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Nanao Sakaki's "Real Play"

When Frank O'Hara picked up a copy of *New World Writing*, it was "to see what the poets in Ghana are doing these days," and in the process he saluted a configuration at the center of poetry in translation: we read foreign poets because we have a fascination with "difference." The cultured sensibility demands hierarchy and opposition — a comparative method that allows us to know the exact degree of our differences. As William Gass put it, "culture has completed its work when everything is a sign." Poets record cultural signs with a concern for semantic strategies and the identities of words, but in Nanao Sakaki's work a central demand upon the poet is to find a way across our signs of difference.

Break the Mirror (North Point Press, 1987) turns away from culture with a large "C" by identifying it in tribal terms: "If you want to know the culture/Check the craft./If you want to know the future of the land/Listen to the folk music./If you want to know the people/know yourself." It's in this last area that post-modern human-kind finds its greatest obstacle. What we know is increasingly negotiated by televisions, satellites, and "spokespersons." Signs of difference are exploited in the service of the cold war, and signs of likeness are often strikingly banal: "le jumbo jet;" "bombe a neutrons." What would a post-modern wandering troubadour poet sound like?

Nanao Sakaki writes in Japanese and translates his work into English. The book jacket describes him as a wandering poet-storyteller in the tradition of Saigyō, Bashō, Ryōkan, and Ikkyū. But unlike the poems and stories in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Nanao Sakaki's travelogue is international. His aesthetic is that of the long distance walker: he is equally at home in the mountains

of northern California or in the deserts of the Australian outback. In his foreword, Gary Snyder observes that Sakaki's work and presence are interconnected, and are known "from Tokyo to Amsterdam, New York to London, Maine to San Francisco." The planet is this man's "lake district" — he tramps thousands of miles every year. Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquility" is transformed in these poems composed by foot: tranquility is recorded in experience. As Snyder puts it, he is "an exemplar of a lineage that goes back to the liveliest of Taoists, Chuang-tzu. . . These poems have been sat into existence, walked into existence, to be left here as traces of a life lived for living — not for intellect or culture. And so the intellect is deep, the culture profound."

The book's opening poem offers a remedy for a culture obsessed with the perfection of signs:

If you have time to chatter
Read books
If you have time to read
Walk into mountain, desert and ocean
If you have time to walk
sing songs and dance
If you have time to dance
Sit quietly, you Happy Lucky Idiot

In *Break the Mirror* one encounters poems by a naturalist who notices the regional ecosystem he finds himself in, and he links this with the biosphere and the heavens. Culture is redefined as biosociology:

After evening glow
Jupiter shadows the coral reef

I am part of human beings
Human beings/mammals
Mammals/animal kingdom
Animal kingdom/all creatures
All creatures/earth
Earth/solar system
Solar system/Galaxy
Galaxy/whole universe
Therefore, I am part of the whole universe

Dark midnight
A water rail sings in a mangrove

— from "An Axiom"

The pared syntax and the ecological vision in these poems will be familiar to readers of Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, or Michael McClure, to name just three American poets with whom Sakaki can be usefully compared. While the poems celebrate and describe natural facts, they are also filled with paradox and contradiction in the manner of the *Tao Te Ching* — the meditations are sometimes profoundly noumenal. He inscribes the absolute which is neither being nor not being:

Nice Meeting You

Underground deep
fossil cave dark

you sit down
might be midday

someone comes in
you can't see him, hear him, touch him

still someone with you for sure;
is he friend or devil?

you don't care
all the same

you smile
he looks blank
I burst into laughter

no body
wave after wave

The beginning and the end of knowledge are the same, an idea which is opposed to cultural differences or literary hierarchies. The source of order in nature is a steady flame of contemplation. These poems were written in the deserts of the American southwest in the late twentieth century: they are visionary in the best sense, because Sakaki is both a survivor and a witness. He has seen atrocities, and as a mendicant artist and political activist he has devoted the last forty years of his life to acts of conscience and contemplation. In August, 1945, Nanao Sakaki was a radar operator in the Japanese navy on the west coast of Kyushu. He identified the "B-29" that was on its way to bomb Nagasaki. His poems are never far from this experience — biosocialism is the anodyne to language which perpetuates cultural "differences" or species-

specific "differences." The survivor's voice is very clearly speaking for all living things:

Memorandum

- 1970: Carlsbad Caverns, then I moved to White Sands National Monument. Dr. Albert Einstein, government officials and the Pentagon all watched the mushroom-shaped cloud right here in the Chihuahua desert 25 years ago.
- 1973: Jemez Springs, New Mexico, I met a Christian priest. At Tinian Air Base in Micronesia he held a service for "B-29" pilots who headed for Hiroshima, August 6, 1945.
- 1945: Izumi Air Base in Yaponesia, 100 miles south of Nagasaki. Three days after the Hiroshima bombing I caught a "B-29" on my radar screen. Due north. 30,000 feet high. 300 m.p.h. Three minutes later my soldiers shouted, "Look, a volcanic eruption!" In the direction of Nagasaki I saw the mushroom-shaped cloud with my own eyes.
- 1946: Hiroshima. There, one year after the bombing

I searched for
one of my missing friends.
As a substitute for him
I found a shadow man.
The atomic ray instantly
disintegrated his whole body,
all — but shadow alive
on concrete steps.

1969: Bandelier National Monument.
Beautiful ruin
of ancient people, the Anasazi.
Dead of night, the earth
quakes three times.
Not by Jemez volcano
but by underground nuclear explosion
in Los Alamos.
More ruins, more churches!

1975: The Air Base ruin in Yaponesia,
south of Nagasaki.
No more "Kamikaze pilots,"
now 3,000 cranes soaring high
in the setting sun.

1979: Northern edge of Chihuahua desert,
Bosque del Apache National Wildlife
Refuge.
Sandhill crane, "Grus canadensis": 1,700.
Whooping crane, "Grus americana": none.
As a substitute
for the extincing species
Mr. Kerr-McGee wants to dump
ever-existing nuclear waste

into "The Land of Enchantment."

— Sangre De Cristo Mountains March 5, 1979

Nanao Sakaki's "real play" stems from his capacity to reveal the culture's signs and respond to them with a unique slant which is compassionate and sometimes funny. The post-modern troubadour sounds a note which is startlingly simple — it "sounds" familiar to assert that our salvation lies in nature. But the survivor's voice, the voice that testifies in Sakaki's book, is shrewd and it also concerns itself with ensuring that we are momentarily freed from the tyranny of structural meaning. In this regard, Sakaki is not unlike Roland Barthes: ideologies, theories, and determinate slogans have become terroristic in our world. The pleasure of the text is, to quote Terry Eagleton on Barthes, "the last uncolonized enclave in which the intellectual can play, savouring the sumptuousness of the signifier in heady disregard of whatever might be going on in the Elysee palace or the Renault factories." Sakaki as anarchist-geographer walks these poems into being, and shows us how our slogan-eering culture can be momentarily split and disengaged:

Top Ten of American Poetry

The United States themselves are essentially
the greatest poem. — Walt Whitman

The government of the people, by the people,
for the people. — Thomas Jefferson

You deserve a break today. — McDonald's

Where science gets down to business.
— Rockwell International

Kick the letter habit. — Bell System

Crime hits everybody. Everybody oughta
hit back. — Chicago Crime Commission

Without chemicals life itself would be
impossible.— Monsanto

I think America's future is black, coal black.
— Atlantic Richfield Company

Have a coke and a smile. — Coca-Cola

Private property — No trespassing —
Dead end road. — Anonymous

As Barthes put it, the text is "that uninhibited person who shows his behind to the Political Father." The radical play in Nanao Sakaki's material is fully cross-cultural, since he has absorbed the lessons of recent history: there is no more reverence for life in Japan, Inc. than there is at Manzano mountain, New Mexico, where the military stores its outdated nuclear weapons. A little boy in Tokyo complains that the sky is ugly because it has "too many stars." A child in Kyoto brings a dead beetle to a hardware store demanding: "change battery please." Housewives in a new town outside Tokyo plant plastic evergreens in their yards because falling needles are "much trouble."

But while the poems are witty, they are often more than recitations of post-modern folly. The poet's response to what he sees in his travels is meditative, and charged with an appreciation of what it means to be human: this is both mystical and funny. It is precisely in the art of the trans-continental walker that poems should possess an equal measure of the ecstatic and the irreverent. In a poem written in Shinano, Japan, he reveals a mixture of bemusement and fascination about the proliferation of toilet paper in a modern supermarket, and gives an almost aboriginal portrait of nature as lavatory paper:

backbone of Mother Earth,
Y junction of eternity, human history and
your soul,
the most gracious lavatory paper
rock and stone!
hatched by sun
in a creekbed
this opalescent pebble
breathes, grows and goes
to the other shore with us.
so sweet, so warm!
can you buy such a cute one in the market?

— from "Ladies and Gentlemen!"

This capacity to express finely etched and unmistakable details that are surely connected to the ancient experiences of migratory human beings gives Nanao Sakaki's poems a sweet absurdity. In several places he addresses nature directly, in the manner of the trickster, and in these moments the results are surprising and fresh, and they remain so with frequent reading:

Grassy hilltop.
A Blooming flower in front of me.
Who and what are you?
No answer.

Loudly I call the flower by my lover's
name
Caressing with finger tips
I wish to give my hands to her.

Now she has hands, legs and smiling face,
And suddenly jumps over me,
Passes through a spider's web,
Comes down as walnut.

Here, I got you.

— from "Nut Trail"

These are poems of contemplation, and they are both tough-minded and playful. But I've failed to say that they are often strikingly beautiful in their descriptions of solitude and the wilderness. Their rough-hewn English is filled with surprises, a matter that ought to make workshop-trained North American poets ponder the merits of taking risks. In many instances I had the feeling while reading that I was looking at the world through the eyes of the first painter in Lascaux: the wonders offered here are that immediate. There is an accuracy in the presentation of details that may very well come from navigating the world by means of natural signs. In any case, landscape is faithfully recorded as an act of celebration. In some cases this is an epiphanic moment, much in the manner of

Basho. But the poems' strongest suit is in their ecological wisdom — the sure knowledge that each moment spent on equal terms with animals as a part of a self-sustained ecosystem is not only the source of authentic joy in this life, but it's also a subject fit for elegies. On the day of Hiroshima, August 6, Sakaki writes in an anniversary poem: "I hear my Neanderthal man's bone/Rattling with wind." Everything seen and recorded by this poet is informed by a special sense of necessity:

With icicles on my beard
Snowshoes and ski poles
I row in the snow ocean.

With binoculars around my neck
A warm teapot in a daypack
And a raccoon's hide on my buttocks
I row in the snow ocean.

Once upon a time
there were two earths: A and B.
While Earth A stayed in the solar system,
Earth B, one day, flew to the other side of the
Milky Way

Earth A is right now a megaslum of several billion
robots,
Earth A blushes with shame whenever a rainbow
appears
because her original beauties, the green mountains
and blue waters are gone forever.

I'm told Earth B is abundant in splendid flowers,

birds and animals.

And the people there wear rainbow robes
and chatter with dance and song.

January 1986.

At the Sierra foothill of North America on Earth A
Where black oak and black-tailed deer are
prosperous

I sent a letter through Halley's comet
To the post office on Earth B
Asking for my immigration visa.

— from "Rowing in the Snow Ocean"

These poems insist that we restore "culture" to its roots. There is urgency and sweetness here.