



Last Saturday afternoon I drove downtown to Military Park to hear several storytellers from around the country in the Printing Partners [Hoosier Storytelling Festival](#).

One of the featured tellers was [Brenda Wong Aoki](#). I had never heard her tell before, but my sister had, in California a few years ago. Bethany had sent me Aoki's beautiful little gift book and CD, *Mermaid Meat: the Secret to Immortality and Other Japanese Ghost Stories*.

Aoki's father was Japanese and her mother Chinese, which is a very unusual partnership because usually, as Aoki puts it, "Japanese and Chinese people hate each other." However, her parents fell in love and got married in spite of their families' prejudices against each other.

In fact, the first story she told on Saturday afternoon was about growing up as a "short, fat, zitty, asthmatic kid" in the multi-racial urban neighborhood known as "The West Side" in Los Angeles.

She is stunningly beautiful now, with a musical voice and a dance-trained body that moves gracefully and deliberately as she shares her stories. She vocalizes her own sound effects and often uses a large wooden and silk fan, and sometimes her gorgeous, long, black hair, to help illustrate her stories.

After telling us about her first boyfriend on Saturday afternoon, she told us about her nephew getting shot. He had come from Samoa to live with them in L.A. in order to have better economic prospects. The Mexican boy who shot him was only 14 years old.

Aoki told about the Samoan grandfather-chief who presided over the funeral in a grass skirt. He encouraged the family to grieve, yes, but also to cherish life.

Sometimes when a teller shares a very personal story, she (or he) has not yet done enough emotional work with it herself to be able to tell it in such a way as to allow the audience to feel safe enough to feel their own emotions as they listen. Aoki told the funeral story very movingly and tapped into her original feelings of rage and anguish, but she didn't let them overwhelm her, or the story, or us.

After the personal stories, she told us a Japanese folk tale. It turned out to be a very creepy ghost story. A samurai named Aoyama tricks a servant girl named Okiku into washing the Emperor's treasured saucers. Aoyama smashes one, and then blackmails Okiku by saying he will put the blame on her if she does not sleep with him. She kills herself instead, and then haunts him.

Even in the bright afternoon sunlight (the tent's side flaps were up) Aoki's telling of this story gave me chills. Her red and green fan, closed, becomes a frame with her arms to highlight the Emperor's effeminate, uncaring demeanor. Open, it becomes other parts of the story. Sometimes Aoki tucks it back into the wide belt around her waist, perhaps to grunt and

squat as the masculine Aoyama, but soon she takes it out again. In lesser hands, it could be merely a distraction, but in Aoki's, it adds another layer of magic to her telling style.

I heard Aoki tell again as part of "The Story Cabaret" in the Eugene and Marilyn Glick Indiana History Center Basile Theater on Saturday night. This time she told "Mermaid Meat!" I was delighted to get the chance to hear and see her tell it in person. She mentioned that it is a favorite story of Midge Munds, too. Midge is Storytelling Arts of Indiana director Ellen Munds' mother. Thank you, Midge, for requesting that Aoki tell her signature story!

It is about a Fisherman who falls in love with a Mermaid that appears in his net. She can only stay with him one day, but then she falls in parental love with his Daughter, and stays longer. The Daughter loves the Mermaid, too, at first, but later tries to eat her in order to become immortal. Instead, she is cursed for one hundred generations.

Aoki's telling of this story is very sensuous. Through her use of her whole body, her agile voice, and her large fan, you hear the waves and the wind from the ocean as the Fisherman casts his net and struggles to pull it in. You smell the musk of the Mermaid as she explores the Fisherman. You feel the Mermaid's pain as the Daughter rips into her living flesh. You imagine the briny taste of that flesh on your own tongue. You see the mist in the graveyard after the Daughter has become an old Woman.

It is a powerful experience.

The Hoosier Storytelling Festival is over for another year, but [Storytelling Arts of Indiana](#) offers several storytelling events year round. The next is the "Frank Basile Emerging Stories Premier" on Saturday, November 1, 2008 at the [Indiana History Center](#) at 7:30 pm. Local tellers Cynthia Goodyear and Deborah Asante will present world premieres of new storytelling pieces for adults. To purchase tickets, please call 317-232-1882 or visit [this page](#) of the Storytelling Arts of Indiana website.

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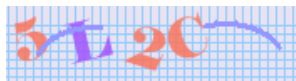
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