

POEMS: NEW & SELECTED

WRITINGS BY JANE JORITZ-NAKAGAWA

BOOKS

Skin Museum (Avant Books, 2006)
Aquiline (Printed Matter Press, 2007)
EXHIBIT C (Ahadada Books, 2008)
The Meditations (Otoliths, 2009)
incidental music (BlazeVOX, 2010)
notational (Otoliths, 2011)
FLUX (BlazeVOX, 2013)
Distant Landscapes (theenk Books, 2015)
<<*terrain grammar*>> (theenk Books, 2018)

CHAPBOOKS

wildblacklake (Hank's Original Loose Gravel Press, 2014)
diurnal (Grey Book Press, 2016)

EBOOK

terra form[a] (Argotist Ebooks, 2017)

EDITOR

women: poetry: migration [an anthology] (theenk Books, 2017)

POEMS: NEW & SELECTED

Jane Joritz-Nakagawa

selected by PAUL ROSSITER

foreword by ERIC SELLAND

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FOREWORD

Over the years, most of them spent in Japan, Jane Joritz-Nakagawa has developed a poetics that is unique among the generation of poets who, like her, came of age during the period when the Language movement was at its peak. Hers is a radically open form – a framework through which the data of life, and poetic themes and materials, freely migrate. She does not reject the personal, but she does not privilege it either. It is simply part of the data. And yet one senses a personal warmth, the presence of an intelligent observer in Jane's work. What we experience here as readers is not 'the death of the author' – the poetic subject has simply become more complex. For Jane, as with Blanchot, the poem never ends. It is an infinitely open system, always searching for that which is unexplainable, and unattainable: the poem is constantly in search of itself.

After completing a Masters in Linguistics in Chicago in 1989, Jane felt the need to expand the limits of her thinking, so she moved to Japan, where she has lived, and developed a poetics, as a foreigner. This was neither a new nor an uncomfortable reality for her, because as a woman and as a thinker she already felt like a foreigner in her own country, the United States. 'There is something foreign just about poetry in the first place, of course, outside conventional boundaries,' she commented in an email exchange she and I had in 2012 (later published online in *The Conversant*): the poet is already a foreigner by definition, an exile. This movement away from the center, the search for meaning outside the mainstream continued after settling in Japan. She avoided Tokyo's large expatriate community which had developed around the booming stock market of the 1980s, and headed for the provinces instead. Here she read widely, uninfluenced by the latest fads in the American poetry community, and collected a broad range of influences.

Poems: New & Selected not only displays the stylistic range of the work that was the fruit of these influences and experiences, but

also reveals the consistent thinker behind the poems. Multiplicity and migration, both between languages and cultures, and within her poetic language, are the key concepts governing Jane's work. It is an open process or procedure through which internal and external elements circulate. As a self-proclaimed 'hardcore feminist' the political is also important to Jane, though this is often expressed more in the acceptance of multiple voices in the poem than through direct statement, or else in terms of thematic material, as in *FLUX* (2013), where the many voices which emerge there include those of abused women and victims of rape.

The thought behind the poems, as well as the more subtle connections between images and observations, has attained more complexity in her recent work, as well as a lyric quality. Lines referring to the body and its connection to language and to the external world become more common. In *Plan B Audio*, the new work that opens this selection, we see for the first time reference to her recent – and ongoing – experience of cancer, and yet as with all other subject matter, it comes and goes.

near a pond
a body on a road
as if replaced

suffocated by sight
the 'e' is silent
so must i be

my chewed vagina
a vanishing self
former namesake

In some of these more recent poems there is a tinge of 'melancholy at the passing of things' much like what one finds in the *mono no aware* of medieval Japanese literature – the awareness of impermanence, of the transience of things. In fact, one senses that

there might be something Buddhist in Jane's acceptance of all experience, all events, basically on the same plane. Even earlier on, in *Notational* (2011), her first book-length poem, one runs across lines such as 'border between identity and non-identity'. But here again, the preference is to avoid any outward ideological leanings other than her own personal sense of what it means to be a feminist and an activist (this latter role performed especially in her work as teacher).

One source of this ever-shifting poetic landscape may lie in her early poetic influences. In a 2016 online exchange with Thomas Fink of *Dichtung Yammer*, Jane mentioned some of these, such as John Ashbery, although she immediately went on to add that everything influences in some way: 'Ashbery was more important to me during my college years but I am sure he is still important for me. Everything and everybody is important in some way.' And again, later in the exchange she insists that 'anything that takes a poet's attention can be in a poem.'

Appropriation is another method of avoiding overly much focus on the author's ego-self, a process which, as mentioned earlier, takes us to an almost Buddhist state of selflessness; as Jane puts it in her essay 'Mistaken Indemnities' (published in 2008 in *Jacket* 38), 'Like the actress the poet who appropriates may be unclear as to who she really is, whether she was really ever anyone, whether that matters, whether anything matters.'

However, in addition to displaying these almost Buddhist qualities, Jane's poems also powerfully evoke the physical. The work's frame, much like the frame of her own body, is highly susceptible to the environment and subject to pain, things which affect both the body of the work and the body of the poet. Jane has had a lifelong chronic illness, which establishes a particular ground for poetry – particular boundaries, or perhaps in Jane's case a giving up on boundaries. More recently she has been battling cancer, which brings a heightened sense of mortality as well as the tendency for themes of the body and illness to come into the poetry, as in these lines from *terra form[a]* (2017):

remote possibilities of escape
a person in pain exceeds language
inventing herself and watching herself [die]

each word its own planet
haunting the body

In conclusion, we return to the theme of migration. The overriding reality for Jane both as a poet and a woman living in the world is that she is an immigrant, a foreigner living in the Japanese countryside, living out daily life and communicating with the people around her in Japanese, while writing in English. In order to avoid isolation she has organized a number of writers' groups over the years located in or near provincial cities where she has held university positions. But ultimately her true community may be the one she brought together in the anthology she edited (*women: poetry: migration [an anthology]*, theenk Books, 2017) – that is, women writers who live in a country other than the one they were born in, and who, like herself, constantly navigate the boundaries between languages and cultures. Identity cannot be defined in simple terms because identity is by definition multiple. And this fact has a profound influence on the poetry.

In this sense, there is no way to describe definitively or to explain Jane's work. Perhaps life and poetry are indefinable – especially as long as they are ongoing projects. Jane's poetic explorations are still very much underway. The selection here provides an excellent introduction to a poetry whose depth increases with each reading, and which draws us further in, and along, leaving us wanting more.

ERIC SELLAND
August 3, 2018, Tokyo

SHORT FICTION

The crucial diary
His dirty breath
All that fits into the sack
(so we could stop here)
Self deflation and flagellation, defection
Fragile as your happiness
The classes of society
'I don't think I'd know what to do with a girl if I fell over one'
He sees her laid out in a satin-lined coffin, in the same
 flowered housecoat instead
Of her usual sluttish makeup
Perhaps because he had already lived the scene
Out in his mind
Each black half note to perfection

And upstairs on the after deck

But never mind the accident, let us turn back again to the
 morning

That's what the people of Mariposa saw and felt that summer
 evening

MEMORY TRICK

Her stunned immobile
Body, eyes searching skyward, the head
Moving sideways, ears wiggling, a fuzzy

Smile, the darting eyes
Said help me help me, cars
Just kept driving by, there was

No help, there is
Never any.
The exhausted body

Of the kitten flattened
On the pavement sparkling in
The sun, the hot darkness of the day

To bring it back to life...
Why didn't we stop?
My eyes sting, my body

Flat and immobile
I want to crush my head against
The dark sparkly pavement

My torn shirt cradled in my arms That
Night too, no one to help I ran
Home with one shoe on

I called you that
Night just to find out
Whether it had really happened

An invisible handprint, a scar under
The furry part, a piece of the kitten's ear
Under my pillow, my claws, crying into

The bowl on all fours, the position
You will never see me
In, my stunned immobile body

Although I lack conviction my
spine is made of bamboo
Once in a bamboo forest I lost
my husband several years later
He turned up but

I had remarried since then

for years we sat on the tatami

now I can make green tea using
only my belly button

earn easy typing income. lather,
rinse, repeat. in a contest
between truth and beauty money wins every

time. model AF6200 is not as good as last year's but
costs more. i may be radioactive iodine. what
remains after the tidal wave. go ask father

nature. somebody stole my vertebrae. your
browsing is history. we are
scientists after all. i worry where my eyes will go

next. and would like to move my hand across that
continent but stop myself

tipped pelvis. hindsight is still sight except when
father time divorces mother nature but not before

begetting father nature whose rage is the length of
a continent and deeper than the ocean. i won't be

getting out much for a while. the heaven i made on earth blew
to pieces. bank blowout. i asked

for a blow dry not a blow job. blank and
blue city. learning nothing

greater than the plumed building.
there are better ways to anger people

than comment on their views. you could
mention their hair for instance

another form of militarized darkness. rationing my thoughts
so there'd be some left for breakfast. i was

wrong. if not so dead i'd call you immediately. even though
clouds frighten me into moving i'm stuck in

tomorrow's tedium. collectively the seasons have much power
but individually we can smash them to

bits. i married a sexy macho man with no
emotions or thoughts. ideology alone in a back room

eclipsed by stars under homeless
lice-infested blankets. able to find no other use for

the pineapple i put it on my head. the poets have left the
building now. whether the past

or future makes me more anxious i'm no longer
sure as i can no longer distinguish them. you said run

for cover so i am hidden by trees. yet the accountant appears
fierce when i turn on the lights. in an email to

me beginning dear sirs

awful stillness
hide me forever
cleave my native tongue, funeral flowers

shadow of trees
the wind is dry mist rolls
cover my head in a thick fog

failing to learn the language of
the rulers but singing the
song of the dispossessed:

oh the background is out of focus
ah men in suits read comic strips thin and wan
colonial inheritance is a pretty garden

in my rucksack hidden
in the self conscious air
where money may be time

white dust torn fields
meaning shrinks sublime
in the empty seat

at the drive in movie
the film I can't see continues
my poem is complete to the extent i am not

from PLAN B AUDIO

courtship of empty space
process garden of past medals
wall of being and faded photographs
featuring thin trails of violent intentions
masquerading as frenzied farms
blue books of frozen procedures
nothingness in small white porcelain bowls
i dismount saying thank you
i dismantle saying i'm sorry
i'm speechless when the wind slaps my face
when you turn around and impeach me
i fall in your general direction
to subsequently be lifted by slow moving clouds and
straw men of the future
in my colleagues' arguments
in a heavy whimpering meadow
near the indifferent willows
enhanced abandoned items
more transient words in space
thank you for hurting me
taken out of my thin arms
the beginning of weather crumbling into wealth
empty words are useless props
restarting the phrases which eat my organs into cheap relief