

## Mariko Nagai's *Georgic*: Exploring the dark side of the Pastoral

By Uma Anyar

*Georgic*, is a beautifully written and unsettling collection of Japanese short stories that will haunt you with the question: what would I do if I were in that situation? These reimagined folk tales of dire human predicaments and impossible choices center on farming and what happens when crops fail through drought, through floods and through nature's capricious cruelty to those that work the land. Several stories are based on Japanese fairy tales but no one lives happily ever after. Hunger and survival are the forces behind most of these traditional or historically based stories told in a first person narrator's voice by women, daughters, and children. "When I was a child, I was always hungry. We grew up not knowing that some people were never hungry." This is the first sentence of "Fugue." And the first paragraph of "Grafting," the first and most remarked upon story in the collection, is "Harvest. Another Failure. Third year in a row. Now. The posted sign in the village center: All people unable to work must leave within two weeks. Children exempted."

So, *who is not exempted?* The reader may wonder. The answer is delayed while the narrator lays out the stark, non-negotiable facts one after another in a spare style that Hemmingway would have admired. But there is more than modernist, macho minimalism at work in these stories. They feel Japanese. There is a Zen like beauty to the entire collection of these harrowing and very true, you suspect, stories. True in the sense that all fiction is truth dressed up to make it palatable.

Some distraught daughter must have followed the dictates of her village, or her clan and committed matricide as the narrator of "Grafted" was forced by starvation and agrarian custom to do. "Grafting" is an archetypical mother/daughter tale of love. Mariko Nagai is the second storyteller to bring the full horror of this dire necessity to my attention. This death-by-abandonment rural tale was part of a Japanese film I watched in an art house movie theater sometime in the 1980's. In the movie version a son carries his mother up a mountain knowing he will leave her to die of exposure and starvation. In "Grafting," it is a daughter. Oddly, there is a difference to the quality of the story in that single fact. Surprisingly, it is the mother's love that makes the unthinkable possible, as well as the rationalization story the villagers repeat over and over like some mantra. "So they will not starve, so they will not go thirsty, so they will not die alone; they will live, so the villagers say, they will live longer than we will, so the villagers say, they will live longer than we will, the villagers say. And they say many things more. Many many more."

The wisdom in these stories is wrapped within a lack of blame in the narrating voice. It is this quality of blamelessness that gives the stories a fairytale distance, which makes them; feel timeless and thus valuable in our fast-paced contemporary world.

In the Readers Guide section at the end of the book Mariko answers some of the questions she has raised for her readers from a personal.

“Working with historical facts and folktales is fascinating in that the choice others have made is there for us to judge, to recoil, and in some cases dismiss by saying that *you* would never make that choice... I found, through these stories that it is easy to judge the choices, but that these are choices that we ourselves would make, that *I* would make if I were living in that time and given the understanding that I have of the world. I would be taking my aging mother to the mountain if my village commanded - where would I go, who would I be, if I were to defy the village, which is the only home I know, which is the only place in which I could exist-as is the case in “Grafting”? I would be selling my daughter to a stranger if I knew that she would have a chance to live-, as is the case in “Autobiography.” We would also be making choices that we cannot ever tell anyone, when we are put in an impossible situation.

How much hunger would it take for you to consider cannibalism?

These extreme situations are presented in a taut, unsentimental voice. It is this style which functions like great bone structure, which supports the beautiful terribleness of these unforgettable stories. There is something ancient and deeply wise in this collection. Artists have long served humanity as cultural conduits for a deeper understanding of the world and events surrounding us all. Reading **Georgic** in the context of the news reports about the recent earthquake, tsunami and ongoing nuclear plant disaster in Fukushima, Japan, I cannot help but wonder how this contemporary calamity will be digested and translated by Mariko Nagai. For like her, many of us have asked, “what would I do if I were there?” It is both terrifying and terribly humane to empathize as closely as possible with the rest of humanity no matter how difficult or uncomfortable it may be.

Mariko Nagai is an important emerging voice on the international literary scene. **Georgic** is her first published collection of short stories and her second book; her first book **Histories of Bodies** was poetry. She has won the prestigious Pushcart Prize twice and the G. S.Shart Chandra Prize for Short Fiction. Mariko is a Japanese national, she writes in English and was educated at Boston University and New York University. She grew up in Europe and the United States as well as in Japan. Ms. Nagai currently lives in Tokyo, where she was born, and teaches creative writing and literature at Temple University, Japan Campus. **Mariko Nagai will be speaking at the next Ubud Writers and Readers Festival October 5-10, 2011,**