

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Mariko Nagai

*Pain comes from the darkness
And we call it wisdom. It is pain.
- Randall Jarrell*

If it were another time and another land, if gods are kinder or heard your prayers, your child would be twelve now, her face taking on the reminiscence of your face, or perhaps you as you once were, but no longer. Each part of her would have been a reminder that you had given birth to this child, a hand or a face, even her slightest way in which she cocks her neck as if she is listening to some voices other than what is apparent, real.

You have sold her. You have not told anyone.

No one knows. No one must know.

Someone will tell us your story if you do not: in another land, in another time, a war ended. Your husband had been drafted at the last minute, and you were left, without money or language to survive, and the only luggage, only thing you had time to gather up not discard, were the clothes on your body and a child, an infant really, who would not stop crying, not during the march south to where the border lay, not in the shelter where you nested for a season, temporary and barren like the feeding place of a migrating bird. They kept telling you to bash the child's head against the ground, to strangle its small neck while it slept, just to shut the child up, *just shut the brat up, they'll find us out, shut her up*, and you were helpless, unable to find food to feed yourself so that you could feed the child in your arm. You sold your body so that you could continue to provide milk. At any hour, night or day, you lay on your back with your legs open, men entering you for the price of a slice of bread – the price had been deflated, you see, and women were no longer expensive, no longer an expensive commodity that could be translated into paper money. There were enough women around for the so few men left. These meals were not enough to fill up the hunger, but enough to keep going, to keep doing what you were doing. To keep living, to keep breathing until you could wait for the border to open up, to ride the boat across the short distance of an ocean. Until one day, your child stopped crying and only began to whimper. You could not do anything. Your breasts no longer milked; your body began to eat itself from inside, and when you looked down at your own body, in those moments between men, you saw a hard and brittle fishbone on your chest, until you realized that these were your own ribs. The chants, *sell us your children, sell us your children* kept going; you were desperate. The child was dying; there was nothing you could do. So you sold the child. You sold her that she could be better fed, better looked after, so that she could have a chance to live. You bought yourself a passage on the boat to go back home with that money. You shed your past, remarried, and lived the rest of your life trying not to

remember.