

Poetry Reading *by*
San Mateo County Poet Laureate
Aileen Cassinetta
Tuesday, March 9, 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. Appointed by the Board of Supervisors in October 2018, her term has been extended through 2021. As Poet Laureate, her mandate is to make poetry more accessible to all residents in the county. Aileen has worked with different county and city commissions and nonprofits to amplify the role of poetry in public discourse. She also facilitates youth poetry workshops and free one-on-one mentoring sessions with San Mateo County youth.

About this poem:

I wrote “Legacy” in honor of all the women who made San Mateo County what it is today. I was also inspired by my grandmother who immigrated to California with her family in the 1970s when she was in her 50s. Woven into this poem is the story of the late Ginetta Sagan, human rights activist and San Mateo County resident, of former Half Moon Bay Mayor Naomi Patridge who was interned with her family at the Topaz War Relocation Center, and of Congresswoman Jackie Speier whose ordeal during the 1978 Jonestown shooting has been widely documented. I also wish to acknowledge and thank the women at the frontlines, the essential workers, the teachers, and everyone here who has been working hard throughout the pandemic in service of our residents. To quote Supervisor Carole Groom, “There is something in the human spirit that yearns to be a part of a greater effort, to move a community forward.”

Legacy

—for Nanay, Naomi Patridge, Ginetta Sagan, Jackie Speier, and all the women who made San Mateo County what it is today

To tell her story, you must know when
to put courage in a matchbox and conceal

it in a loaf of bread. You must learn how
a message betokened deliverance

when courage is simply a word someone
wrote on a slip of paper and the sweet

scent of bread could no longer sustain you.
You must grasp your other hand with what

grit remains, growing and unyielding.
To tell her story, you must walk in her shoes.

If forced out of your leased farmland,
don't forget to bring rice if you can pack

only what you can carry. And if
your mother did not speak inside the bus

with the windows covered with brown paper
on the way to the barracks, it was only

because she was praying that you would not be
housed in the horse stall with the manure

whitewashed over. And if you were, she was
deciding what to do about the smell.

To tell her story, you must remember
the landscape from behind barbed

wire fences. You must gaze at your body
and know its history, look beneath

the tender, ridged scars and see the bone
protruding out of your right arm

and hole the size of a football
on your right thigh, wondering how

the lights never went out. You must
look at the image of your grandmother

with the weight of rammed earth against
what you survived. To tell her story,

you must say a prayer, not of sorrow,
but of grace. You must loosen the earth,

pick daffodils to the base of the stem,
remember your roots and ordinary days,

and the grit under your fingernails,
the way your grandmother taught you.