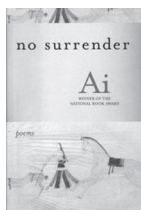


A Gathering of Friends

By Phil Estes

Book Review:

No Surrender, by Ai,
W. W. Norton & Co., 2010.



Other students at Oklahoma State in Stillwater told stories of Ai at the Stonewall, the de facto English department bar. She loved the shopping network QVC, they would say. She loaned money to people who claimed to be her family members, no questions asked. She couldn't lift her arms high enough to wash her hair after a car wreck, so she started to wear wigs. Her favorite wig: Cleopatra's hair. All of her friends, famous or not, were "motherfuckers" in her anecdotes—this was an affectionate term, from what I gather. This knowledge I carried as I read the poems in *No Surrender*. All the conventions associated with Ai's work exist in this final book: the ritualistic confessions of anonymous, or fictionalized, figures in the spirit of *Cruelty*, her first book—though poems from the perspective of John Wilkes Booth and Custer's wife appear—the lack of ornament in her language; an inclination toward violence.

A poem early in the book, "Sisterhood," is a classic Ai monologue: a young woman and former nun turned nurse who lives in 1960s New York City:

By then, I was a practical nurse.
I treated women left in the lurch by other scoundrels,
Yet, I fell for one myself.
One day at work, I miscarried.
A week later, I called my da and told him.

Ai stacks each lean, tassel-free line on top of each other, each line almost self-contained and built on an emotional momentum. These lines stack, one bleeding into the other, resulting in a line

of restraint and amazing matter-of-factness: “One day at work, I miscarried.” Ai transcends narrative here. This line does not need to rely on the monologue established earlier; on its own, the line galvanizes. Many think of her as a poet of prosody, but Ai does not rely on long sentences carved up in enjambments, or on narrative momentum, to keep the reader engaged.

Ai’s voice becomes the voice of the poems by the end; *No Surrender’s* structure of dramatic monologue breaks down. We are left with elegy, and the distinct voice of the poet. “Cancer Chronicles,” the book’s final poem, lacks the ornament or dire seriousness expected from the title. As the character considers the tumor growing in her breast, she contemplates ritual suicide:

She bought a special knife
 In some misguided hara-kiri fantasy,
 She’d imagined plunging it into her stomach
 As she kneeled on the tatami mat,
 Where her cat, Boo-boo, sat looking at her
 As if to say, “What gives?”
 Oh, dear, what would she do about him.

Ai’s humor subverts sentimentality. It also reveals fear. For as tough as the characters of her poems would like to act, all have an intimate relationship with frailty and impotence of action. They all surrender. “Cancer Chronicles” ends with the speaker in a hospital bed, awaiting death. The book’s final line: “Her cataclysm ceased.”

Ai died March 20, 2010, before Oklahoma State University accepted me for admission; my friends here started before me and came here because of Ai. I knew little of her and wondered what was the big deal. I always assumed Ai’s work operated out of narrative catharsis. There is a catharsis in her work, but Ai also knew the distinction, subtle as it is, between catharsis and art. The poems here reveal guilt—her speakers know they are as implicated in their decisions as those who may have victimized them. Her poems teach me how to make the line lean and uncompromising; she teaches me to be unapologetic.