

ELIZABETH (BETSY) AOKI

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West of where the natives say is conversation

The natives say the frequency of fog is  
moist, often  
quite saturated, and there is much cloud.

The smoke from the enormous fires started  
by the natives is burning:

wood splits, and a man suffers great discomfort  
from the dry dusty air. Even this,  
the air, is myth:

a wind has acquired the name of “the doctor”  
due to evaporation from the observer’s skin.

Thick fogs are frequent in the mind.  
The natives, enervated by the interviewers’  
hot-house atmosphere, are very sensitive

and light great fires to keep themselves warm at night.  
Here the most violent storms

are thunder squalls which often start  
very suddenly,  
last but a short time,

sometimes only  
a quarter of your life.

Interviewers almost always travels from east to west,  
and are specially frequent  
at the beginning and end of the rains.

*blinding lightning misses the point*

Natives of these storms ride less rain, but steer  
far more violent winds revolving  
rapidly with a short radius.

(Interviewers, note: these natives are not like our natives.  
These winds are not made of the same air.)

This air is often thick with smoke from the numerous grass fires,  
started by natives in the savannas  
to clear the ground of dead words.

In the height of the famine there were for weeks  
together more than 6,000,000 persons in receipt of relief.

*there is no relief from the questions, say the natives*

During the heat of the day the natives  
retire to underground chambers. They leave  
the interviewers to surface chatter among themselves.

*'I used to hold up my hand to protect my face from it in the same way  
as one would in front of a fire.'*

Others speak of the sand being hot enough to burn the feet  
even through thin shoes. The natives slip on their own secret shoes.  
But they warn: there is no relief.

In the morning and late in the evening, when the sun  
is below the horizon one suffers from almost frozen feet

everything in view seems  
to vanish in brightness and the eye, unprotected by dark glass,  
cannot gaze steadily in any direction,

and the natives shiver with the  
unusual cold.

*These interviewers are always asking at the wrong temperatures to understand.*

The sand was so hot that matches burst into flame when dropped into  
a small bottle blackened on the outside, shielded from the  
air by inserting it in a larger vessel of transparent glass.

The language has been made  
to boil by simply exposing it to the sun.



## ABOUT THE POEM & AUTHOR

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“West of where the natives say is conversation” by Elizabeth (Betsy) Aoki is crafted from *The Climates of the Continents* by W. G. Kendrew (1922). About the poem Betsy says:

This poem, based on *The Climates of the Continents* by W. G. Kendrew, emerged when I realized I was much more fascinated with the way “the natives” were coping with the weather and all its excesses and violence than the actual weather patterns themselves. Because so often indigenous people never get to speak in older Western historical treatises, my project was to have them speak using fragments I found, as well as language divined from the text itself. I also fancifully supposed there might be nosy and possibly ham-handed interviewers, trying with Mr. Kendrew to talk with the natives about the weather.

Elizabeth (Betsy) Aoki is the author of *Every Vanish Leaves Its Trace* (Finishing Line Press 2009). Her poems have appeared in *Nimrod International Journal*, *Hunger Mountain*, and *The Nassau Review*, as well as in the anthologies *Yellow as Turmeric*, *Fragrant as Cloves: A Contemporary Anthology of Asian American Women’s Poetry* and *Fire On Her Tongue: An Anthology of Contemporary Women’s Poetry*. She lives in Seattle, Washington, and works as a technical program manager. She also volunteers for Hedgebrook, a non-profit organization that offers writing residencies on Whidbey Island. Online at [www.betsyaoki.com](http://www.betsyaoki.com).

