

AWAKE IN THE RIVER



poems and stories by
JANICE MIRIKITANI



AWAKE IN THE RIVER

Poetry / Prose by
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Special Thanks : To the sisters and brothers in the communities
who like water, feed roots,
make springs move,
fill the seas, sustain me.

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.
And yet,

we were not devoured
we were not humbled
we are not broken.

For My Father

He came over the ocean
carrying Mt. Fuji
on his back/Tule Lake on his chest
hacked through the brush
of deserts
and made them grow
strawberries

we stole berries
from the stem
we could not afford them
for breakfast

his eyes held
nothing
as he whipped us
for stealing.

the desert had dried
his soul.

wordless
he sold
the rich,
full berries
to hakujines
whose children
pointed at our eyes

they ate fresh
strawberries
with cream.

Father,
I wanted to scream
at your silence.
Your strength
was a stranger
I could never touch.

iron
in your eyes
to shield
the pain
to shield desert-like wind
from patches
of strawberries
grown
from
tears.

Sing With Your Body

for my daughter, Tianne Tsukiko

We love with great difficulty
spinning in one place
afraid to create

spaces

new rhythm

the beat of a child
dangled by her own inner ear
takes Aretha with her

upstairs, somewhere

go quickly, Tskuiko,

into your circled dance

go quickly

before your steps are
halted by who you are not

go quickly

to learn the mixed
sounds of your tongue,

go quickly

to who you are

before

your mother swallows
what she has lost.

August 6

Yesterday
a thousand cranes
were flying.
Hiroshima,
your children
still dying

and they said

it saved many lives

the great white heat
that shook flesh from bone
melted bone
to dust

and they said
it was merciful

yesterday
a thousand cranes
were flying.
Obachan
offered omame
to her radiant Buddha
incense smoking miniature
mushrooms
her lips moving
in prayer
for sister they found
tattooed to the ground
a fleshless shadow on Hiroshima soil

and they said
Nagasaki

Yesterday
a woman
bore a child
with fingers
growing from her neck
shoulder
empty

and they said
the arms race

Today
a thousand cranes
are flying
and in expensive waiting rooms
of Hiroshima, California
are blood counts
sucked by the white death

and they said
it might happen again

tonight
while
everyone sleeps
memoryless
the night wind
flutters like a thousand wings
how many ears will hear
the whisper
"Hiroshima"
from a child's
armless shoulder
puckered
like a kiss ?

Loving from Vietnam to Zimbabwe

Here in this crimson
room
with silk skimming our skin
I shape into thought
these strange burnings
starting in my fingertips
as they lick your nipples,
hairs standing to the touch.

You are marching in
the delta
the river water
at your boots
sucking through the leather
sand has caked your color yellow.

Your chest moves
to the rhythm of my heart
warm skin singing

you plod weighted by
days of marching
nights of terror
holding this patch of ground
shaped like a crotch.

my teeth on your
shoulder
hungry to enter your flesh
as you call me strange names.

water/water
sinking sand
they are coming
as you raise the blade
of your bayonet
clean it with
your sweat.

My mouth driven
to your thighs
the sweet inside
just below the swinging
songs of your life.

Deeper into
the mekong
the grass has eyes
the wind has flesh
and you feel the trigger
pressed back for release

your thighs tremble
your long fingers like marsh grass
in my hair
as i reach down
onto Mt. Inyangani

you have seen them
hanging in the trees
after american troops
had finished/
slanted eyes bugging
crooked necks
genitals swinging from
their mouths.

Sweat from your neck
I think they are tears
as i move
into the grassy plain
of your chest.

You never saw them
but knew they looked like me
and you got sick a lot
wondering what color
their blood.

As I hold
your skin between my
teeth
I can feel the blood
pulsing
on my tongue
spurting like the
beginning of
Zambezi River.

You turned in your rage
knowing how they have used you.
Not the invisible ones
whose soil you were sent to seize
but those behind you
pushing you
pulling
pulling
your trigger.

And I massage
your back
large/black like the shadowed
belly of a leaf
as you in
your stillness
hold me like
a bird.

they stripped you
held you down
in the sand
took the bayonet off your gun
and began to slice
lopped off your head
and expected you to die.

I, in the
heavy hot air
between us,
in the crimson room
that begins to blur
feel you enter
my harbor/kiss the lips
of my soul

Call me Strange Names

hanoi
bachmai
haiphong

loving in this world
is the sliver splinting
edge
is the dare
in the teeth of the tiger
the pain of jungle rot
the horror of flesh unsealed
the danger of surviving.

Watergate, U.S.

"The deadliest evil is when 'recognized'
power works against the good of all people . . ."

Cecil Williams

It is a time like no other.

In the streets
the children
play with dogs
who have smelled
the danger of sleepless giants
frightened and dying
fucking their bitches
in fantasies of
young men.

The heat is unbearable.

Dried, white heat
sweating with peoples' hunger

It is a time like no other

The dried, white dying giants
walk their women
who suck the erect heat
of air
led by the leash of unfulfilled
promises
splaying their smell
for hot, young men
held hungry,
hopeless.

It is a time like no other

the woman
dangled like meat
on a spear
by dried white dying giants
who lie about their love for women
their hate for themselves.

It is a time like no other

When cannibals
and giants
battle
for the smell of the woman
and the giants' limbs
torn, rent
leaving only his member
dangled on a spear.

The woman eats it

gags
gives up her mind
clothes her body
with her smell
for bait
while the hot
young men
wait
hopeful
hungry
to become giants.

The First Generation

Elegy to my grandmother

Bent and knotted as a wintered vine
she watched her daughters grow from her
in a hybrid land
and the grandchildren thick around
no longer her own.

Hototogisu naki naki
(The cuckoo cries cries)

She grew wisteria
as a temple
in her garden
and there kept her private peace

Oto hitori ame de ato
the only sound after rain

The children mocked the old ways
shook the fragile vines in their play
while silently she made a wreath
of the dying blossoms

shizuka no jimen arau
washes the land with quiet)

Her love wore long
as my sorrow.
The withered roots
have given back beauty to the soil.

Japs

(Inspired by a play by Hiroshi Kashiwagi
"Plums Can Wait" about migrant Japanese
American farmers after WWII)

Owls with open mouths
watch mutely
as rapists come
and ravage the plums
hanging heavy
like a waiting woman's breast.
They will soften
before the boxes are built.
The slant eyed midget
works harder
sweats more
as the boss's wife
watches from her shaded window
the short arms
lugging long planks,
nails
protruding from his palms.
She wanted to hate him, who
never spoke
planeing the wood
nailing them tightly together
like thighs.
Owls with open mouths
watch
as the rapists
lurk behind
shaded windows
wondering at midgets
quickenning among the plums,
moving faster
strides shorter,
and the plums
like ripe breasts
always above his reach.

She felt
rage at the slant eyed
short armed
quick moving
midget/the jap
who made her
watch the walls at night
when sleepless
the owls called.
The boss would not
let him go
he worked too well.
And the wife
chipping the midget
like a knife,
her words/hate
as she tried to make
him/weaker/anything
and he would
bend/silently/packing boxes
with full/soft plums.
Owls with open mouths
see the rapist
offer the midget
a 5¢ raise in pay/a day
if he will fuck
the wife.
The midget jap
pins the long planks
with nails
from his hands
making boxes
as the wife rapist
lurks behind the window shade
while flies collide
over the dead owl,
eyes staring
haunts her.

if you're too dark
they will kill you.
if you're too swift
they will cripple you.
if you're too strong
they will buy you.
if you're too beautiful
they will rape you.

Watch with eyes open
speak darkly
turn your head like the owl
behind you.
They are coming
to nail you to boxes.

A Certain Kind of Madness

After the assassination of
Orlando Letelier of Chile &
Steve Biko of South Africa

Incense
white paper
Somber kimono sleeves
lapping at the coffin.
Water spilling
from each face,
burying auntie.
My mother is there
trying to hide me.
The smell of dead bodies
makes my mind
pain.
It's my form of madness.

After the war,
auntie would cry
at night
tried to bury her face in the mattress
so we wouldn't hear.
And they would whisper
about her forgetfulness
her thinness
and trembling that would not stop.
In frozen silence
the black shoes gather
at the incense cup.
Momma, you wonder why I don't speak
anymore.
The smell of dead bodies
makes my mind pain
It's my form of madness

When we saw Letelier blown up
in a car, front screen
you said he must've done something bad.

I told you
there are hunters who kill by color :

the gold tinted flesh
that shines in its sweat
rice eating creatures
who plant in the sea.
brown backed bodies
blended to earth
that once ran free
in mountains behind Managua.
black glistening
shoulders moving to
wind sobs, in the
streets of Soweto.

There are those
who are hunted and killed for pleasure.

When Biko went
they thought silence would
follow
like rows of white stones.

What form of madness ?

Did auntie
eat the sandwich
left on the road for ants ?
You said
hunger is not a question
it is a disgrace.
Don't speak of it.

You are mad, you said
when I asked you
about the train
we boarded years ago
for those cages in the desert.
Didn't you know
they were smiling/smiling
while you
thrashed like a rabbit
entangled in barbed wire.

Momma, did we do something bad ?

There are hunters who kill beauty
for pleasure
to fill their coffers
from the sale of your flesh
who kill free moving things
to stop them from hurting their eyes.

The smell of dead bodies
It's my form of madness.
But I tell you

These words I do speak
I don't do well in a cage.
It's lonely there.
I won't dwell in a cage
It's my form of madness.

Jungle Rot and Open Arms

for a Vietnam Veteran brother, ex-prisoner

Leavenworth
and jungle rot
brought him
back to us
brimming with hate
and disbelief
in love or
sympathy.

his johnnywalker red
eyes
tore at my words
shred my flesh
made naked my
emptiness.

my anger
for the enemy heads
of state
boiled to nothing
nothing
in the wake
of his rage

jungle rot
had sucked his bones,
his skin fell
like the monsoon
his brain
in a cast in Leavenworth.

In the midst
of genocide
he fell in love
in Vietnam.

"Her hair was
long and dark – like yours"
he said

"her eyes held the
sixth moon
and when she smiled
the sky opened
and I fell through.

I would crawl
in the tall grasses
to her village

and sleep the war
away with her
like a child on my thighs

I did not know
of the raid

and woke

with her arm
still clasping mine

I could not find
the rest of her

so I buried her arm
and marked my grave."

We sat in a silence
that mocks fools
that lifts us to the final language.

his breath sapped by B-52's
his eyes blinded by the blood of children
his hands bound to bayonets
his soul buried in a shallow grave

i stood amidst
his wreckage
and wept for myself.

so where is my
political education ? my
rhetoric answers to everything ? my
theory into practice ? my
intensification of life in art ?

words
are
like
the stone,
the gravemarker
over an arm
in Vietnam.

Salad

The woman
did not mean to
offend me,

her blue eyes
blinking
at the glint
of my blade,

as I cut
precisely
like magic
the cucumber in
exact, even,
quick slices.

Do you orientals
do everything
so neatly ?

Ms.

I got into a thing
with someone
because I called her
miss ann/hearst/rockerfeller/hughes
instead of ms.

I said
it was a waste of time
worrying about it.

Her lips pressed white
thinning words like pins
pricking me – a victim of sexism.

I wanted to
call her what
she deserved
but knowing it would please her
instead
I said,

white lace & satin was never soiled by
sexism
sheltered as you are by mansions
built on Indian land

your diamonds shipped with slaves from Africa
your underwear washed by Chinese laundries
your house cleaned by my grandmother

so do not push me any further.

And when you quit
killing us
for democracy
and stop calling ME *gook*.

I will call you
whatever you like.

I HATE YOU
WOMAN

YOU IN YOUR SMALL MIND
SQUEEZING INSECURITIES
GRAPLING AFTER GOSSIP MINDED
BOURGEOIS BIGOTS

I HATE YOU
WOMAN

YOUR FUMBLING MISINTERPRETATIONS
CONTROLLING LIVES
THAT ARE NOT YOURS
BECAUSE YOU CANNOT LIVE FOR YOURSELF

I HATE YOU
WOMAN

YOUR MANIPULATION
GUILT CREATING – PUTTING INTO BOXES
EVERYTHING YOU DON'T WANT TO
UNDERSTAND. DON'T GIVE ME THIS SHIT.

I HATE YOU
WOMAN

BECAUSE YOU CANNOT
KEEP YOUR MAN
YOU ONLY CAN NAG HIM
INTO SUBMISSION

I HATE YOU
WOMAN

FOR IMPOSING YOUR LIFE
IN MINE
FOR STEALING MY ENERGY
AND TIME
FOR BEING IN MY MIND

I HATE YOU
WOMAN

FOR YOUR LIES
TO YOURSELF
FOR THE SMALL CAUSES
YOU UNDERTAKE TO
LIMIT YOUR EGO

I HATE YOU
WOMAN

FOR YOUR COLD
MISCOMPREHENSION
YOUR SELF PITY
AND DECEPTION
YOUR MINDLESS CONTRACEPTION
AGAINST LIFE

I HATE YOU
WOMAN

YOU
WHO ARE
MIRRORED
IN ME.

Bitches Don't Wait

Stayed up
half the night
wondering
knowing
where are you
it's better
to have
more than one
it makes you
anxious to come back
to me when you're thru.
Bitches don't wait.
don't play those games
sleeping around
with fools
who don't care
about my fine
sensitive woman nature.
i'd rather
stand on the corner
in my short
slit chong sam
or my wide necked
kimono
massaging
muscles for a dime
in some anonymous
room
warm, moist,
and smelling like
that opening
from where we all come
the room
like a wide screaming
mouth
melting coconut oil
on you
after a steaming bath
your bodies dripping
like my eyes
we won't get bored
'cause i won't even know you.

my virginal soul
will wait
and wait
for you.
keeping the bed
like an altar
wrap the sheets
on your feet
finger your hem
and you will always
return.
Does it hurt
because i know you are
with the one you're with
and you do your love thing
as i wait here
not present to you ?
It hurts
'cause i would
rather write a better line
stroke poems
like antelope
feel the Miles
blues like warm
honey
capture tigers
in China
and sleep in the folds
of their great breathing shanks.
i will go now to my street
when the work is done
coat my skin
with a violet gown
haloed with hood
oils in my hands
water
in my vessel
a net in
my thighs
and i will
sell
my body for a dime

while i don't wait
for you.

Nakama

to comrade sisters
before me, beyond me.

The cherry blossoms
are bursting

female swans
calling
on the lake
beckoning with dark beaks

This time
the day spilling like bright flowers
I thought of you
sisters

ebony bones
building empires
empowering brothers
the dark wombs
spilling with the future

mujer
nakama

browed in sun work
blessing the earth with boundless beauty
pounding the rice
dancing the dance
that makes our brothers rise.

my child
is singing to herself
and she is
growing
she is woman
shining
as she tends her flowers, asks me

why do they die ?

why do they always die ?

Afterword

From the eye of racist relocation fever which came about and plagued America during World War II, Janice Mirikitani grew/bloomed/fought as a desert flower behind barbed wire. She grew with that pain, of what it all represented ; from the multinational corporations to war from Korea to Vietnam to Latin America to Africa to Hunter's Point and Chinatown. *Awake in the River* screams those memoirs, the lessons and a prophesy as only one from within the cage of the American nightmare would know.

Janice Mirikitani, a sansei, lives and works in San Francisco. She has been published in numerous anthologies and textbooks. She has also co-edited several anthologies. Janice has organized and participated in many community projects and programs. She is currently serving as the project director of the Japanese American Anthology Project. Her works have appeared in *Third World Women*, *Time to Greez*, *AION* magazine and more. In her words :

Words from the Third World, like food,
fortifying the act, universal, essential,
procreative, freeing, connective, satisfying.

George Leong
Editor
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