Ai Interviewed by Lawrence Kearney and Michael Cuddihy

Michael Cuddihy: Would you like to tell us something about your childhood? what forces, conflicts, or events led you to poetry?

Ai: Well, when I was fourteen we lived in L.A. and I went to Mount Vernon Junior High. One day I saw an ad up on the board that said "Poetry Contest." The poem had to be about a historical figure. But before I could enter the contest we moved back to Tucson. But I'd discovered that I could write poetry, and I've just continued from the age of fourteen, though there wasn't much in my family life that encouraged it.

I remember I'd written once before, when I was twelve, at this Catholic school in L.A. The nuns said we had to write a letter in which we were a Christian martyr who was going to die the next day. They told us to go home and pretend this was our last letter. But, as I've said, I didn't really start writing until two years later. It was a rather unconscious thing?as I grew older I realized that poetry offered a way to express things that I couldn't do otherwise.

Lawrence Kearney: Some of the poems in Cruelty have that quality of "last letters" for me.

Ai: Maybe they do, I don't know. Sometimes I can't even remember the poems in Cruelty. I guess I don't care about them as much anymore.

Kearney: I'd like to ask you about Cruelty while we're on the subject.

Ai: Sure, I've got it right here?in case I need to refresh my memory. (Laughter)

Kearney: Which poems in the book do you feel closest to?

Ai: The only one I really feel close to at all is "Cuba, 1962." For me, that's the beginning of my new work, my new interest.

Kearney: In what sense?

Ai: The character speaking in "Cuba" seems to me a character with "heart," a character larger than life, no matter how insignificant his own life is. . . . That's what I think has happened in the new book, Killing Floor?the characters have moved beyond their own lives into another world.

Kearney: How would you characterize that other world? Or is there a way to?

Ai: I don't know. It's not so much a world as?what's that science fiction term??"dimension." That other dimension, rather than inspiring fright (as it did when I was a kid and watched The Outer Limits) is simply an expanded consciousness.

Kearney: A sense of oneness with life? That kind of consciousness?

Ai: Not so much a oneness as a not being separate.
Kearney: An interesting distinction. . . . Sticking with Cruelty: many reviewers, although it seems to be missing the point, accuse the book of being obsessed with sex-and-violence. But to me, the poems are about loss. I remember you said once that Cruelty was a book of love poems.

Ai: I don't remember when that was. The distinction between my "sex-and-violence" poems and others you might read is that in mine the characters love each other. The poems are not hate poems. A lot of women's poetry approaches the theme of trouble between men and women in terms of hatred, I think, or "giving it to the man" in the same way that men have given it to women?and I never wrote from that point of view. Loss is very important to all the characters in Cruelty?even if they don't identify it as loss?it's something they can't get or can't get back. And so, there's quite a bit of desperation in it, and I've used violence and sex as a way to express that desperation. . . . What I wanted?I did have a "grand reason" for the poems (at least after I'd finished the book)?I wanted people to see how they treated each other and themselves, and that's why I accepted the title Cruelty for the book.

Kearney: What was your original title?

Ai: It was Wheel in a Ditch. It symbolized the wheels of the chariot in Ezekiel's vision. Wheel as the circle, of course, and as the spirit of man trapped, stuck and not able to pull himself out.

Kearney: In a recent interview, Norman Dubie says something to the effect that the characters that speak in his poems are "contexts" for his own voice, rather than personalities separate from himself. Do you feel that way about the people who speak in your work?

Ai: No. I think that might be the fundamental difference between Dubie's work and mine, or at least the way we approach our work. I know from the new book, Killing Floor, where I'm dealing with some historical figures, there will be people who will see similarities. But my characters are just who they are?they're not, you know, vehicles for my own voice that much. My characters aren't me; some are archetypes, some are people I knew, most are made up. I used to preface my readings with a statement that I hadn't been pregnant and had never had an abortion?because people tended to believe all those things in Cruelty had happened to me. Which seems pretty naive.

Kearney: They couldn't believe you could write those poems without an autobiographical intent.

Ai: Yes. It's the tyranny of confessional poetry?the notion that everything one writes has to be taken from the self. Which for me isn't true. If anything, my poems come from the unconscious?I'm irrevocably tied to the lives of all people, both in and out of time.

Kearney: Okay, but I've heard you talk at poetry readings about some episode from childhood or whatever that gave rise to a poem. I guess what I'm trying to get a handle on is where is Florence Ogawa then, in your poems? If it isn't you speaking, then what kind of continuity of sensibility do you feel in your work? A continuity that would be "you" in the poems.

Ai: Hmmmm . . . Sorrowful? That life is sad, or is most of the time. In Cruelty you just see that side of it. As a child, there were good times, but they were always eclipsed by bad times. It's like I haven't been able to accept that I'm an adult, that the bogeyman isn't just around the corner. Of course, that's something one goes to therapy to deal with. When I was a child in San Francisco we never had enough money, and my stepfather would go down to the street
and borrow some. He'd buy a hamburger and cut it in half for my sister and me for supper. Sometimes he'd spend the whole day borrowing money and by the next morning he'd have gotten some polish sausage and grits and we'd have milk and maybe even fried potatoes. But most of the time we just had S.O.S.?shit on a shingle. To this day I hate biscuits, because they were always the shingle. Bad times just around the corner.

Kearney: In reviewing The American Poetry Anthology, Louis Simpson says something to the effect that your work makes the work of your contemporaries look juvenile. Do you agree?

Ai: I don't feel very comfortable assessing my own work. And I don't feel very knowledgeable about contemporary American poetry. My tastes run to older poets' work, poets like Galway, Kinnell and Phil Levine. Randall Jarrell. I love Cesare Pavese's poetry. I loved The Lice by Merwin when it first came out. I like Gerald Stern's work, and of course, Louis Simpson's. Honestly, there are very few of my contemporaries whose work I admire or feel inspired by?I really like Steve Orien's poetry and Jon Anderson's and Norman Dubie's. There is an obvious kinship, I believe, between Dubie's work and mine. . . . My favorite poet for a long time has been Jean Follain, whose work is totally different from mine. The list goes on and on.

Cuddihy: I'm aware of your wide reading, particularly in Spanish and Japanese literature. Could you name any writers or poets among this group who may have influenced you?

Ai: I don't believe my work is influenced by anybody. People may not believe that, but the hell with them. I am inspired though, by other writers. Miguel Hernandez, and Vallejo, when I was younger. I really love Hernandez's work. I recognize Neruda as a master, though I don't particularly care for his work. A Chilean poet, Enrique Lihn, his early work is very inspiring. My greatest inspiration comes from fiction, especially Latin American. Some Russian work, also. Juan Rolfo. Asturias's Men of Maize. And, of course, Marquez?whom I really love. "Cuba, 1962" was inspired by reading One Hundred Years of Solitude, though I wrote it months later. Also, "The Woman Who Knew Too Much," which I wrote a first draft of about the same time, which is in Killing Floor. Even then?this was the summer and fall of 1972?I was moving away from the poems in Cruelty. The bulk of the poems in Cruelty were written between March and July, 1972, when I was twenty-four. It's always interested me about myself; an incredible maturity on one hand, and an incredible immaturity on the other. (Laughter) So, I was still able to put all those poems in Cruelty, and, at the same time, had already moved away from them.

Kearney: An obligatory question about craft. How do poems happen for you?

Ai: The way it does for most writers, I suppose. I might hear a tune, or see something, or read something, and that sets me off. . . . The other day I was reading the first chapter of Serenade by James M. Cain, a mystery writer of the '30s. I've been working on a great poem (or at least what I hope is a great poem)?and I happened to start reading Serenade. They have a way, Cain and Raymond Chandler, of suspending you?of holding your breath while their characters talk. And you don't breathe till they're finished?whether it's a chapter or a paragraph. I was sitting there in a local shopping mall and when I'd finished I said, "Boy, that's great!" and I let out my breath and took out my notebook and just started writing.

There's also another way I tend to write: everything I want to say is filed in my head. I work out the first stanza or first part or whatever in my head first. Before I write anything down, it's planned?"planned" is the wrong word, it makes it sound like planned parenthood. I've got to have my character. I've got to know what kind of person he or she is. What are they doing? What would they wear? What colors do they like? Everything. What I'm doing, really, is
painting? I've got to picture them before I can write. Like the poem "Childbeater" in Cruelty? I have to be that person.

Cuddihy: In a related area, how do you answer the criticism of some that too many of your poems are written from the male point of view?

Ai: Whoever wants to speak in my poems is allowed to speak, regardless of sex, race, creed, or color.

Cuddihy: You have been criticized by some black and feminist spokespersons for not identifying yourself sufficiently with either group. Is this because of your ethnically mixed background, or because, as a writer, you simply wish to be treated as an individual instead of being classified according to race or sex?

Ai: I'm 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? Who the hell wants to read it.

Also, I don't feel black. I can't be more honest than that. I was telling Lawrence the other night that my mother was a maid and my grandmother was a maid; most of the black women I know were maids. I certainly relate to "the black experience" on that level, the human level of having to be a maid all your life. That means a hell of a lot more to me than an educated black person using a bunch of "dems" and "dats" when he writes poetry, even though he doesn't talk like that himself. It's pretentious. My experience is not "the black experience"?it's simply the experience of having lived as a poor person.

Cuddihy: Your new book, Killing Floor, has a significant number of poems of a mystical character. I'm thinking of poems like "Pentecost," wondering whether these poems come out of your Catholic upbringing or do they grow from your personal interpretation of Scripture. Would you care to talk about this?

Ai: I don't mind talking about it?though it's difficult. I went to Catholic school until seventh grade. I was a Mexican Catholic. All I have to do is open the door of my memory and there it all is: the Sorrowful Mother, the suffering Christ?those images from my childhood are beginning to surface. One thing I feel good about in the new book is that there are other sides to my character that aren't apparent in Cruelty and in the new book I'm not afraid to deal with some of my past spiritual beliefs, or some of my present ones?but subtly altered by my own psyche, when I'm writing, so that one can't say?ahah! this is Mexican Catholicism, etc.

Cuddihy: Poems like "Killing Floor" and "The Gilded Man," not to mention your poems on Zapata, are grounded in historical persons and events. This seems a new direction for you. Could you tell us what has drawn you to historical subjects?

Ai: Zapata has always been a hero for me?he inspires me. Of all the Mexican revolutionaries, Zapata seems to have been the only one truly concerned about the welfare of the peasants. It happens to be something I'm trying to deal with in my work?trying to integrate my life emotionally and spiritually.

Kearney: How about Trotsky?

Ai: I don't remember exactly. I've tried to remember just for myself. I know I wrote it last November, but I can't seem to place it, to recall what set it off. But I don't just arbitrarily pick
historical figures?there has to be something in their lives that interests me. Sometimes I simply want to capture a feeling . . . I think I was inspired by your poem, "The Heaven of Full Employment," the lines about the troika rushing past, and I may have simply wanted something Russian to deal with. . . .

I haven't really talked about my new book the way I want to?I really love it. Unlike some people, however, I'm usually able to put even the most favored of my poems aside after a few months and sometimes after a week. I get bored and want to write something else. I suppose it's the blessing of a fertile and constructive imagination.

Kearney: What changes have occurred in your work that are evident in Killing Floor?

Ai: First, I think I'm more skillful as a narrative poet. James Dickey said once?I'm not quoting exactly?that he wanted to take the narrative poem as far as it could go. And I said, "Goddamn. I don't care for him, but that's the way I feel too." I want to take the narrative "persona" poem as far as I can, and I've never been one to do things in halves. All the way or nothing. I won't abandon that desire.

Second, my poems are longer. When I sit down, I seem to know what goes where better than I used to. Crossing the great water, as the I Ching calls it?that's what I'm doing, without fear. Consequently, I'm taking more risks with them. I mean I'm very good at writing short poems?the proof is in Cruelty?but I needed more space, my characters needed it. And so, though the new poems aren't as tight, there's more to them. I'm not afraid to look a character in the eye and see his whole life, and deal with that life rather than an episode. I think of the poems in Cruelty more as the fragments of a life. In the poem, "The Singers," the character Rosebud Morales (for whom I have a lot of affection) is there on the page, the life of a man.

Kearney: The poems in Killing Floor seem much more generous in spirit than the poems in Cruelty. You embrace your characters more wholeheartedly, and let them talk longer and more fully.

Ai: I don't know if I embrace them, but I love them. Which is not to say that I didn't love some of the characters in Cruelty, but some of them I didn't feel either way about.

One thing I didn't get into about contemporary American poetry is a lack of feeling. The Spanish and Latin American poets are capable of great statements of feeling. Miguel Hernandez says?in a poem?"I have plenty of heart." I know only two American poets who come close to saying something like that in their work: Galway Kinnell and Phil Levine. They can say "kiss my ass, if you don't like it." For the Spanish poets, however, it isn't quite "kiss my ass." Miguel Hernandez can say "I have plenty of heart" and you don't laugh at him, you say "I believe you. I feel it too." Perhaps there's a fear of revealing too much emotion in American poetry, despite the go-ahead of a sort from confessional poetry. At any rate, I think that that is my goal?I mean I never want to say "I have plenty of heart," but I want to be able to say whatever I feel without fear or embarrassment.

Kearney: Killing Floor is dedicated "for the ghosts." Did you have particular ghosts in mind, the dead in general, personal ghosts?

Ai: What I meant is the ghosts, both living and dead. That, in a sense, is my justification for the historical poem characters. Of course, this began in about 1974, when I was thinking about writing a poem about my great-grandfather. Suddenly, there seemed to be all these
voices in my head saying, "Me, I want to speak."

I just call them "the ghosts." It's very important though, because it represents both a beginning and an end for me. An end because they've spoken?they've had their say?if they never had the chance when they were alive, they've had it now.

Kearney: Why don't you talk some more about Killing Floor?

Ai: I think the poems in Killing Floor are a truer reflection of myself, sides of me which are not visible in Cruelty, my first book. I'm dealing with past and present mystical beliefs, the line that separates the ecstatic visionary state from ordinary life and saying, "Look, it is as simple as lifting your hand, this passage into another life." For Aguirre, in "The Gilded Man," it is his "transfiguration by the Pentecost of his own despair"; for Zapata, it is death; for me, it is poetry.

If I could be free not to teach and so on, I think I'd lead a contemplative life?I'd write, of course, but I'd spend a lot of time just contemplating the universe?whatever great mystical questions there are. What emerges in Killing Floor is a kind of meditative poem. The poem I'm thinking of as I say this is "Nothing but Color," a poem for Yukio Mishima, a Japanese novelist who committed suicide in 1970. . . . One night I put on an album of Japanese music and was real inspired by it. The last line of the poem, which I really love, is "I mean to live." It has a meaning for me?which it might not for anybody else?I thought of this last night (I was talking to myself about depression, what life meant to me). Of course, there's an ironic note about Mishima committing suicide and saying at the same time "I mean to live," but I don't mean it just in that ironic way. It's transcendence?that's what I'm striving for in all these poems: no matter what the characters go through, no matter what their end, they mean to live.


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