

KOCHAN



Jack Gilbert

Credits for the original printing

Designed & Printed by Allen Hoey during January 1984. Text is Baskerville on Mulberry rice paper. Of 300 numbered copies, the first fifty, signed by the poet, are bound in boards by Gene Eckert; the remaining copies are sewn into wrappers of Manilla [sic] hemp handmade by Alice Wand. Twenty-six ad personam copies, also signed & bound in boards, are lettered A to Z.

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KOCHAN

With Four Poems by Michiko Nogami

Jack Gilbert

1984

Nights and Four Thousand Mornings

I go out the back gate and past the orchard.
Up the stream over the small sound of water.
Through olive trees, under the big cypress,
and come to a dirt road. When it curves left
I am above the villa. Michiko raises her arms
and I wave and the road climbs to the nunnery.
I go past and down the other side onto the scree
of a donkey trail. Soon I can see the village
white and miniature far below by the sea.
A path branches off through an old terrace
to Linda's shepherd hut. I look under the marble
rock for messages. Leave a note and go on.

Now Michiko will be in the shady arbor
behind the house watching the swallows
in the early morning sky or painting
the fig tree or translating Heian poems.

The trail drops faster across stone shelving.
The farm with a child and a mean dog on the right.
The old woman's house with her dying husband after.
It gets steeper and mostly boulders. I go too fast
on their tops as a treat and come to the dry creek
and rushes and thicket of oleander at the bottom
of the mountain. It is hot now.

Every wise man I met in Asia warned me against caring.
Explained how everything I loved would get old,
or be taken away and I would suffer.
I tried to explain what a bargain it is.
They patiently helped me understand. I said the Devil
must care if he lets us get so much, as though he can't
resist something we are. Christopher Smart believed
his cat, Jeoffry, played with the mouse to give it
a chance, for one in seven escaped by his dallying.

Across the flat farmland through ferocious sun.
Bleak fields and straggling dry vineyards.
Past the turn for the Valley Of the Owls where I lived
three years before. I stop at the ugly fig tree
for shade and the fruit. Then handsome fields
of ripe barley with the Aegean very blue behind.

Michiko was to be with me that year
in the valley, but we had bad luck.
Now she is sitting on the mountain
under the jasmine. Like moonlight
in midday, Linda said. She has sliced
cucumbers and put them with lemon juice.

I stop at the best fig tree. I pass the field
of three black cows and pass the delicate goats. Cross
the dribbling stream to plum trees in a walled garden.

Stony plots again and severe heat. The farmhouses
become more frequent and it is the edge of town.
I buy tomatoes and eggs, squid for dinner and bread.
Check the mail and start back.

Zen monks circle a hill each day for a hundred days,
then walk it for a hundred sitting in their spirit.
I climb the Greek landscape daily in San Francisco,
getting the ten miles and the light and Michiko clear.
Today giant American winds churn violently in the firs
and eucalyptus. Uprooting and tearing down. Their bulk
is astonishing up close, like buffaloes at arm's length.
I move small among them in the strong air. Two possums
cross a clearing and I recognize the faces of the dead.
Two years and I know Michiko is not like that.
Her bones are burned clean and hidden in Japan.
The Michiko I miss is the Michiko I contain.

We are composed of memory. We are the past ignited
in the present. Without felt history, America is merely
another country. Without Tuesday and the years before
conscious in me, I am merely someone, uninflected.
Our past is an orchestra which merges with the tenor now.
The eleven years of Michiko are me. Those months
in the gardens of Kyoto and she with me now amid these
splintering trees are both happiness. Memory is
the equity we have in our lives.

Michiko calls softly out of the orchard in me.
She eludes and laughs, gentle and pleased.
I know she and her shy heart and small breasts
are in there with the apple trees and figs,
however invisible among the leaves.
The air is fresh around her.

Rabbit in the room

A brown rabbit jumps
in my heart.
Goes out through my back.
Leaving us trapped
looking
with his tender eyes.

Michiko Nogami

Jodo

The smell of lemons.
The Manyoshu open
face down. She crossing
away from me. The leaks
of sun through the shutters
flaring on her nakedness.

Secret Mornings

She does not wake in the morning.
Or if she does, she looks over to my bed
to see if I am watching.
Sees I am and folds the blanket back
from the *futon* a little
and I visit her.
We make love or we don't and she sleeps.
When she wakes again it is between morning
and after. There is San Francisco sun
in four of the six windows.
She does not look for me
but makes a small sound.
I stand in the doorway and say *Ohio*, Michiko.
She makes a different sound which pretends
to complain. Poor thing, I say,
and go to get the tea.
After, she puts on the blue *yukata*
and I return to my writing.
There is the sound of water.
Then the sounds of her making breakfast behind me.
It's ready, she says gently,
and I carry the tray in.
We have cabbage with eggs which she says
is Japanese and it may be.
Or we have *udon* with *tofu* and chopped green
onions put in after.
Then it is day.

Song

A strange, nameless river
runs from my heart
into this world
while I go happily
trying to reach a country
inhabited by no one.

Michiko Nogami

Married

I came back from the funeral and crawled
around the apartment crying hard,
searching for my wife's hair.

For two months got them from the drain,
the vacuum cleaner, under the refrigerator
and off the clothes in the closet.

But after other Japanese women came
there was no way to be sure which were
hers and I stopped. A year later,
repotting Michiko's avocado, I find
this long black hair tangled in the dirt.

Transformations

Is there no way
to stop the houses falling
within the bird's body?
Why must life go on
testing the heart
against metal?

Such excess
pours a terrible glaze
over me.
I can feel myself thickened
by the unmoving sun
as the dove in me flies on,
shadowless as always.

Michiko Nogami

Michiko Nogami (1946-1982)

I try to see the smokestack against the sky
and see the sky with a chimney in the way.
A chimney and a winter sky and a woman
not there. Smokestack and sky. This
and that. Merely this and that.

Is she more apparent because she is not
any more forever? Is her whiteness more white
because she was the color of pale honey?
A smokestack making the sky more visible.
A dead woman filling the whole world. Michiko
said, The roses you gave me kept me awake
with the sound of their petals falling.

Dawn Waltz

If you were here now, Kochan,
you and your body would be
asleep in my other room.
Having written all night,
I would get into bed so quietly
that when you did open your eyes
you would see us dancing.

Missing Me

It is not because of groaning on the rug
nor the nights of missing her that I have
lost me. Nor from grieving so much about
Michiko's loss of herself. That is only pain.
I am like this watch which runs wrong because
the thick new band separates it from the pulse.

Being Ready

Being ready
I watch and listen to the silence
coming through the dark, narrow
path of the world
toward my small room.

Michiko Nogami

Getting Better

Now there will be good times.
I will come back from the picnic
in Umbria with my friends.
Back from the Aegean in the dusk
with a beautiful woman or girl
who loves me. My home will be
filled with talk and happiness.
I will go outside into the quiet
and whisper to Michiko.

The Children's Hour

We let the soul peek out and it pretends
that snow flies softly at the earth.
Makes up Katsura and melons and sycamores.
Makes up music and Michiko. Who could
hold out against lies like that?