

Excerpts from
Instructions for the Living

First edition, September 2012

Copyright © 2012 Mariko Nagai

Word Palace Press

PO. Box 583

San Luis Obispo, CA 93406 wordpalacepress.com wordpalacepress@aol.com

Book and Cover Design by

Ben Lawless, Penciled In Design penciledin.com

ISBN: 0985026081

ISBN-13: 978-0-9850260-8-0

Instructions for the Living

Mariko Nagai

Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgement is made to *Drunken Boat*

and *A Dictionary of Unwieldy Words* (merz & solitude,

2010) for first publishing “Instructions for the Living” in a slightly different version and under a different title.

Many heartfelt thank-you’s to the following organizations and their wonderful staff for generously providing financial supports, temporal spaces, and conversations to dream and write pieces that appear in this book: Akademie Schloss Solitude, the Civitella Ranieri Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center, Temple University Japan Campus

(especially to the Research Department and the Library)

and UNESCO-Aschberg Bursaries for the Arts.

So many have reached out to talk about their own experiences of grief and mourning, death and grotesque; so many have lend me their compassionate ears while I tried to find the language of mourning

— for this, I cannot thank you enough: Arshia Satter; Sharmistha Mohanty; Daniel Straub; Kristina Estell for the long winter and the lovely spring day at the zoo; Amy Kirsten, my dark sister; Silvia Pareschi for a decade of transcontinental friendship; Julia von Leliwa, Sybille Neumeyer, Anita, Julia, Angela, Jean-Baptiste Joly, Silke, Inge, Frau Roth, Maren, Viola, Iva, Franziska, Karoline, Mikolaj, Sienna, Eunjung, Roberto, and many others at the Akademie Schloss Solitude; wonderful fellows at the Bellagio Center (my enchanted April) who first heard “Instructions for the Living”; Jeffrey Kingston, Matthew Linley, and Jonathan Wu for too many dinners to count.

And many thanks to the incredible team at the Word Palace Press for creating such a beautiful book.

We die with the dying:

See, they depart, and we go with them. We are born with the dead:

See, they return and bring us with them.

—T.S. Eliot "*Little Gidding*" v. 230-233

Each man's life is but a breath.

— Psalms 39

Remembering is an ethical act... memory is, achingly, The only relation we can have with the dead...

— Susan Sontag, *The Pain of Others*

I. Instructions for the Dying

Remember this: the moment your dying begins, your body ceases to belong to you. The moment your dying is discovered and declared, there is no private life. Your life will be defined by medical terminologies so foreign that your tongue refuses

to curl itself around the sounds, and your body will become a foreign land you cannot navigate.

II. Instructions for the Dead

In the moment of your death, do not have any regrets. No matter how often you hear the begging of your loved ones — you can't go, you can't leave me here alone — you should understand that your body is no longer your home. You're an exile, who has been evicted from your home — like that old woman who was told to pack three day's worth of luggage but instead carried her cat in a basket from Chernobyl, or the displaced men and women from Fukushima after the nuclear meltdown. You cannot stay. You must go. If you linger, you will not be able to cross over. If you have regrets, you will linger. So before you remember your regrets, go.

III. Instructions for the Living

A man dies. It was a mechanical death for, in our time, death is named, reasons attested, and written off. We have learned to keep death at bay, with

the boundary between the living and the dead as clearly marked as the borders between nations. We do not understand the language of medicine; the hospital room becomes the promised land, but the diseased is an exile from his own home.