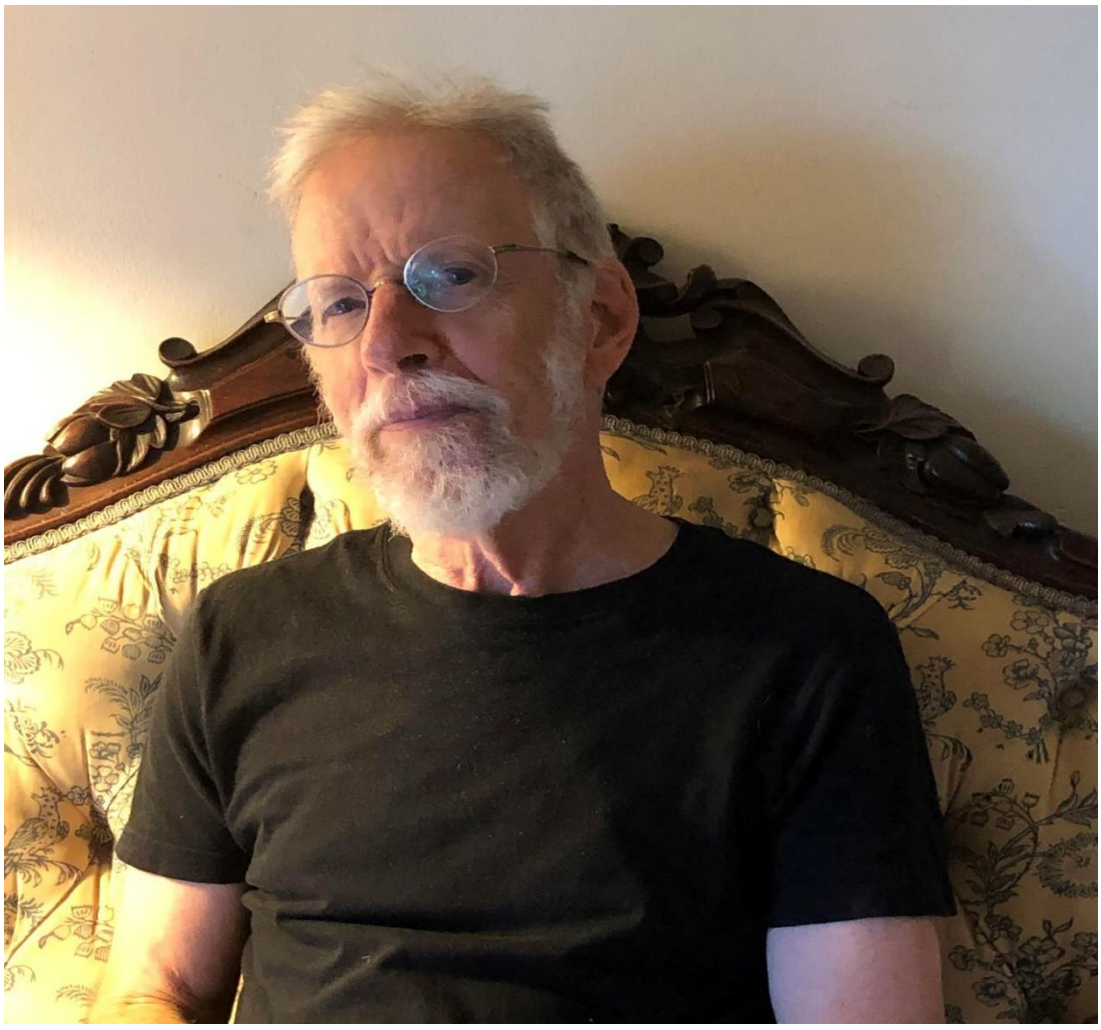
‘On *Not* Going Straight in One Direction’: In Conversation with Jonathan Brewer

Chiho Nakagawa

Nara Women’s University, Japan



Jonathan Brewer

Jonathan Brewer is an American poet and academic who was based for many years in Japan. Born in Los Angeles in 1948, Jonathan obtained his bachelor’s degree from St. John’s College, Santa Fe, New Mexico and his master’s and PhD in English literature from the University of California, Berkeley. He has studied with the poets Charles Bell, Arnold Weinstein, John Anson, Robert Pinsky, and Peter Dale Scott.

In 1971, at the time of the Vietnam War, he became a conscientious objector and fulfilled his alternative service by teaching English in northern Thailand. He later lived in India and spent time in and out of ashrams, until he entered graduate school and wrote a dissertation on Yeats, Pound, and Snyder entitled "Closing the Circle: Eastern Visions in Western Verse." After earning his doctoral degree, he lectured for five years on "Great Books" in the Core Humanities programme at the University of Nevada, Reno. In 1996, he travelled to Japan as a tourist, stayed-on as a part-time teacher, and then became a Foreign Lecturer of English and American Literature at two national universities in Japan — Nara Women's University (2004-2012) and Kyushu University (2013-2015). He published many of the poems he wrote in Kyoto and Nara in the journals for the study of foreign literature at Nara Women's University and Kyushu University. The three poems in this special issue of *SARE* were selected from a sequence of poems that were started in Fukuoka and finished after his retirement. They are appearing now for the first time. He currently lives in South Pasadena, California.

I first met Jonathan when I joined Nara Women's University in 2009. There were only three Americanists at our university at that time, so naturally we became very close, talking about ourselves, our students, and (mostly American) political issues in between classes. He was always cheerful and kind, and good at encouraging students to engage in class discussions as Japanese students tend to be shy in general. I learned a lot from him in the four years we worked together. We continued to keep in touch after he transferred to Kyusyu University.

As a colleague and a friend, he has shown me his poems occasionally, but I have never before commented on or written about them. Jonathan's poems treat both political as well as aesthetic subject matter and are often light-hearted and funny. The three poems featured in this special issue on "EcoGothic Asia"—"How Prescient the Worm," "If This Were Noh," and "Keeping the Mourning"—are more serious and deal with our human relationship to nature, as well as to our past and future. The poems are set in Kyusyu, the southernmost large island of Japan, and were written while he was teaching at Kyusyu University. In the exchange that follows, conducted by email over May and June 2022, I provide a commentary and some background information for each poem, with Jonathan responding in turn to my comments, resulting in a conversation of sorts.

Chiho Nakagawa: **You have said that "How Prescient the Worm" was made possible by the chance location of a field of mulberry trees outside your ground floor apartment in the International Housing complex for visiting professors. The trees were carefully tended to by the Agricultural Department in order to provide food for the silkworms its scientists were studying. Sericulture, or silkworm farming, has a history of about 5000 years in China. The two old Japanese history/mythology books (*Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*) also include references to silkworms, suggesting that sericulture had been introduced to Japan very early in history. Silk is luxury — not only in the sense that silk garments cost more, but also**

in the sense that being able to wear them indicates a leisurely way of life. If you need to work hard physically or move around a lot, silk is not for you. Silk adorns humans, to wrap, to cover, to add radiance to our lives in the forms of gowns, shirts, scarves, and gloves.

The silk manufacturing process, let alone the fact that silk is made from the cocoons of an insect, is mostly out of our minds. People do not think of silkworms when they look at beautiful scarves or dresses. For all the "luster and sheen" that silk offers, we are not mindful of the "cruelty and craft" involved in silkworm farming. We tend to ignore lives that are sacrificed for our sake. Of course, silkworms are not the only creatures humans exploit. There are many others, too, including humans. The cycle of exploitation can be seen in garment productions throughout history and across the globe. Young female spinners were placed under harsh working conditions in the early twentieth century in Japan; and cotton production has been associated with slavery in the American South and still in contemporary Xinjiang. The poem reminds us of how the beauty of silk hides the grotesqueness behind the process of its production — strange, white fluffy things are boiled and gutted just to give us beauty. The silkworm, like other creatures, has been domesticated by humans. Having been cultivated for our purposes, the few moths allowed to live literally cannot exist in the wild. As the poem says, "They are bred to breed, not to fly."

Your poem reminds us of human cruelty, but are we unaware of our guilt? There are not many literary works on silkworms, but we can see our guilt in the way silk is represented in our literature. One of the earliest crime novels to feature a serial killer, Anthony Berkeley's *The Silk Stocking Murders* (1928), succeeds in conveying immorality and deviousness by naming the fabric in its very title. As the title suggests, a psychosexual killer strangles a series of young women with silk stockings until he is brought to justice. Kate Chopin's "A Pair of Silk Stockings" (1897) portrays a foray into consumerism at a department store, of a woman who once led a comfortable life but is now struggling financially. Little Mrs. Summers goes on a shopping spree when she "unexpectedly" acquires fifteen dollars. Instead of buying clothes for her children, she decides to spend the money on herself. Although she buys multiple items—a new pair of boots, kid gloves, magazines, and a theater ticket, in addition to a pair of silk stockings—Chopin chose to call this story "A Pair of Silk Stockings." The title indicates the symbolic function of silk stockings, a sweet guilty delight, seducing the protagonist like a "tiara of diamonds," and glistening and "glid[ing] serpent-like through her fingers." The silk stockings provide her with sinful pleasure, but the feeling does not last. Her "poignant wish and powerful longing" to not go back to her everyday life will never be fulfilled, as the pair of silk stockings can only give her fleeting pleasure. As silkworms are destined to die, silk mesmerizes and fascinates us with its beauty but also with its ephemeral frailty.

Jonathan Brewer: Ezra Pound says in his "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" that "the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol." In this regard, the life cycle of the butterfly performs an incredible service as an adequate symbol for transformation, across many cultures and many religions. Thinking of the silkworm's cocoon it is hard not to picture the strips of cloth wrapped around a mummy in preparation for a new "kingdom come." What interested me the most in writing this poem was how we interrupt the natural metamorphosis of the silk worm for the sake of our own human artifice. Someone many millennia ago had the idea that silkworm thread wound into a cocoon could be unwound and spun into threads to make cloth with "luster and sheen." If all created beings are considered sacred, such an action is both cruel and profane, particularly since the whole process of moving from a wingless creature to one that can fly is a perfect example of how nature for sheer inventiveness is equal to any single god or pantheon of gods. The human species, however, as a participant of the natural world, can also express its own imaginative power, and even be as indifferent to loss as nature and gods are often thought to be. The seeming unavoidable cruelty of our method of procuring silk, however, is matched by the extraordinary craft that fashions extraordinary garments, such as the kimonos that have sashes tied "to look like of all things butterfly wings". How fitting is that—to dress a Cho-Cho-san, a myriad of small 'Cho-Cho-sans' must be sacrificed, unless, like a proper Hindu one purchases *ahimsa* or 'non-violent' silk from a cottage industry that takes special measures not to boil the larvae in their cocoons but waits until they have hatched and been set free. And, yes, this takes more time, yields less silk, and is much more expensive.

CN: In "If This Were Noh," the poet and his companions meet an old woman at the bottom of a trail leading up to the summit of Mt. Tachibana in Kyusyu. She tells them that she is doing a sort of *sadhana*, or Buddhist spiritual training, of climbing the mountain for two thousand days. The poet is reminded of the typical set up for Noh drama: a traveler on a pilgrimage to a holy place, meets an ambiguous figure, who turns out to be a supernatural being or demon. The real woman on the Tachibana trail plays her part very well. Leading him and his companions to the little known "power trees" on the mountain side, she even collects fallen *tsubaki* blossoms, spears them on a pair of twigs, and hands them over as a kind of blessing. After she guides them to the summit where a castle once stood, she melts back into the forest and goes on her way.

The poem is titled "If This were Noh," because that is how the story runs in Noh plays. I would suggest "If This were Kyoka's Story" as an alternative title. Izumi Kyoka was an early twentieth-century writer, who was known to have written supernatural stories. Many critics pointed out the structural similarity between his novel, *Koya-Hijiri* (1900, The Saint of Mt. Koya 高野聖), and Noh

plays. In this most popular novel by Kyoka, the narrator meets a travelling monk in a train, and hears his story of a journey in which he met a beautiful woman, who seduced men and transformed them into animals. This structure closely resembles a genre of Noh called Mugen Noh (夢幻能) in which the central character is a ghost or a supernatural being. This genre is distinguished from Genzai Noh, which focuses on physical events and characters in our natural world. According to Ishii Tomoko, most plots of Mugen Noh plays progress as follows:

1. **A travelling priest (Waki, or the major subordinate) visits some place, and a mysterious local person (Zen shite, or the first-half lead) talks to him.**
2. **The local starts telling stories about that specific location. The travelling priest finds it strange that the local talks as if he were there, and then the local confesses that he is the main character in that story that he is narrating, and disappears.**
3. **Another local person (Ai, or the subordinate) enters, and tells the confused priest a story related to the episode that he heard earlier. This local convinces the priest to pray for his peaceful rest.**
4. **While the priest is praying for the soul of the man he met earlier, that man manifests in his previous form (Go shite, or the second-half lead) and dances or tells war stories, and then disappears again. The priest then finds that everything happened in his dream.**

According to Ishii, the ancient people believed that dreams were a communication method between this world and the hereafter. By introducing dreams into a stage play, Noh can transgress time, Ishii maintains, merging the past with the present. As Gothic fiction often explores the past to reassess and to understand the present, Noh too connects the past and present.

The poet's encounter with the old woman, unfortunately, does not take him away to a supernatural world. She remains entirely human, appearing like a kind and friendly stranger one sometimes meets when travelling. There is no hint in the poem that the poet imagined being seduced by her as a beautiful young woman who would turn him into an animal, and yet he cannot help but imagine the world of Mugen Noh or Kyoka's fiction where spirits and humans meet and the boundaries between past and present are fluid.

JB: Indeed, I would have been interested in learning more about the old woman's past, in particular her psychological motivation for taking a vow to climb the mountain. It would have given me a clue on how to title the play that I imagined. I have no desire, though, to be taken away to a supernatural world. I am too much of a realist, which is not to say that I don't thoroughly enjoy the myth and folklore out of which so much literature has been created. My wildest dream instead would be to write a Noh drama as brilliant as Zeami's *Yamamba*, the play which I first thought of when I started to write my poem. The set up in its mirroring seems

so Nabokovian—a dancer famous for performing the character of "Yamamba", The Mountain Spirit or Crone—is on a pilgrimage to a mountain temple and meets on the path a strange old woman, who is fully aware of the dancer's fame and makes it known that if she performs "Yamamba," she in turn will reveal her true form. Before the dancer can comply, the old woman changes into the actual Yamamba, moves center-stage, and demonstrates to the dancer how the real dance is done. What fun Zeami, a former actor himself, must have had with a story about an actor who had identified so thoroughly with the role she played on stage that she is able—without any conscious intent—to attract the real figure she portrays. Was Zeami himself interested in having the supernatural experience that provided subject matter for his Mugen Noh? I doubt it—anyone who has read his highly specialized treatises on acting knows he is such a consummate dramatist that for him "the play in all of its aspects is the thing." Period.

CN: "Keeping the Mourning" contains multiple literary and mythological references to bring together the scene in front of the poet to make sense of the current world we live in. The poem's central concern is ecological; as the poet takes his morning walk, he observes the high-rise condos on their artificial islands, thinks about industrial air pollution, the harmful invasion of jelly fish in Hakata Bay, and the consumer culture of the nearby mall. He enjoys his walk, but his musings, like "the tin-dazzle" of sunlight on water, quickly turn "grey."

The central motif in this poem is an episode from *Kojiki*, an early book of Japanese history/mythology of Emperor Chuai and his wife, Empress Jingu, at around 200 AD. In that episode, Emperor Chuai and Empress Jingu were in Fukuoka, ready to battle a tribe hostile to the Yamato dynasty. But then Empress Jingu was possessed by a goddess and told her husband? to go to the West, to conquer a wealthy land (Silla, or today's Korea). Emperor Chuai did not see any land and rejected to follow the prophecy. Enraged by his disbelief, Empress Jingu decried that he was not fit to rule the kingdom, let alone the one in the West, and that he should "go straight in one direction" to a far-away land in the netherworld. The poet sees our destiny in Emperor Chuai, who was deemed unfit to rule this world, and sent to the world hereafter. According to Akima Toshio's study, from which the poet learned about the mourning keeper (jisai 持衰), this episode of Empress Jingu is most likely based on ancient legends of the undersea world goddess. Empress Jingu, who sends her husband to a faraway land of the netherworld and voyages out to the faraway land of Silla, can be seen as a variation of the goddess of the undersea world, who rules the netherworld and the sea.

The poem abounds with images of death; the death of Chuai, the deaths of faked lovers, and the future deaths of human beings as a species as a result of their destroying everything and "conquering" others in pursuit of wealthier and more convenient lives. These deaths are also associated with femme

fatale figures, especially Empress Jingu, who invaded a foreign country, and killed her husband. Empress Jingu took over the reign of her country after her husband's death and became the ruler instead, conquering Silla while pregnant with Chuai's son. This tale of Empress Jingu in *Kojiki* entails political complications today, for it was used to justify Japan's colonization of Korea in the early twentieth century. Yet, was Emperor Chuai a completely innocent victim? I would say no, for he was ready to conquer the Kumaso anyway. Chuai was destined to die, for not believing in what he could not see.

There is another female killer in this poem. A double suicide at Kashii's strand refers to a main episode in Matsumoto Seicho's *Points and Lines* (1958), a railroad mystery classic. Seicho spent half of his life in that area of Kyusyu. The lovers' double suicide turns out to be fake; they are two separately murdered victims, sacrificed, so to speak, so that the man will be silenced forever about his involvement in government corruption. One particularly interesting plot twist in this story is that the plan of these murders is laid out by a house-bound sickly woman, Yasuda Ryoko, whose hobby is to "read" train timetable books. She is probably the farthest away from Empress Jingu as a woman — she never bears children, or takes up arms, or ventures out to the faraway land, and she is on the brink of death from tuberculosis. The story of Empress Jingu tells us of the time when women were not limited to a small, enclosed space, unlike Ryoko, a mid-twentieth-century Japanese woman, whose movement is restricted to her household. But her world is not limited: she imagines what she cannot see from books and time-tables, to the point of planning the (almost) perfect crime. She also stands in between life and death, like Empress Jingu.

The poem concludes with Jingu's curse— "go straight in one direction"— and the poet says it "could double as our curse too." This poem makes us aware of the close relationship between life and death. Empress Jingu is the central character in this respect, but we cannot forget the shadowy, private woman, Ryoko. Also reminding us of our proximity to death are the "keepers of mourning" who supposedly protected ships traveling overseas on journeys so inherently risky that they were equated with going to Ne-no-Kuni or the underworld. Death is always with us, and never far away.

JB: Was Chuai an empiricist, an aesthete, or simply spineless? All three, perhaps, but there is so little character detail in the *Kojiki*'s narrative it is hard to say for sure. Jingu, evidently, was the stronger of the two, a cross it seems between Cassandra and Clytemnestra. She could play the role of shaman and then turn around and tie her hair like a man. Most importantly, she understood the value of the divine voice, which the less savvy Chuai denied. Like the characters in Noh drama, she lived at a time when the supernatural carried authority. When it comes to myth, I am something of a Euhemerist and can't help but see her channelling of spirits as a

vehicle for her ambition. Perhaps she really believed there was a land of "gold and silver" waiting to be conquered, but even if she was not fully persuaded it existed, she had the chutzpah to launch her ships and go for it. That alone makes her a rare character in Japanese tradition. For that matter, she has also precious few counterparts in the West.

In any case, my primary allegiance in the series of poems I wrote in Kyushu is to *place*. The references to *Kojiki* and *Points and Lines* in this particular poem promised to add depth to my immediate personal experience of where I walked without fail every day, either in the morning or at night after dinner. I learned from a tourist plaque that Jingu washed her hair in the bay before embarking on her campaign, the same bay where I witnessed swarms of jellyfish washed up on the beach that figures in Matsumoto Seicho's mystery. A bit of poetic sleight of hand allows me to ask the question—"At what price has conquest come?"—as though Jingu's invasion abroad and the jellyfish invasion close at hand were somehow connected. Obviously not, except that human exploitation of the environment since her time has done irreparable damage to the seas. The spread of jellyfish "ravaging links in the food chain" is just one of the harmful consequences of global warming.

As for the curse "that could double as our curse too," the modal verb "could" leaves open the slim chance of us *not* going in the same heedless direction we have been going. I don't seriously believe that "every last consumer" abstaining from consumption is a workable solution for reforming our global economy. Even if it could happen, it would at best be a symbolic gesture, as "repugnant" as carrying a "keeper of mourning" on board ship to save it from sinking. A societal plan for initiating a sustainable relationship with our environment is beyond the purview of this imagistic poem. What it can do in a short space is situate archetypal figures from both our distant and recent past in a closely observed, natural setting. No matter where you live, if you can unpack the stories that have local significance, and pay attention to your immediate surroundings, you will have better surroundings, you will have a better appreciation of where we have been as humans and where we are going.

Works Cited

Chopin, Kate. "A Pair of Silk Stockings." *The Awakening and Selected Stories*. Penguin, 1984, pp.262-266

Ishii, Tomoko. Noh・Kyogen no Kiso-chishiki *Noh/ Kyogen's Basic Knowledge*), Kadokawa, 2009.

Pound, Ezra. "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste. *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (March 1913): pp.200-206.