

Poet Ai

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I love writers because I worship words and lines of them. Writers are far more important to me than presidents, premiers, comandantes, colonels or generals, kings, queens, super hottie movie stars or underwear models, rockers, directors, ballplayers (excluding track!), even touched by God, evangelical rightwing TV commentators—this is how fringie dangerous I am. Most of the writers I praise are no more than names, mantra-like syllables, on indefinably meaningful books. Or were. For a good half of my adult life—when I was officially allowed to be a member—I have been privileged to meet a few. Some I've come to know even.

So many are boring. I don't mean boring as lifestyle, as in which store decor in their home, the pro- or anti-fashion of their hair or the hip-hop quotient of their slang, not even as in a measure of distance on any form of pedometer. What matters to me...hard to describe. A glint of eye, as faintly seen as a distant star, on an otherwise dismissed object in a busy room? A distraction of speech either too fast or too slow? The will to risk with no acted out rebellion in it? A mute, even embarrassed awareness of the mystery being alive is, or the contrary, an inability to fathom anyone unconscious of its thrill or terror? The storytellers and poets who are any of the above are not bores. Yet most, lots, who have the title *writer* or *poet* seem no more haunted by daemons than a geologist. They make such good choices in careers, mates, clever plots and touching images, that even their parents sound just right. Hard for those of us raised with dysfunction to bitch about those without it. Could be it's me and I should stick to watching sitcoms. Whatever, I don't hang much. I've never done much to appear on the society page of the living writer.

Bias alert: I don't trust creative writing programs. I don't believe listening to tenure-track teachers and selected peers in seminar rooms is so much better than writing near a boulevard with fading lines or a plowed field, that obsessing on technique and contacts makes for better writers than 40-hours a week and a boss, living and hearing stories. Yes, my complaint sounds dubious coming from someone employed in the MFA business for a decade. I concede. I could say it exemplifies more my own compassless survival than career laddering, that once my other life got out of control, I lucked out and bounced into that *pay*. But

guilty as charged. And don't think I am not aware of the often silly wail of way many non-academically trained poets and—really all that's survived—screenwriters. What I am saying is I have *bias* that doesn't come from good science.

I'd been especially cynical about those endowed chairs for writing. Probably comes out of being a young writer who did his typing at night after he got off work, kids asleep, or the weekends or when I'd been laid off. Twenty years after those days, when I first took a job at Southwest Texas State, my director was asking me at a welcoming party what I thought about the new endowed position approved for the next year. My old wage (big, I thought, union, benefits tagged to hours) was never going to approach its six-figure and a quarter size. I'd just negotiated 40% of that. I was relieved to have a job, he liked me, he was excited about the program's future. I wanted to not stink up the party. But what I thought? That any qualified fiction writer probably would not need the money because of movie deals, screenplay options, big advances, and why not hire three other people? And a poet? Should any poet, I didn't say, drive a freaking Beamer? I'm not saying I had financial accuracy or depth. I'm telling you what my head was like when it and me arrived.

In the years that came, there were good writers in this hot seat. Tim O'Brien. Leslie Silko. When it was going to be the poet Ai—the Poet Ai, she liked to be called—I was so interested I decided to go to a small dinner for her when she got into town. I'd heard so much about her for as many years as I could remember. What I'd read of her work was raw, fearless, driven, smart, *good*. She wrote unnostalgically about the poor and the outcaste, openly about sex and violence but without cliché or stereotypes or in a simplistic binary politic—so that her poetry was not only about holy victims or folkloric heroes, nothing that made *her* people better than *your* people, only about inside each and every. Her work even seems to question whether cultural or racial identity can continue to exist, even as her most riveting characters were black. *Cruelty* was a stunning collection, as was *The Killing Floor*. When she won the National Book Award for *Vice*, it was like, *It's about time*.

But of her poetry, aside from a sentence here and there of admiration, was what I heard about least. Gossip was that she was nothing but trouble. That she did not cooperate with anyone or any group. As someone who's been fired too many times, I was too familiar with this kind of trashing and was especially suspicious of the sources, invariably people who felt wild was someone too loud in their university department hall. Born in Texas (a plus), from Tucson (a bigger plus), she was, however, an MFA poet.... I mentioned my own nasty Pavlovian conditioning. I wanted to meet the endowed chair poet already a tenured, full professor, who was cashing in.

San Marcos, Texas, is not New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles. Not a suburb of. Not Houston. It's not Austin or San Antonio either. Once a Mexican American town, now a university one, there is one "nice" res-

restaurant for “nice” evening dinners. Used sparingly, that wasn’t where we were meeting. It was August, hot, and it stayed bright sunlight until almost nine at night. We were at an Italian restaurant, meaning, in rural Texas and even urban Western neighborhoods, spaghetti and ravioli and their finest, the lasagna, a parmesan cheese shaker on the table covered with checkered red plastic. I’d heard whispers about the visiting poet Ai already. She was needing to be paid because she was broke. She was upset that she wasn’t going to get any money until the end of September, and that was only for two weeks in August. She wanted to borrow money, she was sure someone could make her a loan. Her credit cards may have been maxed out. Seems she often had money trouble in the summer because she was only paid nine months, on the academic calendar, at Oklahoma State where she was faculty. This all made me smile, I admit it, so, when finally she was sitting next to me, not many seconds passed when I had no doubt I liked her. It’s that I saw a glint in her eye, catching something, scheming something. I don’t think she ordered wine and not because their best was Gallo. And then there came the meal orders. Each selected and, when it was her turn, there was an *absolutely, yes, the department’s getting this*. She ordered a large pizza. She ate a slice for dinner and got the rest boxed for home.

From that moment I knew we got along. I loved Ai. It wouldn’t even embarrass me if she were surprised to hear me flat out say this: I thought of her as a good friend. Nothing like when you’re twenty. I never even visited the house she rented in San Marcos. She came to visit me a few times in Austin (where I lived). We’d go to dinner or lunch and a couple of times she asked if my then girlfriend would like to go shopping with her. Didn’t matter that she never did, Ai could go shopping alone. She bought shit. She bought everything and anything. She knew it, too, that she spent all her money buying things and lots and lots of clothes. And she had cats. And she ate a particular chocolate every day. Certain grad students didn’t think much of her, evidence that she told them, shameless, she liked to be in at a certain hour at night to watch her favorite TV shows. I say these are the very people, for one, who needed to watch any TV to find out how much better that writing was than theirs. A good friend: email here and there, we would talk on the phone, though not often, no. Always a pleasure, always glad I did, and always planned to again. And I don’t like to be on the phone. We would talk about loves then and now, about this one and that one, this maybe and if only, what was, what is, aging, career, book deals. She would tell me about the Choctaw tribe and her genealogy diplomacy on campus and otherwise. We’d talk readings, publications, books, television shows, movies, gossip. We even talked about our own writing sometimes.

I feel much older without Ai. More than a few that I have known well have died, yet, sad, their deaths didn’t make me believe different. There is so few of us. Her. *Us*. I’m not sure either what I’m saying, but there it is.