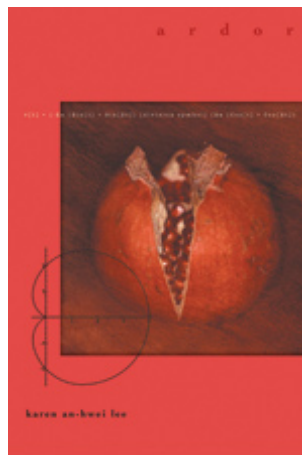


A Reader's Companion

Ardor

karen an-hwei lee



Hypothesis
This logarithm of
Love raised to its base
In lowercase italics
Exponential legacy
Of power . . .

Version Date: March 12, 2009

Contents . . .

A Note to the Reader of Poems	3
An Interview with Rigoberto González	5
Translation: My Words in My Own Words	11
Creating a Space for Writing: Exercises	17
About the Poet	19
Postscript: My Name	20



*A coronal view of winter
versus sagittal light
or a mirador
looking
especially far . . .*

A note to the reader of poems . . .

Dear reader: You are a person I already love, but you may not know this.

Loving you, I learned, was useful in order to write *Ardor*. Yes, I lay down my rude skepticism to write this. Late at night I wrote longhand in my unlined notebook when I woke for no reason except to put all of this down for the morning, when I woke quite early to see, partly out of curiosity, what I said to you. I wrote in the daylight of white spiders. I wrote by hand without my glasses in the darkness, doubly blind. I wrote without clocks in the room. I wrote while sipping countless little cups of cold green tea. I wrote so you would not read words with dead souls and no music. At minimum, I hoped you would experience new language.

We are strangers, you say, this is absurd. You may think I was too ambitious.

To be honest, I was not that concerned about whether you would like this, but I do not say this to be arrogant. I wanted to say something to you which would matter to both of us. I sacrificed, therefore, saying things in the usual way. If I met you on the street and asked, politely, for directions, you would not recognize this voice. Perhaps I am forgetting my manners: Sacrifice as loss on one hand, and good manners on the other, though, have nothing to do with love. Those who don't love may see sacrifice as loss rather than gain; in turn, those who act out of love may forget their manners. In other words, those who love may see action bearing fruit – a form of grace -- through any distressing encounter.

We are still strangers, but love will help us navigate the unknown.

There's no fear. As I write this now, you drift away from me like curled blue smoke, concealed in a future of reading what I've written. A clandestine hourglass. Do you love me back? We are blind to one another's histories. We ask one another, who are you? Who is the woman behind the words, one who in turn asks, who is the one who reads? Are you small-boned with a soft voice? Did we ever meet? Did we catch glimpses of each other on the subway, in a distant city with our raincoats misting, without recognizing one another? Or are you someone I see nearly daily, the postman, the gardener, the vegetable grocer who knows details about me – whether I will choose the butternut squash or the casaba melon --

without seeing the words to these poems, although you are someone who lives in them, cameo without a name?

You and I share at least one trait in common, no matter how mundane it might seem: I will mention it. We have puzzled through the lines alone, or understood them with lightning-struck astonishment on a first read in the morning. We share these words as companions. You may not have opened *Ardor* yet, but you have started to read this note to you, at least, this far. Or perhaps *Ardor* was assigned to you in a class and you've opened it, alongside your peers, waiting to see what will happen inside, like an open boat at sea.

Indeed, without love, I am nothing, says the apostle.

I am often asked, is the writing autobiographical? Did I experience everything this book describes, or is it my imagination, or the words of women whose voices I know? Do I know all the women in this book-length poem? How many of the women's voices are my own? And so on. My answer to all the questions is yes, but yours is, too. We have both experienced the full range of these things, I suppose.

As a token of love, this is my gift of appreciation to you. Imagine my shadow in your room, holding a pomegranate in my hands. You invited me to journey with you beyond the words in *Ardor*. I want you to have this: Please hold this as a gift. I wrote this with you in mind. I included things I hoped would surprise and delight. In addition to this note, this companion includes a translation of my own words into my own words, a revelation of the water sonnet concealed in a long poem, and a prayer of pomegranate seeds for your blessing.

The prayer was mailed to me, incidentally, by a reader of poems like you.

Always with gratitude,

Karen

Santa Ana, California

To write is to write is to write is to write. – Gertrude Stein



An interview . . .

National Book Critics Circle Blog

SMALL PRESS SPOTLIGHT: KAREN AN-HWEI LEE with Rigoberto González

November 23, 2008

***Ardor* is a book-length poem that's shaped by a series of fragments, many announced on the left-hand column as letters, dreams and prayers. Slowly, perhaps even seductively, these fragments coalesce to tell a narrative about love, passion, and heartache as experienced perhaps by the blind protagonist in the poem, though this narrative is more abstract than concrete. It's the recurring image of the pomegranate that suggests (despite the many Biblical references) that the story is Greek tragedy—Persephone ascending from and descending into darkness and sleep, so that there's always a second-guessing about what's real and what's imagined. What are your expectations in offering readers such a challenging book, both because it is a book-length poem and because it's difficult to encapsulate and summarize?**

Although linguistically intricate, *Ardor's* internal fugues – prayers, meditations, dreams, letters, jottings – hover transparently, I hope, between the earthly and ecstatic. The language blends an awareness of intimate minutiae with universal desires, such as yearning to love and be loved, to give meaningful names and to inherit one, to seek God and be known, intimately, by God.

I answer this question with one raised by a poet. Anne Carson muses, “What makes a poet, accident or attention?” Both experimentation and linguistic attention can make poetry challenging. While I'm not exhorting all readers to join a revolution in poetic language, it's been noted that language-driven aesthetics are seldom considered accessible by general readerships. Indeed, poetic compression, complexity, and poetry's elliptical qualities – accidents or surprises while paying exquisite attention to language itself – may render poetry and experimental prose difficult, but to paraphrase Toni Morrison, *that is what reading is*.

I suppose my response is partly about attention to language itself as experience. For instance, in researching how stained glass is made, I discovered the words “leadlight” and “ferramenta.” Attention shifted to surprise. The least intentional aspects of writing are often

the most crucial to breaking open the geometry of craft. A unifying pulse is revealed, a flagon pours new oil or wine, or a source illuminates the internal architecture of a poem-organism. It's a cell under a light microscope. Transparent envelope with a permeable boundary. Parcel of life. Ecstatic. Protean. Alive. How does a new poem live? Where? In one writing exercise, I ask students to imagine a cell as a transparent room. What furnishes this room? Look inside. What do you see? A mitotic glass pool? A tarnished mirror, a fish vat, a box of clay shards, childhood, a burned orchard, a lake bottom, nebulae, an airplane lying in a debris field? I encourage students to use surprises to shift attention without losing focus.

A cardioid graph appears on the cover of *Ardor*, another enclosed shape, nearly cellular. Music, medicine, and mathematics are entwined. Cardioids appear in botanical nature, are the sensitivity pattern of certain microphones, and share an etymological root with *cardiology*. Advancing the quiet etudes introduced by *In Medias Res* (my first collection of poems), *Ardor* begins with an image that traces the path of a locus on a circle rotating around another circle of the same radius, forming an epicycloid with a cusp: A heart-shaped cardioid lingers on the margins where acoustical language evaporates or is saturated with fragrance.

I look outside poetry to seek forms which may loan shapes to my writings. To this end, *Ardor* is a book of sequential cardioids: heart to heart dialogues, mothers and daughters, a blind woman who figures prominently in my writings -- readers have inquired, who is this mystery person? A response appears in my next collection, *Erythropoiesis* -- women waiting for their bodies to heal, a hidden water sonnet, a poem that cycles, and an epithalamium or two.



The following is an example of a cycle-poem in *Ardor* (pp. 10-11). It depicts a woman after a single mastectomy. She's looking in a mirror while putting on a light dress for a wedding.

...

Coating of time

the color of patina

resembles sherry or amaretto

after putting on a light dress. Lightness:

she wears a corsage to cover the remains.

The flow of blood widens through the heart

as water emerges from a narrow channel;

the flow of blood widens through the heart.

She wears a corsage to cover the remains

after putting on a light dress. Lightness

resembles sherry or amaretto

the color of patina,

coating of time.

...

Poetry is also a natural vehicle for synaesthesia, present in *Ardor* through all the senses. Vowels are warm colors and consonants are cool colors, yielding rich tones, shades, intensities in form of musical perfume. When I was fourteen years old, puzzling aloud the effects of music to my piano teacher, whose name is Fern – I was remarking how a certain Romantic-period waltz sounded green yet was alternately saturated with mellow amber tones, the cork-textured key of E flat – she commented that not everyone experiences language and music in this way. (Arthur Rimbaud's synaesthetic poem "Voyelles" was

unknown to me then: “A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu”) Thereafter, Fern would inquire at the start of a new piece: What color is it? What fragrance? What textures?

I rode my bicycle to flute lessons, a silver open-holed flute with a B foot jouncing in a side basket hooked to the seat. My flute teacher taught me the importance of breathing – the caesura – at the ends of phrases and the skill of varied articulation. I had an off-center embouchure, creating a warm dark tone in the lower registers but split notes in the higher ones, so she taught me to whistle enharmonics. I learned to achieve a focused tone in different registers, to maintain pitch, and to use proper breath support not to break a legato.

Poetry, like music, has pitch, rhythm, dynamics, and registers.

So, I express a hope that readers will find pleasure in light, color, fragrance, and meaning as poetic language engages experience in unconventional ways.

Finally, thoughts to share about the pomegranate Persephone, absolutely, with seasonal imagery of descent and ascent, death and resurrection. On a personal note, a dear friend shared a Biblical meaning of pomegranates which is “memory-knowledge of good.” Without any proper exegesis in the original language whatsoever on my part, I imagine this “memory-knowledge” looks like rich crimson drupelets embedded in people’s hearts. Additionally, I’m delighted by a reader named Teresa who recently mailed a letter to my post office box with this wonderful prayer inside: “May you be blessed with many blessings as pomegranate seeds, is a Jewish blessing that I pray for you.”

Likewise, I pray this blessing for all readers of poetry, near and far.

Letters, dreams and prayers, which are communication through intimacy, create a tone that’s distinctly vulnerable and, dare I gender the language, feminine. But this assessment is disrupted by the presence of mathematical quandaries and vocabulary that’s straight out of *Gray’s Anatomy*. This creates a tension that mirrors the push-and-pull between the many binaries that appear in the book—man and woman, pleasure and pain, order and chaos. The space of the page becomes conflict-ridden and complex, but it never compromises the beauty of the imagery and the fluidity of the music, even with words like “beta-fructofuranosidase.” Who are some of the poets (and perhaps, texts) that you turn to for

inspiration and education? What are some of the languages (in the all-inclusive sense of the word) that guide you toward poetry?

Voices returning to me over the years, variously, include Marguerite Duras, Saint Augustine, Clarice Lispector, Octavio Paz, Chuang Hua (Stella Yang Copley), Myung Mi Kim, Arthur Sze, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge; the prophets, gospels, and epistles in the Old & New Testaments; writings of mystic women and early itinerant female preachers, especially ones with fire-in-the-bones. I've written about Virginia Woolf, Theresa Cha, and Kazuo Ishiguro, so these authors are always with me in one way or another. Recently I enjoyed Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss*, Eileen Tabios' *I Take Thee, English, as My Beloved* (wherein is the lovely phrase, "poetry as a way of life," and a marriage to poetry complete with a wedding cake & satin bridal train adorned with poems), and Mother Teresa of Calcutta's posthumous *Come Be My Light*.

Languages I love are the four-tone syllables of Mandarin my parents taught me, translation proficiency in French I acquired in school, conversational Spanish in southern California where I now live, medical language pertaining to life and healing I studied, the language of theology and Biblical studies on the college campus where I teach -- eschatological murmurings of *parousia*, *dunamis*, *pneuma*; talk of synoptic gospels L and M versus Q. I take pleasure in translations, linguistic migrations, calque or loan-translation, when new words, yes, even "beta-fructofuranosidase" -- the enzyme bees use to convert nectar to honey -- enrich tongues in sweet glossolalia.

A public announcement was made by publisher Jeffrey Levine that *Ardor* would be the first of three titles that Tupelo Press was committed to printing. This created plenty of buzz in the poetry world, where such multi-book contracts are unheard of. Does this agreement provide comfort that you have a home for your future projects or anxiety that you must certainly write publishable books? Has this shaped or affected the way you consider or revise your current projects?

This promise is a gift, the generous blessing of time. Like bread on the table, it is a "gift of protected liberty," as Ann Lauterbach puts it. Since the collections were already finished at submission, it may seem there's no more pounding coriander seed or manna flakes to make breakfast. However, a poet's labor doesn't end with book-making. New manna --

provided for wanderers in the desert wilderness, as poets in American culture often live in forms of exile – still settles on the sand after the frost melts and awaits refining. I must gather it, write it down, otherwise it may vanish at day’s end. There is also the irresistible impulse to be daring, to be purer in voice & vision (“*what it is*” rather than “*what is it?*”), and to find what is rare. I’m grateful to do all of this. In other words, with the promise of three books, I am free to work on new projects or focus on other areas of writing life instead of sending, waiting, revising, and sending again. At the very least, this gift saves postage; in the long run, it yields peace of mind with a space for travel or reflection.

For the past decade, I labored quietly in relative seclusion, staying out of sight except teaching students on a tiny campus with a serene chapel at its heart. Waking early in the morning, I’d sometimes walk around to see things – my attention is focused in the wee hours, although I prefer to write at night when attention dims to yield room for poetic accidents – to witness a hummingbird flick water onto its sleek green back in a granite fountain, to see magnolias hold out their immense ivory, and touch a bruised violet-skinned fig on the sidewalk. I still wake early and love my prayer walks; this aspect of my life hasn’t changed. I do hope to use this gift of time to travel more often to share poetry. I encourage those who want to write, who want to hear – to listen with utmost attention – the music of rare languages, to bear witness to survival in ragged crevices of existence. Concerned less with “what is it?” or whether the manna is viable, I receive this gift not as accident but as generous provision.



... God is love. – 1 John 4:8

Translation: My Words in My Own Words

This translation exercise is a whimsical interlude for you in this reader's companion. I've started it, and you may continue with any poem in *Ardor*. On the left-hand side is the original poem. On the right hand side, in italics, is a translation of my words from poet-English into plain English . . . with annotations. I chose three fragments of varying linguistic density to see what I would say in my own words . . . about my own words. Why did I include this exercise? After all, some say poets are notoriously inaccurate about elucidating their own intentions.

All the more amusing for the reader, if you'd like to believe what I say is true, whether or not intentions matter at all. I was also curious to see what is lost or gained in translating my own words. The overall effect, for me, was an exercise in returning to the point of origin – why I made certain choices for words over others – and unraveling the poetic compressions of their meanings. In one case, I confess not remembering the origin at all, so I was returning to the words blind, reading them as though I were a stranger, although they were still luminous with the memory-knowledge of love.

FIRST FRAGMENT

...

Calque alphabet

*I am thinking of words loaned from translated languages (calque), letters, & textures
I am inviting you to examine language itself as a form of experience*

Modulation with avian equivalence of hands

Shifts in registers of meaning as we use our hands to gesture, bird-like

Translation perched around a white rose

*A translation of this poem already exists, although unwritten
like a white rose, the invisible poem on a blank page*

Photographic grapheme of cardioid delight

*Poetic compression is word and image, a grapheme or calligramme of sorts
whose verbal-visual hybrid nature is of emotional (cardioid-heart) & logical origins*

Water potential, a hidden sonnet whose

I am referring to an actual sonnet hidden later in this long poem

Permissible boundary of closed form

*The sonnet is a formal or closed poem with a set rhyme scheme & meter,
yet readers who encounter these lines, open or closed, may contribute their interpretations
The poem has a skin with a permeable boundary for water and air*

Is a sequence or open cycle in

*Formal poetics (sonnet, pantoum, renga, sestina) resemble mathematical sequences or cycles
which give visible shape to patterns in nature*

A heart-shaped curve traced by a point

This is a mathematical description of the cardioid (a heart-shaped curve in words)

On the circumference of a circle rolling

Around an equal fixed circle, general equation

$\rho = a(1 - \cos \theta)$ in polar coordinates

As a child I knew how to sketch this

As a girl, I learned about polar coordinates: angle and distance

Graph a cardioid around plotted

I first learned to sketch a cardioid in geometry class

Birds from real algebraic equations

*When I plotted coordinates using my pencil,
I imagined each dot was a graphite bird*

Conversation images of empirical scent

*Graphite birds turned into poems talking to one another,
mathematical or empirical yet exuding a perfume, like words*

I slipped this dream out of its own skin

*I still have a tendency to daydream
and slip dreams out of their transparent forms*

Put its shape inside a bottle, this one

*then place their forms inside new ones, poems
like this one*

Joined its hands to prayer, this one

or this one, the shape and spirit of a prayer

Jin wei first tone fourth tone

*or this one, the name of a river
whose syllables change meaning depending upon their intonations*

Merged rivers of contrasting hues

It's a river created from two blended rivers of different colors

One opaque, the other clear

One opaque, the other clear

...

SECOND FRAGMENT

Dream: Light underneath a bushel. Tabled love. Astringency is the beauty of pomegranates, instinctual hiddenness. Persevering under scarlet. Vermilion. The pomegranate is also a lamp, each seed shedding light. And here's what a pomegranate believes. Mineral salts, unwitnessed relinquishment, quotidian grace such as rain and leaf and the gradual strengthening of bone.

This is a fragment I don't remember writing, or to be more precise, whose origin I don't remember, although I'm sure I was present at its conception, since I recognize these words as indubitably my own: the lamp under a table from the Gospels, the pomegranate of the heart, and a love of mineral salts. In my quiet times, when I am alone, especially in the winter, I make my own bath salts. I choose my own dyes and perfumes. This past winter I used amaretto and a red dye. The water is like almonds – a nearly transparent scent – and the red is so faint, it hardly looks like bleeding, much to my relief.

Astringent, no, although the color of pomegranates makes me think of velvety red wines which are. Astringent, that is. Quotidian grace would be the everyday things given to us – running water, prayer, boiling an egg, any blessing – we take for granted, including life itself, the rain and leaf and gradual strengthening of bone. Now, about the pomegranate lamp and seeds shedding light . . . where did all this come from? Perhaps I was referring to the inner pomegranate-colored light we wish to hide from others, like a lamp under a table, when we are hiding from love . . . or the lions . . .

Lions, however, are not mentioned . . .

THIRD FRAGMENT

The long-hidden sonnet

This line introduces the only part of Ardor where there is a formal poem, a sonnet

A lee of water potential

Lee is a pun on my last name in its English transliteration, which also means a body of water – hence its water potential, literally the movement of water from an area of high concentration to a lower one

Slips from an open sleeve

I see a slender body of water, the leaside of things, emerging from an envelope or sleeve, sort of like a long poem

With a couplet in parenthesis:

I am foreshadowing some formal aspects of the hidden sonnet

An avian or potential beauty

This shaping poem is like a bird (the first line of the sonnet)

Matures the living water for a duration:

whose deepening form holds a spirit over time, which is life itself

A gift of quiet potential purity

and in the envelope of life itself, the quiet soul's purity, like prayer

At equal ambiance and assignation.

and beauty is equal to purity in spirit and appointed time

As dormancy in spaces of potential

as potential faith lies dormant

Flows in places lower than the sea,

in the deepest places of the soul, lower than sea level

Water seems more secret than prudential

in these secret places, faith is a hidden spring and may not seem practical

When described in terms of transparency.

because it is concealed, it is invisible so it is not tapped.

As aqueous potential in solution,

*As the potential of water molecules to saturate a liquid
the difference between them*

Density of faith under chloroform

*or a solvent immiscible with chloroform -- anesthetized sleep as imitation death . . .
faith is still present underneath limbo states of consciousness*

And sleep of faculties, precipitation

inducing unconscious dreaming, codification

Increases pressure on poetic form.

is a poetic form in itself.

(A rainbird crying in a water drain

*We return to the beginning image, a bird
now in a shallow drain with a little water, crying in drought*

is commonly believed to augur rain.)

*yet in this cry or desire is the prayer for rain,
a prophetic utterance.*

. . .

One may ask, after reading these translations of my words into my own words, why don't I write like this all the time and save everyone the mysteries and strange music? I invoke a kindred spirit: Why didn't Emily Dickinson regularize her verse and make her words plain as bread and water, not dense and pungent as her black spice cake, which sat for a month in the cool dark cellar, soaking in a royal concoction of mace and cinnamon and brandy? In the poet's own words, she reflected upon her own innovative style: "Tell the truth but tell it slant. . ." I also like to see poetry as a startling way to live, citing another famous Dickinson proverb: "To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else."

After all, that is reading – and writing: startling lives.

Incidentally, I do not mention Emily Dickinson by accident She does make a cameo appearance in *Ardor*. I would like to note, however, that she didn't keep her fascicles underneath her bed, but rather, in the bottom drawers of a cherrywood chest . . . indeed, I was imagining things. (A secret: I was the one who hid my writings underneath my bed when I was a girl.) Perhaps you would like to try your hand at translating my own words into your own words. At the very least, I invite you to translate the last three lines: "My seasoned grammar / Of double roses / Dashed rhododendrons."

FOURTH FRAGMENT

Talking about a poet, a woman
What happened to her fascicles
Four hundred of them in the drawers
Underneath the bed, I remember
Or am I imagining this
Black spice cake
Hand-twisted rope
Lowered into the garden
From her upstairs window
Loved a young man who died

Consumption or fever something
Had other suitors, loved others
Including married men
One who moved to the other coast
Around here, as a matter of fact
Then, though, it was like relocating
All the way to the south pole or Asia
Why she spent all day in her room writing
Unscrolling handwritten dashes
A mustard-colored room
It's what I would rather do
Close the door when the suitors come
With their briefcases of paper
Don't standardize my phrasing
My seasoned grammar
Of double roses
Dashed rhododendrons
...



Pure mathematics is, in its way, the poetry of logical ideas.

-- Albert Einstein

Creating Spaces for Writing:

A word-space continuum in life.

Vowels unwritten

Of the opening spaces

– Myung Mi Kim

Where do you like to write? Do you need to write alone or with people in the room? Do you need a window? Quiet or noise? Little pieces of paper in a box? Do you journal? Can you write anywhere? Where do your words begin? How do you create time to write? What times are best for you? When do you find it most difficult to write? Do you have incubation periods? What are the internal and external influences that help or hinder writing? What is the pulse of your writing life? How do you afford to write? What moods, words-as-objects, images, or experiences are the internal architecture of your poems?

An idea: Procure a notebook and write a little bit daily.

Go outside and find something that has an interesting shadow; then, find something outside that, perhaps, doesn't have a shadow. Describe what is there and isn't there. Now ask yourself: So what? Answer "so what" in a poem. Go inside. In a room, find an object that's like a poem. Explain why it's like a poem. Turn from the poem-object and look inside your life. Describe the space you see and how the poem-object relates (or doesn't) to that interior space.

What furnishes the room?

Who is the echo?

Writing Exercises. . .

1. You are a well. *Jing shui*. What's at the bottom? Write in the language of water.
2. Write down seven or eight vowels or vowel combinations (au, ou, ea, iu . . .). Say them aloud. Rank the vowels according to tone quality and actual pitch.
3. Create a rainstick or any musical instrument out of paper. Write a poem describing how to make rain* or how to make paper.*
4. Write a poem about sweetness arising from bitter things or the reverse.
5. Visit a local museum. Write an ekphrastic poem. Write synaesthetically.
6. Write synthetically. (It's up to you to decide what that means.)
7. Write down several ways to break a line in a poem, break a bone, and break news.
8. Learn how to bind a book. Make a chapbook using envelopes. Make fascicles.
9. Compose an aleatory poem using the dictionary, algebra, or any formula for data.
10. Without using e-mail & the web, find an economical way to share your poems as gifts or as forms of witness . . . share with one hundred people.
11. Research or invent a marginalized (rare) language. Write a poem.
12. Invite a friend over and make flan de coco (coconut flan).* Write collaborative poems. Set up a typewriter in a place where there is a lot of foot traffic. Post a sign sharing your poem-writing service. Write poems for free. Explain the purpose of this service to people who ask.

. . . What sorts of poems do people ask you to write?

**Paper-Making*

A bag of shredded or torn paper
Flower petals, grass, or lint
Mesh screen with frame
1 T. White glue
Water

**Rain-Making*

1 cardboard tube
Two rubber bands
Wax paper or foil
Rice, beans, seeds, or sand

**Flan de Coco*

1 tsp. vanilla extract
1 can condensed milk
1 can coconut milk
5 eggs



For the most part, things never get built the way they were drawn.

-- Maya Lin

About the Poet

Karen An-hwei Lee is the author of *Ardor* (Tupelo Press, 2008) , *In Medias Res* (Sarabande Books, 2004), and a chapbook, *God's One Hundred Promises* (Swan Scythe Press, 2002). The recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Grant, the Norma Farber First Book Award from the Poetry Society of America, and the Kathryn A. Morton Prize for Poetry, Lee has worked as a florist's assistant, mended books in a rare-book archive, grown tissue cultures in a medical lab, read to children in a family literacy program, and taught music lessons in the field of music therapy for mental health patients. She currently chairs the English Department at a faith-based liberal arts college in California, where she is also a novice harpist.

Postscript: My Name

From time to time, when I am asked about my middle name, An-hwei, it's usually one of two questions or both: "What is it?" and "What does it mean?" An-hwei is Mandarin Chinese for peace ("an" is pronounced the way it looks) and fragrant orchid ("hwei" is pronounced as the PRC's pinyin "hui," sounding like "hway"), specifically, the *Coumarouna odorata*; related phrases are *huiyu* or jade orchid and *jinghui* or serene orchid.

So, my name is Karen Peace Fragrant Orchid Lee.

I value peace, but frankly, as a girl I sometimes felt ambivalent about being named after a pretty flower, implying one is fragrant, delicate, herbal, and easily trampled. Sometimes I wished my middle name meant "woman who is pure dynamite – watch out!" or "woman who leads revolutions – salute her!" Or how about "woman who utters earth-shaking prophecy in a world that considers her, alas, a fragrant plant – huzzah!" However, a professor in college once reassured me that serenity is a revolution in itself. And what's wrong with fragrant orchids, after all, with their various healing or medicinal properties? Additionally, the "hwei" in my middle name comes from the "hwei" in my grandmother's name.

My grandmother's ideogram *hwei* is favor, graciousness, or a gift from above. A location in our ancestral Fujian province is called *hwei an*, the same *an* I have and *hwei* my grandmother has in her name. My mother added crosses over my grandmother's ideogram to signify a female root, so I am proud to inherit *hwei* in addition to peace.

Orchids, besides, can thrive under adverse conditions, and are in fact quite strong. I also discovered in my adult years that the *Coumarouna odorata* is also known as the tonka or *tonqua* bean tree – bearing wrinkled black-skinned pods with an intense vanilla perfume -- which grows in South America. Moreover, it is no wee plant. It can grow to over a hundred feet high; the bean pods may grow to over two feet long. Terrible misfortune to be knocked on the head with a giant pod while one is passing casually underneath the tree! I have no idea how the etymology of my name hopscotched from orchids to tonka bean trees, but I consulted several dictionaries which confirmed these definitions, citing either *species of fragrant orchid* or *Coumarouna odorata*. So, is the tonka bean tree a type of orchid? Vanilla,

after all, is a genus of orchid. Mischievously, I rather enjoy the idea of a hundred-foot tall orchid with giant black-skinned pods big enough to conk unsuspecting folks on the head, like rolling pins or mailing tubes falling out of the sky.

One fourth of my name remains a mystery perhaps you will unravel.

(Dear reader, I will also say to you, *sotto voce*: What *Karen* means, with its etymological Greek root *Aikaterina*, if you will, is a whole other story, and I'll save *Lee* for a rainy day.)



I wish that every human life might be pure transparent freedom.

– Simone de Beauvoir