



Book Review: *Plan B Audio* by Jane Joritz-Nakagawa (Isobar Press, Tokyo & London, 2020)

Reviewed by Pam Brown

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Jane Joritz-Nakagawa is an indefatigable poet, teacher, linguist and editor. She is an American who has lived and worked in Japan since 1989. She devised and edited the superb transnational anthology *women: poetry: migration* (2017), comprising poetry and essays by forty-nine women who emigrated for diverse reasons to many different countries. She has also published two chapbooks, *Diurnal* (2016) and *Wildblacklake* (2014), an e-book, *terra form(a)* (2017). *Plan B Audio* is her tenth full-length collection.

A plan b, though unforeseen, is a second strategy or, in the case of this particular long poem, can be imagined as another chance, the next thing. Plan a, if it existed, is irrelevant. Serious illness, not as metaphor as in Susan Sontag's well-known illness/health dichotomy, but a real situation requiring radical surgeries, is the complicated experience the poet undergoes. Conditions of change, loss, frustration, frailty, mutilation, struggle, disorientation and the possibility of finitude compound the testing art of occupying both the dysfunctional biological body of medical science and the actual lived body. The poems are made from evocative language that is distinct from the medical. This is the crux of the work of this poem.

Throughout this predicament, Jane Joritz-Nakagawa continues her practice of writing-into whatever lines or stanzas a circumstance may bring. That is, rather than determining a topic to write 'about', she starts from within a situation and realises what she has written afterwards. This is how her unconventional poetic imagination works.

Two stanzas at the end of the opening page prepare the way into the poem:

near a wandering brook  
children's fantasies fall silent  
a deserted door  
opening onto a freeway

to collapse the dystopia  
i ate the data

scars that itch  
failure of languages (7)

With data scars itching the failure of languages, the poem traverses variations of form indicating that it was compiled from different states of being over a lengthy period of time. The poet's body is being altered in parallel to her open-form text's responsive lines of thought and feeling. Joritz-Nakagawa's poetry is unpredictable. *Plan B Audio* is a montage that is often fragmentary and digressive (mimicking thought, dreaming or talking). Her minimal tercets can suggest haiku or a personal metonymy:

why does death  
seep from my pores  
cleaning the air of its stupor (12)

and:

bees atop flowers  
perfumes in springtime  
my greedy vulva

folded yukata  
blue and white on tatami  
large holes in the shoji

dead science of understanding  
forming a sinkhole  
sliver of grief (13)

*Plan B Audio* is informed by a feminist framework. This traumatised body is universally feminine. In that regard the poem is not an exclusive autobiographical account. It is a lyrically intimate, private *and* public (i.e. political) chronicle in a context that is of-the-world. The fierce candour of the poem is intense and unsettling even given its moments of alleviating irony, awkwardness, delirium, humour, love and sadness.

restricted contamination zone  
my leaves are fine  
but my flowers have shriveled  
the moon has been stolen  
and is not coming back (37–38)

and love:

smidgens      love spasms  
          replenished      correct the seasoning  
  
 and whom i love and love      i want to burrow into him  
                          his broad chest  
  
 lime chili lemongrass      stopgap sliced finely  
  
 robust decay      full of nulled voices  
  
 i have no children    alter form      blame sin  
  
          words jumping off the page (41)

Not really having much choice, Joritz-Nakagawa decides to make friends with the medical machines, the dragons: 'The three headed dragon that licked sucked / and bites.' 'The white machine is a dragon with / many heads. The red light blinds me; one / of the heads falls from the ceiling / flattening me with its weight. i / cannot be saved anymore' (50-51)

         ... Today  
 a definitive jazz tune, as the  
 multi-headed dragons tear  
 at my vulva. I imagine the  
 oncologist following me,  
 unable to get enough  
 of my naked pussy (50-51)

Joritz-Nakagawa's feminism is undiminished here as she calmly and adroitly dispatches what could be considered insensitive preferences of 'some men':

of course some men actually preferred the plastic replacement vulva

Emphasising this slant, she then borrows lines from two women poets. The next stanza begins with a line from Emily Dickinson and the line following it is from a tanka by Ei Akitsu:

A not admitting of the wound  
 Until it grew so wide  
 That all my life had entered it<sup>1</sup>

... women / walking with ovaries / hanging inside<sup>2</sup> (51)

There are prose passages that are less associative in their account of long periods of treatment and rehabilitation whilst institutionalised, connected to machinery and dosed up with medication:

... the room with the beautiful forested ceiling I've not seen in weeks.  
this room's ceiling is simply beige with surveillance equipment built in

... deep in my wound i see you. my mother and father are also visible.  
beads of sweat form a chain of memories leading to sadness or madness.  
they said they changed my medicine but i feel no different than before (64)

'This time we'll tie the virus around your waist.' The technician leaned  
toward me and whispered in my ear. I noticed however that the usual  
technician had been replaced by a silver robot

I think my right foot has gangrene. I put a black sock over it though the  
left one is white. They are affixing their seals to the document which tells  
the dragons what to do with me. Which ones of us are the living dead

i wonder when i speak with my inner voice if it can be heard. the black  
sock fights with the white one. it's always exactly like this. a strange  
object makes a wheeling sound as it hits the wall near the window (67)

In a despondent and vulnerable lull after declaring:

my tunnel is broken          under construction

no feeling can get through (82)

the poem pauses and, a little later, takes a salutary turn:

out from under the muck of thought  
to feeling's bold strides  
in an evening of detours  
I was thinking about you and then you arrived  
If only in my mind (83)

The book's pace is tempered by a dozen carefully placed, small, black and white photos by Australian expatriate in Japan, photographer and author, Susan Laura Sullivan. The photos are sometimes in soft focus. They are images of flora, sun-edged buildings, a box of handwashing ladles at a shrine, stark rows of pristine empty classroom desks, a patch of suburban street; each is simply 'there'.

Taking hold of this intricate, often disturbing, complex yet enriching poem, the reader might wonder how remembering what one was before drastic surgical intervention might affect the concept of a

future. Is plan b possibly regenerative? However, in this work the question of whether illness and recovery have an ultimately beneficial capacity does not seem to be Jane Joritz-Nakagawa's particular quest. In spite of grief and the intensities of treatment, from beginning to end she resolutely holds fast to her decades long, artful skill of making uniquely versatile poetry.

because without this notebook  
i couldn't stand it, am scarcely  
surviving now.... (48)

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Excerpt from poem 1188 in Emily Dickinson's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (1998).

<sup>2</sup>Excerpt from a tanka written by Ei Akitsu in *A Long Rainy Season: Haiku and Tanka* published by Leza Lowitz *et al* (1994).

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Pam Brown

Pam Brown has been writing, collaborating, editing and publishing in diverse modes for decades now. Her book *Click here for what we do* (Vagabond) was awarded the ALS Gold Medal in 2019.

Pam's new collection, *Stasis Shuffle*, is due from Hunter Publishers in 2021. She lives in Sydney on Gadigal land.