

SAN MATEO COUNTY
POET LAUREATE



Poetry Reading *by*
San Mateo County Poet Laureate
Aileen Cassinetta
Tuesday, May 18, 2021

About the poet:

Aileen Cassinetta is the 3rd Poet Laureate of San Mateo County, the first Asian American and foreign-born poet to assume the post. Widely anthologized, she is the author of two poetry collections and three chapbooks. In April 2020, she organized a fundraising community poem for frontliners and healthcare workers which raised money for the San Mateo County Health Foundation's COVID-19 fund. It was also read at the Mystic Seaport Museum in Connecticut for Memorial Day, cited in the Alzheimer's Poetry Project in Minnesota, used as a resource by the Montgomery Independent School District in Texas, and incorporated in "The Transcendents" exhibitions at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles which are on view until May 16, 2021.

About this poem:

This poem was commissioned by the Golden Gate National Cemetery for its 78th Annual Memorial Day Observance.

Dear Soldier,

Just now, stones bespoke you.
Name, rank, and Purple Heart
chiseled on quartz and feldspar,
beneath plumes of dust.

I will speak of you in a language of absolutes—
Always placed the mission first.
Never accepted defeat. Never quit.
Never left a fallen comrade.

There was a death march that lasted
70 miles in the dead of summer,
with the fallen in litters, carefully
lifted by brothers nearly dead or dying.

I will speak of the faint voices of the grieving—
“twelve went out, nine returned,
silence and sadness because
of your absence, now that it is all over.”

At the Roll Call, the first sergeant called out
your full name and rank a third and final time.
Your combat boots, your weapon, your tags and
helmet tell the story of all you defended.

In another world, there is a purpleheart
whose heartwood turns deep brown and purple
with sun and time, impermeable and
unbreakable. Like the memory of you.