

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved dress with a ruffled neckline, stands against a textured grey wall. She is holding a large, colorful, abstract object that resembles a piece of fabric or a sculpture with vibrant, blurred colors of purple, pink, yellow, and green. The overall mood is artistic and contemplative.

how wood ash fertilizes the earth

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*tell me, what does it mean to
feel safe?*

*a safe space —
a place in which a
person or
category of people
will not be exposed to harm.*

in the 1850s, after the abolition of slavery, white people
looked for others to do their work.

in the 1850s, laborers
cheap enough to offer a reason to hire Chinese
were lied to in hordes,
whipped on the tracks for trying to
leave their inhumane jobs,
dying in 3s for every 2 tracks of railroad.



*tell me, when did this country
ever once let us trust
it would not expose us to harm?*



then, the 1870s:
my people came (were brought)
to do the work (nobody else wanted to) in droves.
the white laborers grew
crimson with rage,
“they are taking our (American) jobs!” they screamed,
torching Chinatowns scarlet and
lynching our men.

i wonder, gripping knuckles so red
they turn white,
how many of us had *nowhere left*.

by the 1880s, this land housed
200 Chinatowns reduced to wood ash,
re-absorbed by the earth as nutrients to
give new life.

i think of my people,
deferential, even in suffering,
always making sure we leave *something*
everywhere we are guests.

stillness, i realize, is a luxury we
are not all afforded;
after all, movement is a *choice*
when you are able to rest.





like low tide and crescent moons,
our spaces come and
our spaces go.

i think of the Japanese that took root in the 1890s,
while the Chinese were ripped from their ground, of
the 40 Japantowns they built, of how,
after the 1940s,
they *collapsed* into 3.
i think of how
they were forced to give up
their land, their homes, *their lives,*
for a war they couldn't see.



*tell me, how many times
have my people paid
this country's price
for wars they couldn't see?*

in the 50s: how the U.S.
split a country by its 38th parallel
to “maintain its influence on the peninsula.”
in the 60s: how a war stopped by daisies
caused 3 million of our people to die,
in the 70s: how the Hmong fought for their lives
after the “political climate changes”
and the U.S. Army boots
quietly take their leave.





in the decades after,
we reduce the richness of the
Korean, Vietnamese, and Lao
to the word *refugees*.
we give them
a world without housing, documentation, or health,
ask them to pay the cost of living
for our hollow promise of safety.

my lips stumble around the words
Asian American,
a battle cry when uttered in the 60s.
these days, it reads to me
like something that
kills you
even as you beg to be seen.





safety, i realize, is a luxury we
are not all afforded;
after all, you must not want to
hurt us
to make a space where
we can simply just *be*.