

Around Sea

Reviewed by Sarah Porter

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Brenda Iijima

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Brenda Iijima's *Around Sea* begins with a rush of oceanic imagery, but soon travels far away from it; afterwards we catch only intermittent glimpses of the water. The sea comes and goes in waves of reference, but the *around* of her title remains insistent: Iijima's book tracks a sequence of expansive orbits, each one wider than the last. Each of the six sections corresponds loosely to a new order of understanding, scaling upwards from an austere romantic vision of nature through the dizziest cultural abstractions. By the end enormity can only be depicted by a molecular smattering of punctuation, evoking both the unstructured sea and the random matter of deep space. At a scale simultaneously so vast and so intimate, the sea becomes indistinguishable from everything else; Iijima takes us to extremes where the grain overwhelms the image, then half-resolves back into a jostling multitude of suggestions. *Around Sea* is an ambitious book, but its ambition is filtered through Iijima's peculiarly delicate language, reaching us as deposits of silky minutiae. She excels at collecting a distinct kind of particulate grandeur on the page.

As she swerves between extremes of scale, Iijima shows an understandable conflict between the yearning for context and resentment of context as a human imposition. Iijima's concern with human intelligence is primarily in how it figures contexts, however improbable; in how it concocts formulas, taxonomies, and hierarchies. The dialectic she wrestles with is that between the borderless drift of nature, in which molecules of water, numbers, stars, and words are all dissolved in metaphoric

equivalence, and the human effort to identify distinct elements and control their allegiances. While Iijima embeds fragments from a variety of scientific texts, she shows a particular affinity for descriptions of metal alloys; combinations of matter, like combinations of words, may manifest unexpected properties. It is the human imperative of division, of distinguishing one thing from the next, that allows the exhilarating possibilities of combination; without this juxtapositional magic, division collapses into imprisonment: “Magnification of the combination look up at the sky / through oculus slot / A lock / State penitentiary.”

At other times she attempts to imagine nature free from human projections: “Just the landscape / before realization // before resource / before it could // speak.” The conscious irony of this attempt to empathize with the inhuman is revealed by Iijima’s language, which captures nature in a gilt frame even as it tries to escape from human contexts: her repetitions of *just the landscape* imply that we can never approach *just the land*. Coming late in the book, at a point where human abstractions have attained almost complete domination, (“so brothers wheel their zeros while brothers wheel”) this poem suggests a volatile nostalgia for our own absence. Throughout the book Iijima conjures terrible loneliness for the world without us, for the one thing beyond our imaginative grasp. The explorer imposing himself on untouched land still yearns for the one thing always receding from his advance: “Neighborhoods impenetrably blue. / Far beyond the ken of vision.” Iijima shows a wonderful awareness of the framing of negative spaces by positive ones, of the unseeable nudged into new figures by the seen.

For all the tension implicit in these two competing visions, it is the joy of combination that ultimately thrills through this book. One of the loveliest poems in *Around Sea* renders that joy with rapturous directness: “an unknown artist in the presence of the author // a horse in the presence of a landscape // a landscape in the presence of

love // night in the presence of darkness.” There is no other world available to us than the one arranged by our minds, the one that arrives in combination with our eyes, and Iijima follows the ramifying beauty of her complex anthropomorphism:

“Come on
now” murmurs
the seashell. “Come on.”
Inevitably.

Sarah Porter was born in 1969. Her stories have appeared in *Open City* and *The New Review of Literature*; her poems are forthcoming on *Sonaweb*. She teaches creative writing in the New York public schools and is currently in her second year of City College’s MFA writing program. She lives in Brooklyn.