

Something Whispered in the Shakuhachi

No one knew the secret of my flutes,
and I laugh now
because some said
I was enlightened.
But the truth is
I'm only a gardener
who before the War
was a dirt farmer and learned
how to grow the bamboo
in ditches next to the fields,
how to leave things alone
and let the silt build up
until it was deep enough to stink
bad as night soil, bad
as the long, witch-grey
hair of a ghost.

No secret in that.

My land was no good, rocky,
and so dry I had to sneak
water from the whites,
hacksaw the locks off the chutes at night,
and blame Mexicans, Filipinos,
or else some wicked spirit
of a migrant, murdered in his sleep
by sheriffs and wanting revenge.
Even though they never believed me,
it didn't matter--no witnesses,
and my land was never thick with rice,
only the bamboo
growing lush as old melodies
and whispering like brush strokes
against the fine scroll of wind.

I found some string in the shed
or else took a few stalks
and stripped off their skins,
wove the fibers, the floss,
into cords I could bind
around the feet, ankles, and throats
of only the best bamboos.
I used an ice pick for an awl,
a fish knife to carve finger holes,
and a scythe to shape the mouthpiece.

I had my flutes.

*

When the War came,
I told myself I lost nothing.

My land, which was barren,
was not actually mine but leased
(we could not own property)
and the shacks didn't matter.

What did were the power lines nearby
and that sabotage was suspected.

What mattered to me
were the flutes I burned
in a small fire
by the bath house.

All through Relocation,
in the desert where they put us,
at night when the stars talked
and the sky came down
and drummed against the mesas,
I could hear my flutes
wail like fists of wind
whistling through the barracks.
I came out of Camp,
a blanket slung over my shoulder,
found land next to this swamp,
planted strawberries and beanplants,
planted the dwarf pines and tended them,
got rich enough to quit
and leave things alone,
let the ditches clog with silt again
and the bamboo grow thick as history.

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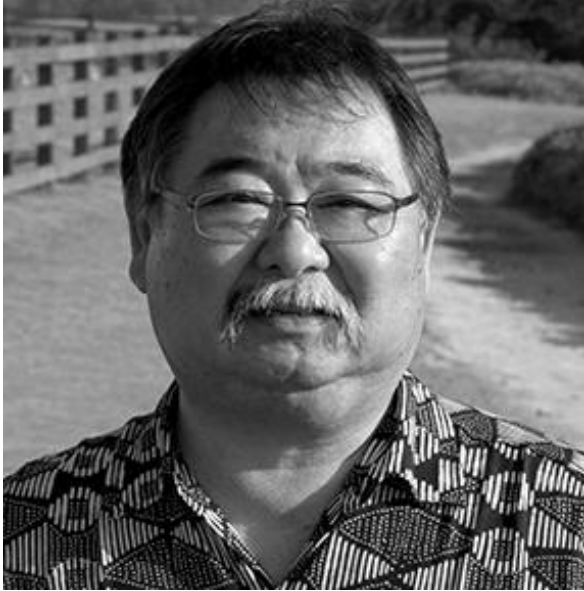
So, when it's bad now,
when I can't remember what's lost
and all I have for the world to take
means nothing,
I go out back of the greenhouse
at the far end of my land
where the grasses go wild
and the arroyos come up
with cat's-claw and giant dahlias,
where the children of my neighbors
consult with the wise heads
of sunflowers, huge against the sky,
where the rivers of weather
and the charred ghosts of old melodies
converge to flood my land
and sustain the one thicket
of memory that calls for me
to come and sit
among the tall canes
and shape full-throated songs
out of wind, out of bamboo,
out of a voice
that only whispers.

Credit:

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