

TWO POEMS



Garrett Hongo

MI VIDA: THE EMBRACE

This boy in my arms now—
 starched khaki pants, a white undershirt,
 netted hair, a crucifix—
I hold him, for an instant,
as if he were the child I still am,
 eighth grade in junior high,
as if I hadn't wanted to take
 the sharpened end of the steel can opener
and slash it across his pulsing throat
 a moment before, as if
he hadn't held that same blade in his hand
 and brought it across my own chin
so that I would forever be marked
 a *chingaso* of this neighborhood
we moved to only weeks before.

I said I didn't like the Valley at all—
 farm kids, Jewish kids from the West Side—
 all whiteys and I the only Jap.
So my folks backed me this one time,
 moved us to L.A., South Bay,
Gardena—*Kotonk* City—Japs all over the place
 next to Chicanos, bloods, and paddies too.
Every group you want, and we all hate each other.

Next thing I know, I'm at war with the 13 Gents
 and me with no backing.
Not even the Bandits would stand up for me,
 on my own in this world.

Jesus! Angel! Mi vida loca!
are the joyous calls I hear slashing through the air,
 the thrash of chain-link
as boys like us are bounced against the parking lot fence.
I hear crying, squeals, and a scream of panic

and I know other boys are being cut—
 with Filipinos, stilletoes, and sharpened can openers
 like the one I hold in my hand
 this moment before I choose my life over this boy's death,
 this moment I cry and embrace him
 before he pushes by me, calling me
mujer,
maricon—
 whatever it is in this life that loves.

UNDER THE OAKS AT HOLMES HALL, OVERTAKEN
 BY RAIN

A desert downpour in early spring,
 and I'm standing under California oaks
 gazing through rain as the grey sky thunders.
 I don't know why the nightingale sings
 to Kubla Khan and not to me, nineteen
 and marked by nothing, not even ceremony
 or the slash of wind tearing through trees.
 I don't know why Ishmael alone is left
 to speak of the sea's great beast, why
 the ground sinks and slides against itself,
 why the blue lupines will rise and quilt
 through the tawny grasses on the hillsides.
 I can't explain the garment of rain on my shoulders
 or the sour cloth of my poverty unwinding
 like a shroud as the giant eucalyptus
 strips and sheds its grey parchments of skin
 and stands mottled and nude in the shining rains.
 I want something sullen as thundering skies,
 thick as earthmilk, brown and sluicing
 across the streets, grievous as the flood of waters.
 I want unfelt sorrows to give away and wrought absence
 to exchange for the imperfect shelter of these oaks,
 for the froth of green ivy around my feet,
 for the sky without gods and the earth without perplexity.
 I want to have something like prayer to pay
 or a mission to renounce as a fee
 for my innocence under cloud-cover
 and these furious nightingales of thunder,
 companions of song in this untormented sea
 of memory uncrowded with bliss or pain.