.  
She kept faithful records of the living,  
the dead, and the missing.  
My words are chosen like her gait,  
a century old and careful,  
the strut of woman, the smile of promise.  
We go down as we come up.  
Our ancestral shrine is all that matters.

## CONTRAPUNTAL PIECE NO. 1

A Fable of Two Thoughts

for Sally

Around the corner from where I am,

    If I could tell you what love is I would

A young man stands in his waiting.

    Once I thought it fleeting past my door

Down a summer's street a girl, becoming woman, comes closer

    Possessed the glimpse in the eyes' crevice.

They will seize each other's existence.

    I do not know what love is

“Lady,” he will say, “the smell of your black hair

    Suspect I never will,

The touch of your lips against my collar-bone,

    Since my too brief gaze at the soul has

Attract, the strength of me.”

    Vanished between the lines of sunrise and twilight

If lovers can love and feel no shame

    Ambivalence is the emotion between these lines

They can part and feel no duty.

    Where sunrise and twilight guard

    The soul-secret in its primeval.





**WENDY BARKER**  
**1942 - 2023**





Wendy Barker (1942-2023) was a love poet of sparkling breadth: she loved beautiful objects, beautiful lovers, a complicated family, complicated students, the 1960's, and the teaching of literature. She was funny as well as profoundly wise. Of her many prizewinning books I will share just three from *One Blackbird at a Time*, which won the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry in 2015. It is a book celebrating the life of the classroom; Barker taught at the University of Texas in San Antonio for decades, and the poetry generated by that immersion has much to teach and delight us all."

—Alicia Ostriker, author of *The Volcano and After*

## TEACHING *MRS. DALLOWAY* I'M THINKING

How I'd like to buy flowers, how I'd like to place a sterling  
silver bowl of peonies or cut-glass vase of tulips and irises  
on the laminate seminar table in this windowless room,  
and I'm thinking how I'd like to arrive before the one student  
always a half-hour early, how I'd like to greet each of them  
at the door, inquire after their sisters and cousins, their tíos  
and abuelitas, and comfort the one who's been fired  
from his job. Every Tuesday another novel about the modern  
condition, those catchy phrases we use: "alienation  
and fragmentation"—while for the past three weeks Jill,  
the debate team captain on two scholarships, hasn't said  
a word because, she told me sobbing at the break, her boyfriend  
was found bloody in his apartment, shot by her brother  
off his meds, and Angie, dispatching for Pleasure U Hot Line,  
her shift moved to graveyard, slumps dozing  
in her chair. Now Jeffrey is saying, "She's snobbish, Clarissa,  
I don't like her, who cares about her maids and  
her flowers, but she's right, I mean, she gets it, nothing like  
a great party." It's the dinner hour, though no bells chime  
on this campus, and only two of us have actually heard Big Ben,  
have ever strolled through Regent's Park, ridden on  
a red double-decker. But nobody around this table wonders  
why Septimus hurls himself out the window, nobody  
needs PTSD explained, and when Marita asks, "Wasn't it Woolf  
who filled her pockets with stones and walked into  
a river?" nobody says "weird," their two dozen heads bent over  
pages littered with post-its. I'm thinking how I want

to say something, mend this rent in the air the way Clarissa  
gathers the raveled threads of her ripped dress with a needle,  
the way she draws everyone into her party, but already it's time  
to pack up our pens, our notebooks, head out on the crowded  
interstate, past all the newly constructed buildings with no  
balconies, no wrought iron railings, these multiple stories  
of steel and glass, mirrored so no one can see into them.

## TEACHING “THE RED WHEELBARROW” THE 30<sup>th</sup> TIME

I know I've explained how  
    Williams didn't like tapping  
tired old symbols, but  
    these sophomores are  
    not convinced. They've  
got that wheelbarrow hard  
    at work: it symbolizes life, since  
it's red, like blood; they've  
    got it carrying feed, back and  
    forth from the coop to keep  
those chickens alive so  
    they can be busy laying eggs,  
though they're white, which  
    stands for death. Susanna  
    says the poem is about  
her grandpa, up at four  
    and out to the barn. I'm tired  
of chatter, of words dragged  
    around to mean what they  
    don't. I'm tired of stories,  
of somebody always *doing* something, or not  
    doing what somebody  
wishes they would. Tired of the whole  
    subject-verb-object paradigm. I'd  
    even like erasing  
the prepositions in the poem,  
    deleting “beside” and “with.” I want

only the barrow, feathers, and  
                    water left from rain. Separate,  
                    not even in relation, as  
with the elements of a T'ang Dynasty poem,  
                    the kind Williams loved,  
the sort he and  
                    Rexroth translated. Just  
                    the Chinese characters  
like drawings, the blank  
                    spaces breaths, each one  
itself: wheelbarrow, red, rain water, chickens,  
                    white. There's  
                    a quiet I want that won't happen  
in this discussion,  
                    a silence that comes after  
long rain, the hush  
                    when you swear you can  
                    feel the swirl of  
planets, the shifting  
                    of rocks. I should lead  
the class outside; we could  
                    sit on the grass, look  
                    at a red bud  
tree, an empty  
                    stone bench. But somehow  
I end up telling a story  
                    after all, the one about

Williams the doctor  
having just explained to a mother and father  
their child would die, or  
was it the child  
had died and  
he had to break the news. Then  
he walked down  
the hall and stared out the window  
at a wheelbarrow and a few  
chickens. Now  
the whole class is with me. I don't  
remember where  
I heard the story. I'm not sure  
it's even true. The poem itself is  
silent. You can't hear  
any clucking.







**AI**  
**1947-2010**

My father molested me as a child. I remember details—the shower door sliding open, the dim kitchen light bright on the blade of the wood carving knife, Terminator 2 on the television—and the rest I let visit at whim, unprepared for the wiles and wickedness of their whims. For years forgetting and silence that both constitutes and comes from forgetting helped me feel I could have a different story, or a different life, and when I learned there was no life but this, no other story but the next chapter of this story, I tried arrogantly anyway to make from memory and silence anything to avenge me. That anything was the lyric poem. That vengeance was knowledge.

The first poem I truly made, and the first I made about being a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, was a persona poem in the voice of my father. To know why he hurt me, I had to understand who he was, which meant I had to find out how being born in South Vietnam, coming of age during one war and enlisting during another, losing that war and suddenly abandoning his five kids and wife embattled with cancer for freedoms the United States promised, resettling in California where he had to acquire a new language, give himself a new name, deliver newspapers early in the morning and drink away abjection late into the night—how did all of that, and more than I could ever fathom, combine to reveal the real thing I wanted to know: myself.

Persona is a difficult rhetorical mode. From an actual or imagined person, the poet fabricates a speaker that is

simultaneously a mask and mirror for looking into their own life. That speaker must seem so real that the reader not only forgets but also becomes the fabrication, collapsing the reader, poet, and speaker into a single self. That collapse brings all involved to knowledge about themselves and each other. When done well, that new self arrives at compassion. Given that altruism is a learned trait, or that there exists little reward for empathy, or that under neoliberal capitalism such a gesture has been appropriated as currency, the challenge of the persona poem is a challenge of public and private human nature. Yet from the publication of her first poetry collection in 1973 to her final in 2010, Ai challenged, a word that also means "to invite or demand to engage," human nature with her persona poems.

Ai, born Florence Anthony in 1947, assembled in the space of five lines or a sprawling sequence a cast marginalized and misrepresented by society, literature, and history. Her characters do terrible things. They think terrible thoughts. And in 2013, in the introduction for her posthumous collected work, Yusef Komunyakaa asserts that each character "comes out of the brutal silence of America." They are the idea of America itself: the desire for self-determination achieved through violence, violence that annihilates the self, annihilation that makes self-determination impossible, the desire to be exceptional begetting more violence. At times they are too real. Every time,

whether J. Edgar Hoover or a kid who kills his family, they are built from the elemental tools of lyric poetry—image, phonic echo, line, syntax, and juxtaposition—and they are built for knowledge.

For poems of vexed interiority, Ai received an American Book Award and the Lamont Poetry Award, fellowships from Guggenheim Foundation, Radcliffe College, and National Endowment for the Arts, and a professorship at Oklahoma State University. For *Vice: New and Selected Poems*, published by W. W. Norton, she won the National Book Award in 1999. She emerged during the Cold War, when the United States propagated creative writing programs and promoted certain writers to produce literature that support its imperialist project for global ascendancy, and she made such evil speak. She made the dramatic monologue her medium, when voyeuristic or ethnographic or confessional autobiography was coin to the realm, and she maintained this even as lyric and avant garde communities failed to comprehend or make space for her the way they did for, namely, white men working from time to time in persona. Self-identifying as Japanese, Choctaw-Chickasaw, Black, Irish, Southern Cheyenne, and Comanche, Ai was complex. She was unrelenting in her complexity, difficulty, and moral ambiguity.

This is why I sing of her now. Because history had begun its erasure during her lifetime, and because history will continue this enterprise in her absence, I sing to remind at least myself of her, of the fact that she named herself “Ai,” the Japanese word for “love.” Therefore, I sing

to say that love made her poems. Love makes poetry. Love is ultimately the path, backward or forward or both, through the poem to the self. And if we look at the titles of her books, we might see the places that path delivers us from: *Cruelty* (1973), *Killing Floor* (1979), *Sin* (1986), *Fate* (1991), *Greed* (1993), *Vice* (1999), *Dread* (2003), and finally, *No Surrender* (2010).

—Paul Tran, author of *All the Flowers Kneeling*

## TWENTY YEAR MARRIAGE

You keep me waiting in a truck  
with its one good wheel stuck in the ditch,  
while you piss against the south side of a tree.  
Hurry. I've got nothing on under my skirt tonight.  
That still excites you, but this pickup has no windows  
and the seat, one fake leather thigh,  
pressed close to mine is cold.  
I'm the same size, shape, make as twenty years ago,  
but get inside me, start the engine;  
you'll have the strength, the will to move.  
I'll pull, you push, we'll tear each other in half.  
Come on, baby, lay me down on my back.  
Pretend you don't owe me a thing  
and maybe we'll roll out of here,  
leaving the past stacked up behind us;  
old newspapers nobody's ever got to read again.

## THE KID

My sister rubs the doll's face in mud,  
then climbs through the truck window.  
She ignores me as I walk around it,  
hitting the flat tires with an iron rod.  
The old man yells for me to help hitch the team,  
but I keep walking around the truck, hitting harder,  
until my mother calls.  
I pick up a rock and throw it at the kitchen window,  
but it falls short.  
The old man's voice bounces off the air like a ball  
I can't lift my leg over.

I stand beside him, waiting, but he doesn't look up  
and I squeeze the rod, raise it, his skull splits open.  
Mother runs toward us. I stand still,  
get her across the spine as she bends over him.  
I drop the rod and take the rifle from the house.  
Roses are red, violets are blue,  
one bullet for the black horse, two for the brown.  
They're down quick. I spit, my tongue's bloody;  
I've bitten it. I laugh, remember the one out back.  
I catch her climbing from the truck, shoot.  
The doll lands on the ground with her.  
I pick it up, rock it in my arms.  
Yeah. I'm Jack, Hogarth's son.  
I'm nimble, I'm quick.

In the house, I put on the old man's best suit  
and his patent leather shoes.

I pack my mother's satin nightgown  
and my sister's doll in the suitcase.

Then I go outside and cross the fields to the highway.

I'm fourteen. I'm a wind from nowhere.

I can break your heart.



## 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?

## SALOME

I scissor the stem of the red carnation  
and set it in a bowl of water.  
It floats the way your head would,  
if I cut it off.  
But what if I tore you apart  
for those afternoons  
when I was fifteen  
and so like a bird of paradise  
slaughtered for its feathers.  
Even my name suggested wings,  
wicker cages, flight.  
Come, sit on my lap, you said.  
I felt as if I had flown there;  
I was weightless.  
You were forty and married.  
That she was my mother never mattered.  
She was a door that opened onto me.  
The three of us blended into a kind of somnolence  
and musk, the musk of Sundays. Sweat and sweetness.  
That dried plum and licorice taste  
always back of my tongue  
and your tongue against my teeth,  
then touching mine. How many times?—  
I counted, but could never remember.  
And when I thought we'd go on forever,  
that nothing could stop us

as we fell endlessly from consciousness,  
orders came: War in the north.  
Your sword, the gold epaulets,  
the uniform so brightly colored,  
so unlike war, I thought.  
And your horse; how you rode out the gate.  
No, how that horse danced beneath you  
toward the sound of cannon fire.  
I could hear it, so many leagues away.  
I could see you fall, your face scarlet,  
the horse dancing on without you.  
And at the same moment,  
Mother sighed and turned clumsily in the hammock,  
the Madeira in the thin-stemmed glass  
spilled into the grass,  
and I felt myself hardening to a brandy-colored wood,  
my skin, a thousand strings drawn so taut  
that when I walked to the house  
I could hear music  
tumbling like a waterfall of China silk  
behind me.  
I took your letter from my bodice.  
Salome, I heard your voice,  
little bird, fly. But I did not.  
I untied the lilac ribbon at my breasts  
and lay down on your bed.  
After a while, I heard Mother's footsteps,  
watched her walk to the window.  
I closed my eyes

and when I opened them  
the shadow of a sword passed through my throat  
and Mother, dressed like a grenadier,  
bent and kissed me on the lips.

## PASSAGE

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.

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