

SAN MATEO COUNTY POET LAUREATE



Poetry Reading *by*

San Mateo County Poet Laureate Aileen Cassinetta

Tuesday, July 9, 2019

About this poem:

This day in 1776, General George Washington ordered the Declaration of Independence to be read aloud to members of the Continental Army in New York. I wrote this poem as a commentary on a major sociopolitical issue, and how our actions compare to the statement adopted by the Second Continental Congress.

About the poet:

Aileen Cassinetta is the third Poet Laureate of San Mateo County, the first immigrant and Asian American appointed to the post. She is the author of *Traje de Boda* and *The Pink House of Purple Yam Preserves & Other Poems*.

There are no kings in America

by Aileen Cassinetta, San Mateo County Poet Laureate

we are not that kind of country.
We are sanctuary for the hungry,
the homeless, the huddled,
held together by an idea
our immigrant fathers believed in.
Rendered, it meant independence.
Pursued, it kindled war, ordnance,
a fighting chance. Forty thousand
musket balls, by themselves, did not
shape the boundaries in which we
map our days. To draw our borders,
we needed more than firecakes.
More than a pound of meat
with bone and gristle,
or salt fish and a gill of peas.
We needed the faith and grit of people
who were not yet Americans.
To be an American is to
recognize the sacrifice
of the widow and the orphan;
it is to understand the weft of tent
cities expecting caravans,
and the heft of a child in a camp
not meant for children, or sitting
before a judge awaiting judgement.
What do we say to the native
whose lands we now inhabit?
What do we say to our immigrant
fathers who held certain truths
to be self-evident?
Do we now still pledge to each
other our lives, our fortunes,
our sacred honor.
There are no kings in America.
Only gilded men we can topple
again and again.