

Knowing I was close. Yet not able to get too close. To ask for what I needed. My own shyness, reticence – obstacles from my own background and genetics. Yet I still knew this was it. An authentic experience. An authentic artist. I wonder if Myung would critique my label of “authenticity” – says who? for whom? But it was. At San Francisco State University I put on a face but my brain worked overtime. I knew Myung was a gifted poet, thinker, teacher, person, but I played it cool. There were “Myungheads,” people who eagerly anointed themselves her disciples. I didn’t know how to get near to that. How to become? How to take in? I walked into poetry workshop wearing a hat I no longer own. Myung noticed and commented.

Spring 2008. 11 years after my graduate work. I sit around an oval, conference-style desk. No windows. 5 full-time professors ask me questions, one after the other. I’m thinking as I’m speaking – how do I explain my poetics, my teaching. Words fail. I clamor for buzz words: *Community, Multi-disciplinary, Socio-political contextualizing, Engagement*. My mind breaking to twigs, the breaks are what I want to speak into but how to do so cohesively? I talk about Myung: “Obtuse limited vocabulary while lying down” (*Commons*, 59).

It seemed appropriate to approach Myung’s work as a teacher. I did what I always do. I waited to assign

work to a class of poetry students. Work I'm afraid of. That excites me. But we'd do it together. Novices. The whole class and I.

We read Myung. The class states: "the work is difficult." I cut into this. "What do you mean?" I'm embarrassed by my own sense of this difficulty. The fact of my resistance to having entered her work earlier. "Difficult," do you mean as in life being what it is? Do you mean complicated, layered, as in language? Difficult as in anxiety, fear . . . a worry of ineptitude, of what to know, how to carry through the work?

"Yes and No!" one student says. "Difficult like maybe not for me. I'm not Korean."

I'm in another space – thinking of Americanism, as in how we "read," decide what stories are relevant, connecting. "How did anything happen? / How does anything happen? / Many things happened" (*Under Flag*, 32). What we choose to respond to, take notice. Language of identity given to us by books, by "news," by authoritarians. We meandering through these dictums, frames as if guides and signposts.

Myung: ". . . but if there's something in the way I've been able to render my experience, that releases in the reader a way of speaking to her experience, then it doesn't matter that I'm Korean American and she's Chicano or whatever. It's the manner in which you're led into the experience, that either releases you or doesn't. But it has that possibility of connecting you to yourself, and hopefully to the writer's experience too, in some way. Ultimately it's the return to your own condition by something

that you see another text take up that is so profound” (“Generosity as Method,” 81).

Myung’s work requires active engagement. I shoulder responsibility with her in building, re-building, laying tracks. “What would the sea be, if we were near it” (*Under Flag*, 13). And yet this student has a red flush. She feels forgotten, left out. I think of that irony. Both because of the generous and inclusive nature of Myung’s work and the place or dis-place from which the work is being written, and for the loud voice and shove of hand that the student takes to Myung’s books, an action that feels heavy with irony.

I only begin to know what Myung’s writing and teachings have brought to me. I return and return to the work. In her classroom we sensed what potential/possibility felt like. Despite institutional constraints, our social and personal tendencies, we attempted to cohere and collaborate with our differences. The act of when you try to bring your best self (at the time) forward. It was what was expected. It was what she brought to us.

I remember thinking she shook when she read other writer’s work. But maybe that’s a romanticized image. Maybe I shook. Maybe everyone, the class, was so still. She read into words, her own and others, like I never heard before. She read the words in her body. You hoped she would read one line, one phrase from your work. It would be heard like you hadn’t heard. You would go to that phrase again when you were alone.

I teach using her methodologies. I expect my students to be each other’s attentive readers. I expect them

to sit with silence and difficulty and also noise and keep moving. I ask them to write letters to each other and be present and show evidence of their deep engagement in each other's work. I believe that there is the possibility to do great work within a classroom but that the real work will expose itself (hopefully) beyond this room and hour. "Faces spread in a field / On the breeze what might be azaleas in full bloom / Composed of many lengths of bone" (*Under Flag*, 19).

One only need to be at a reading of Myung's. The woman to my left cried. Myung seemed uncomfortable. It wasn't about performance. She seemed to have to find the space to engage the words that were honest. Or that the words she had written didn't work, didn't sit right for just now. So she had to break away. Join. And make something there.

That one reading in lower Manhattan. I now lived in Brooklyn and though she had read several times in NY I'd never gone. That night I by the door, standing. She entered and there was loud sound, embrace. It felt natural and people we were.

Her writing: when people ask me who are my favorite poets I'm piqued. I enjoy different writers for different occasions/moods. I boast about this openness. I feel pressured to anthologize and align myself with "schools." I won't. But yet this is a small bit of a lie. There is poetry and there is *poetry*. Or, here I am inarticulate and that it is too. A colleague wanted me to pinpoint my work, Myung's work . . . "poetry." And for that I wanted to say "I just read and know, I just read and know." With Myung's writing you

must live it: “I stayed alive and listened” (*Commons*, 27).

I think about Jabes’ wandering Jew on the desert/ the page; Celan’s tightly coiled words exploding in their crystallized bodies; Susan Howe’s ghosted landscapes informing, re-forming, de-forming, Brathwaite’s push-back, smack, and owning, owning, and even Dickinson whom I read again recently, the prying beneath of civility, prudery, war and gender. This community of writers my most inexpressible ideas reside close with; I am intimate. My trust and certainty in what they write into, what is at stake, leaves me speechless and yet creates motion . . . I want to write.

A writing of opposition from opposition but not nearly that simplistically formulated. A writing where words are hard, distant, resistant to being plucked: “Translucence of cut pears on glass plates” (*Commons*, 27). Where to enter, fall in, absorb? “The two are begun / They are shaving ends of sticks / The two are discussing seeds / They are specimens / Glass does not burn but the hillside does / The two are a vine’s exhalation” (*Commons*, 35).

And yet never without the human presence. The vulnerability. Emotion. “The openings in the human body” (*Commons*, 44).

“Made of particles hooked one to another” (*Dura*, 16).

What is an “I,” Identity, Constructed How? Why? Public Identities (how many does one have?) Private Identity (is that even possible?) “To be precisely from nowhere” (*Dura*, 50).

Contradictions/Oppositions/Hypocrisies/Ironies:
words of harshness and malleability – I can take them
with me. Words are old and decaying but presently evolving
here, here.

And the greatest gift to me: “Any time authenticating
work is taken on, the poem becomes saturated with
possibility.”

Desire.

Myung taught me about letting silence in. Learning
from it. We looked at poetry from silence, words yanked
from people, erased. Places where there were no easily
identifiable words to access (“Method,” 76).

I lived with silence (noise beneath).

Because this is now an opportunity, I respond.