

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Ai Ogawa  
- poems -**

**Publication Date:**  
2012

**Publisher:**  
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

## 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. 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.

### <b>Career</b>

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."

**<b>Death</b>**

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

# Barquisimeto, Venezuela, October 27, 1561

Today it rained vengefully and hard  
and my men deserted me.  
My kingdom was as close  
as calling it by name. Peru.  
I braid your hair, daughter,  
as you kneel with your head in my lap.  
I talk softly, stopping to press your face to my chest.  
Vera Cruz. Listen. My heart is speaking.  
I am the fishes, the five loaves.  
The women, the men I killed simply ate me.  
There is no dying, only living in death.  
I was their salvation.  
I am absolved by their hunger.  
El Dorado, the kingdom of gold,  
is only a tapestry I wove from their blood.  
Stand up. My enemies will kill me  
and they won't be merciful with you.  
I unsheathe my dagger. Your mouth opens.  
I can't hear you. I want to. Tell me you love me.  
You cover your mouth with your hands.  
I stab you, then fall beside your body.  
Vera Cruz. See my skin covered with gold dust  
and tongues of flame,  
Transfigured by the pentecost of my own despair.  
I, Aguirre the wanderer, Aguirre the traitor,  
the Gilded Man.  
Does God think that because it rains in torrents  
I am not to go to Peru and destroy the world?  
God. The boot heel an inch above your head is mine.  
God, say your prayers.

Ai Ogawa

# 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?

Ai Ogawa

## Cuba, 1962

When the rooster jumps up on the windowsill  
and spreads his red-gold wings,  
I wake, thinking it is the sun  
and call Juanita, hearing her answer,  
but only in my mind.  
I know she is already outside,  
breaking the cane off at ground level,  
using only her big hands.  
I get the machete and walk among the cane,  
until I see her, lying face-down in the dirt.

Juanita, dead in the morning like this.  
I raise the machete—  
what I take from the earth, I give back—  
and cut off her feet.  
I lift the body and carry it to the wagon,  
where I load the cane to sell in the village.  
Whoever tastes my woman in his candy, his cake,  
tastes something sweeter than this sugar cane;  
it is grief.  
If you eat too much of it, you want more,  
you can never get enough.

Ai Ogawa

# Disregard

Overhead, the match burns out,  
but the chunk of ice in the back seat  
keeps melting from imagined heat,  
while the old Hudson tiptoes up the slope.  
My voile blouse, so wet it is transparent,  
like one frightened hand, clutches my chest.  
The bag of rock salt sprawled beside me wakes, thirsty  
and stretches a shaky tongue toward the ice.

I press the gas pedal hard.  
I'll get back to the house, the dirt yard, the cesspool,  
to you out back, digging a well  
you could fill with your sweat,  
though there is not one reason I should want to.  
You never notice me until the end of the day,  
when your hand is on my knee  
and the ice cream, cooked to broth,  
is hot enough to burn the skin off my touch.

Ai Ogawa

# 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."

Ai Ogawa

# Killing Floor

## 1. RUSSIA, 1927

On the day the sienna-skinned man  
held my shoulders between his spade-shaped hands,  
easing me down into the azure water of Jordan,  
I woke ninety-three million miles from myself,  
Lev Davidovich Bronstein,  
shoulder-deep in the Volga,  
while the cheap dye of my black silk shirt darkened the water.

My head wet, water caught in my lashes.  
Am I blind?  
I rub my eyes, then wade back to shore,  
undress and lie down,  
until Stalin comes from his place beneath the birch tree.  
He folds my clothes  
and I button myself in my marmot coat,  
and together we start the long walk back to Moscow.  
He doesn't ask, what did you see in the river?,  
but I hear the hosts of a man drowning in water and holiness,  
the castrati voices I can't recognize,  
skating on knives, from trees, from air  
on the thin ice of my last night in Russia.  
Leon Trotsky. Bread.  
I want to scream, but silence holds my tongue  
with small spade-shaped hands  
and only this comes, so quietly  
Stalin has to press his ear to my mouth:  
I have only myself. Put me on the train.  
I won't look back.

## 2. MEXICO, 1940

At noon today, I woke from a nightmare:  
my friend Jacques ran toward me with an ax,  
as I stepped from the train in Alma-Ata.  
He was dressed in yellow satin pants and shirt.  
A marigold in winter.

When I held out my arms to embrace him,  
he raised the ax and struck me at the neck,  
my head fell to one side, hanging only by skin.  
A river of sighs poured from the cut.

### 3. MEXICO, August 20, 1940

The machine-gun bullets  
hit my wife in the legs,  
then zigzagged up her body.  
I took the shears, cut open her gown  
and lay on top of her for hours.  
Blood soaked through my clothes  
and when I tried to rise, I couldn't.

I wake then. Another nightmare.  
I rise from my desk, walk to the bedroom  
and sit down at my wife's mirrored vanity.  
I rouge my cheeks and lips,  
stare at my bone-white, speckled egg of a face:  
lined and empty.  
I lean forward and see Jacques's reflection.  
I half-turn, smile, then turn back to the mirror.  
He moves from the doorway,  
lifts the pickax  
and strikes the top of my head.  
My brain splits.  
The pickax keeps going  
and when it hits the tile floor,  
it flies from his hands,  
a black dove on whose back I ride,  
two men, one cursing,  
the other blessing all things:  
Lev Davidovich Bronstein,  
I step from Jordan without you.

Ai Ogawa

# 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.

Ai Ogawa

# Nothing But Color

I didn't write Etsuko,  
I sliced her open.  
She was carmine inside  
like a sea bass  
and empty.  
No viscera, nothing but color.  
I love you like that, boy.  
I pull the kimono down around your shoulders  
and kiss you.  
Then you let it fall open.  
Each time, I cut you a little  
and when you leave, I take the piece,  
broil it, dip it in ginger sauce  
and eat it. It burns my mouth so.  
You laugh, holding me belly-down  
with your body.  
So much hurting to get to this moment,  
when I'm beneath you,  
wanting it to go on and to end.

At midnight, you say see you tonight  
and I answer there won't be any tonight,  
but you just smile, swing your sweater  
over your head and tie the sleeves around your neck.  
I hear you whistling long after you disappear  
down the subway steps,  
as I walk back home, my whole body tingling.  
I undress  
and put the bronze sword on my desk  
beside the crumpled sheet of rice paper.  
I smooth it open  
and read its single sentence:  
I meant to do it.  
No. It should be common and feminine  
like I can't go on sharing him,  
or something to imply that.  
Or the truth:  
that I saw in myself  
the five signs of the decay of the angel



and you were holding on, watching and free,  
that I decided to go out  
with the pungent odor  
of this cold and consuming passion in my nose: death.  
Now, I've said it. That vulgar word  
that drags us down to the worms, sightless, predestined.  
Goddamn you, boy.  
Nothing I said mattered to you;  
that bullshit about Etsuko or about killing myself.  
I tear the note, then burn it.  
The alarm clock goes off. 5:45 A.M.  
I take the sword and walk into the garden.  
I look up. The sun, the moon,  
two round teeth rock together  
and the light of one chews up the other.  
I stab myself in the belly,  
wait, then stab myself again. Again.  
It's snowing. I'll turn to ice,  
but I'll burn anyone who touches me.  
I start pulling my guts out,  
those red silk cords,  
spiraling skyward,  
and I'm climbing them  
past the moon and the sun,  
past darkness  
into white.  
I mean to live.

Ai Ogawa

# 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.

Ai Ogawa

# Passing Through

"Earth is the birth of the blues," sang Yellow Bertha,  
as she chopped cotton beside Mama Rose.  
It was as hot as any other summer day,  
when she decided to run away.  
Folks say she made a fortune  
running a whorehouse in New Orleans,  
but others say she's buried somewhere out west,  
her grave unmarked,  
though you can find it in the dark  
by the scent of jasmine and mint,  
but I'm getting ahead of myself.  
If it wasn't for hell,  
we'd all be tapdancing with the devil  
Mama Rose used to say,  
but as it is, we just stand and watch,  
while someone else burns up before salvation.  
"People desire damnation, Bertha," she said,  
unwrapping the rag from her head  
to let the sweat flow down the corn rows,  
plaited as tightly as the night coming down  
on the high and mighty on judgment day.  
They say she knew what was coming,  
because she threw some bones that morning.  
She bent down to pick up her rag which had fallen  
and when she straightened up, her yellow gal  
had gone down the road.  
"Go then," she called out, "I didn't want you no how."  
Then she started talking to herself  
about how Old White John caught her milking cows.  
"He wrestled me to the ground and did his nastiness."  
He said, "your daddy was a slave and his daddy  
and I'm claiming back what's mine."  
It was July. I remember fireworks going off outside.  
When Bertha come, so white  
she liked to scared me to death,  
I let her suckle my breast  
and I said, "All right, little baby,  
maybe I'll love you. Maybe."  
Mama Rose said she did her best,

but it's hard to raise a gal like that  
with everybody thinking she's giving them the high hat,  
because she's so light and got those green eyes  
that look right through you. She frightens people.  
Even men, who're usually wanting to saddle up  
and ride that kind of mare, can't abide her.  
They're afraid if they try her, they'll never be the same.  
The only ones willing are white.  
They're watching her day and night,  
but they know John swore to kill any man  
who touched her,  
because lo and behold, he owns up to her.  
He's proud of her. Nobody can believe it.  
He's even at her baptism.  
He buys her cheap dresses and candy at the store.  
He hands it to her out the door,  
because she can't go in.  
He won't, he won't stop looking at her  
like it's some kind of miracle she was born  
looking so much like him and his people.  
It's a warning, or something.  
"It's evil turning back on itself," said the preacher  
the Sunday cut clean through by the truth,  
by the living proof, as Old John stood up in church  
and testified to the power of God,  
who spoke to him that morning,  
telling him he was a sinner.  
He died that winter. Horrible suffering, they say.  
He had a stroke on the way to town.  
His car ran off the road and he drowned.  
They say Bertha found him.  
They say she ran all the way to town for the doctor,  
who told her, "I am not a colored doctor,"  
so she went and got the sheriff.  
He listened for a while, then he locked her in a cell.  
He said he knew she was guilty of something.  
Well, after a while, Rose went down there  
and I swear she nearly had a fit.  
"Get my daughter out here," she said.  
"How can you lock up your own brother's child?"  
The sheriff knew it was true, so finally he said,  
"You take her and don't ever cross my path again."

When Bertha passed him on the way out,  
he tripped her with his foot.

When she got off the floor, she said,  
"Every dog has its day."

From that time to this is a straight line,  
pointing at a girl,  
who doesn't even have shoes anymore,  
as she runs down the road,  
throwing off her ragged clothes, as she goes,  
until she's as naked as the day she was born.  
When she comes to washing hanging on the line,  
she grabs a fine dress and keeps on running.  
She's crying and laughing at the same time.  
Along comes a truck that says J. GOODY on the side.  
The man driving stops to give her a ride.  
He swings the door open on the passenger side,  
but Bertha says, "Move over, I'll drive."  
When she asks him why he stopped,  
he says, "I know white trash, when I see it.  
You're just like me, but you're a girl. You're pretty.  
You can free yourself. All you have to do  
is show a little leg and some titty in the big city."  
He gave her fifty cents and a wink  
and she started thinking she might as well turn white.  
She got a job waiting table in a dance hall.  
One night, the boss heard her  
singing along with the band.  
He said, "Why don't you go up on stage,"  
and she said, "I play piano too."  
He said, "Howdy do."  
From then on, she made everybody pay  
one way, or another.  
She got hard. She took lovers—  
fathers, sons, and husbands.  
It didn't matter,  
but once in a while, she heard her mother's voice,  
saying, "You made the wrong choice,"  
and she felt the blues  
and she let loose with a shout.  
"Lordy," said the boss, "you sound colored."  
More and more people came to hear her sing,

but they kind of feared her too.  
They said, she was too white to sing the blues like that.  
It wasn't right.  
One night, she got to talking with the boss.  
He walked round and round the office, shaking his head,  
saying how much he'd lose,  
if she stopped singing the blues.  
"How often can you find a treasure like mine," he said,  
laying his hand on her shoulder,  
then he said, "If I weren't so old,"  
and his voice dropped off to a whisper,  
then he said, "I got the answer now, sweet Roberta.  
Go on down to the dressing room and wait."  
It didn't take long.  
He came in and set a jar on the table.  
"What do I do with this?" Asked Bertha.  
He said, "you're going to pass for colored."  
Suddenly, she was wearing blackface.  
Suddenly, she was safe on the other side  
of the door she slammed on the past  
and it was standing open at last.  
She could come and go as she pleased  
and no one saw her enter, or leave.  
She was free, she was freed,  
but she didn't feel it  
and she needed it to be real.  
She went on, though. She flowed like a river,  
carrying the body of a man,  
who had himself a nigger, because he could.  
She lived. She got old.  
She almost froze one cold spell  
and she got up from her sickbed  
and told her daughter  
she got during the change of life  
it was time to go.  
She sewed a note to her ragged coat.  
It said, "This is the granddaughter of Mama Rose."  
She put fifty cents in her hand  
and went to stand with her at the bus stop.  
She would not return, but her child  
had earned the right to go home.

When I got off the bus,  
a hush fell over the people waiting there.  
I was as white as my mother,  
but my eyes were gray, not green.  
I had hair down to my waist and braids so thick  
they weighed me down.  
Mother said, my father was a white musician  
from another town,  
who found out her secret  
and left her and me to keep it.  
Mama Rose knew me, though, blind as she was.  
"What color are you, gal?" She asked  
and I told her, "I'm as black as last night."  
That's how I passed, without asking permission.

Ai Ogawa

# 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  
&quot;ain't nobody's business, if I do,&quot;  
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.

Ai Ogawa

# Salomé

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.

Ai Ogawa

# 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.

Ai Ogawa

# 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.

Ai Ogawa

# Woman to Man

Lightning hits the roof,  
shoves the knife, darkness,  
deep in the walls.  
They bleed light all over us  
and your face, the fan, folds up,  
so I won't see how afraid  
to be with me you are.  
We don't mix, even in bed,  
where we keep ending up.  
There's no need to hide it:  
you're snow, I'm coal,  
I've got the scars to prove it.  
But open your mouth,  
I'll give you a taste of black  
you won't forget.  
For a while, I'll let it make you strong,  
make your heart lion,  
then I'll take it back.

Ai Ogawa