

We Are Here *By Susan Ito*

In 1974

I was one of three Asian Americans
in a brick high school nestled in
the garden state.

We read Orwell and Hemingway
Salinger and Dickens
I came to understand that writers
were dead, white, male.

Aiiieeee! screamed its victorious arrival
but I didn't hear it.
I went to college and drowned
in the science my parents wanted for me
my only books were chemistry
anatomy physics physiology biology

It took twenty years for me to hear the sound of Asian voices
stunned to see "Asian American lit" in the course catalog
when I was in grad school, finally freed from science

It took a minute
for my throat to tighten, my eyes to blink
at the sight of the Chinese American professor
the room full of Asian American students
the syllabus crammed with writers I had never
heard of

Susan Ito co-edited the literary anthology *A Ghost At Heart's Edge: Stories & Poems of Adoption* and the short memoir *The Mouse Room*. Her work has appeared in *Growing Up Asian American*, *Choice*, *Hip Mama*, *Literary Mama*, *Catapult*, *Hyphen*, *The Bellevue Literary Review*, and elsewhere. She is a MacDowell colony fellow, and has also been awarded residencies at The Mesa Refuge, Hedgebrook and the Blue Mountain Center. She has performed her solo show, *The Ice Cream Gene*, around the US. She is an advisory council member of the Writers' Grotto, and teaches at Mills College and Bay Path University. Her theatrical adaptation of *Untold*, stories of reproductive stigma, was produced at Brava Theater.

I learned about *Aiiieeee!* and *Charlie Chan is Dead*
Making Waves and the voices of so many

and when the class ended, we didn't want to end
we didn't want to stop
we wanted to drop our voices into that river
now a torrent now unstoppable
so we started Rice Papers:
 for Asian American women writers
 we told our stories, in between pots of rice
 curry and lumpia, flan and roti and mochi

And a quarter century after that,
I enter the classroom as the professor
of Asian American literature
The flood of choices, the tsunami of books
poetry memoir essays graphic books
of writers reflecting the vast diaspora
is more than I can fathom
more than my flimsy syllabus pages can hold.
 I see my students blink. Their souls glow
 in the mirrors of representation.

We are swimming
neck-deep in stories
That swell toward the horizon
The voices coming from everywhere
 the libraries are bursting now
 the bookstores
 the best-seller lists
 the secret diaries
 the internet exploding with Asian American stories
All from that first voice, calling to others in the silence
 calling out *Aiiieeee!*
 We are here.