

Poetry Reading by

San Mateo County Poet Laureate Aileen Cassinetto

Tuesday, January 29, 2019

About this poem:

I was reading three things when I wrote this poem: "Still, I Rise" by Maya Angelou; Paul Vallely's September 2010 article in The Independent, "Why poetry is as essential as air," about the trapped Chilean miners and the poet they appointed at the time to ensure their survival underground; and Elisabeth Malkin's December 2018 New York Times article, "In Home Village of Girl Who Died in U.S. Custody, Poverty Drives Migration" about the death of seven-year-old Jakelin Caal Maquin. This was a tough poem to write as it touches on very sensitive and controversial issues. I wanted it to be as unvarnished as I could possibly make it; but I was also determined that it will speak of hope and redemption.

About the poet:

Aileen Cassinetto is the third Poet Laureate of San Mateo County, the first Asian American appointed to the post. She is the author of Traje de Boda (Meritage Press, 2010) and The Pink House of Purple Yam Preserves & Other Poems (Our Own Voice & Little Dove Books, 2018).

Still, like air

we rise toward
the light, our movement
widening as though

in prayer, holy and urgent. I will say your name—

an act of love more powerful than the weight of air

or the falling of light.

Like clouds speaking

their truth—every

heap and layer, every curl of hair, a reckoning. Still, I pray

for grace, to hear
your story, and what
you know of clouds—

why they shine at night, where they touch the ground,

how they birth a star.

Perhaps you will

want to know

my story, and why these queries—like, what will it cost

to cross an inch
of scorn? Or climb a wall
of fear? How much

to plough the air,
to read the clouds?
How much for a sip

of water, a gulp of air? How much for three square

feet of space?

For the narrowest

breathing place?

How much for the life of my child. Still, I ask—

an act
of grace as I rise
toward the light.