

An Interview with Jia Oak Baker

by Maura Snell



Jia Oak Baker

When I first met Jia Oak Baker, we were both beginning our two years at Bennington Writing Seminars. It was in Commons, the central meeting place for students on campus. There was a fire roaring in the grate, and the room was crowded with new and returning students. Jia was probably as nervous as I was, and I think we were both relieved to be introduced to each other, now having someone to chat with as we stood amidst the high, happy greetings all around us.

In the years since that night, I've come to know Jia as not only a graceful poet, but also as a writer of talent and treasure, a soul of quality and content, and a faithful friend. I was lucky enough to be in workshop with her twice in our tenure at Bennington, not only learning from her but also bearing witness to her growth as a writer. She is becoming a steadfast voice in this literary landscape, one of quiet, elegant power that will, no doubt, endure.

Jia Oak Baker is the author of two chapbooks, *Crash Landing in the Plaza of an Unknown City* (Dancing Girl Press) and *Well Enough to Travel* (Five Oaks Press). She is the recipient of a grant from the Arizona Commission on the Arts and has been awarded residencies from the

Wurlitzer Foundation and Hedgebrook. Baker lives and teaches in Phoenix, Arizona.

TTR: What drew you to poetry in the beginning? Were you always a poet?

JOB: I don't know exactly what drew me to poetry in the very beginning. Donald Hall says that sound was his "doorway" in, but for me my best guess would be that it was the visceral reaction I had when I read poems. I felt enlightened or awestruck, oftentimes altered by language. I think I recognized the power and subtle nuances that words held, in both meaning and sound, and that has kept me enthralled most of my life.

I've always loved poetry. In the ways that we gather meaning, express ourselves, give form to our utterances—I think we're all poets. I think some of us have been encouraged to pick up a pen and write the impulses down and others have not.

TTR: What was the first poem you wrote?

JOB: My earliest memory of writing a poem is in the first grade—something about two brothers sledding in the snow. I grew up in Los Angeles and saw snow for the first time when I was 17 years old. So, I guess I was enacting my imagination to satisfy a wish—a kind of six-year-old sublimation. Later in middle school, I remember writing quite a bit. I created a poetry magazine for my language arts class that was reproduced on an old ditto machine—the kind where the pages come out cold and damp with bluish ink. It got some international attention because one of my classmate's fathers was a diplomat. I guess I peaked as an editor at twelve years old. I also edited my high school literary magazine and wrote some really awful poetry during those tumultuous, ridiculous years.

TTR: For you, what are the marks of a poem that really works? What about the poem that's not working?

JOB: I've written quotations with a Sharpie marker on index cards and have hung them with blue painter's tape all over the wall behind my desk. One in particular serves as a kind of litmus test for the poems I read and for the poems I write. It's by one of my favorite writers, Reginald Shepherd. He says, "A real work of art makes us stop and pay attention. It breaks through our crust of habit and routine." I think a poem can do that in so many different ways.

But with that said, poetry is an art form, and how it's received is subjective. I've always been really embarrassed, maybe even ashamed, to admit that I've never liked the Beatles. I took a music class, *The History of Rock*, in grad school and *studied* the Beatles. I still don't like them. There are Beatles equivalents in the poetry world, and I often wonder why I don't care for their work. I've studied them, read their praises, and I know exactly why I *should* like them, but I'm still like, *Nope. Doesn't work for me.* I'm not sure that I can articulate why in a critical way, but there's often no resonance or connection, no visceral reaction.

TTR: Who are your perennial favorites in poetry? Is there someone you're excited about reading now that's new to you?

JOB: I love Frank Bidart so much. Adrienne Rich. Jack Gilbert. Derek Walcott. James Wright. Walt Whitman. Chaucer. Anne Sexton. Too many to name them all.

A poet friend just recommended two books: *This Way to the Sugar* by Hieu Minh Nguyen and *Home Burial* by Michael McGriff. Those are the next two on my reading list.

TTR: What are you working on now?

JOB: I'm leaving in a few days on a trip to South Korea as part of a grant that I received to conduct research for a poetry collection. I'm nervous. It dawned on me a

few weeks after I received the grant that the South Korea I proposed to research no longer exists. I panicked. Post-war Korea still has its scars, but it's recovered and prospered in the last sixty years. So, I am trying to go with a completely open mind.

TTR: How do you spend your time when you're not writing? What do you like to do for fun?

JOB: I've had a love affair with photography for the past thirty years. I learned how to process film and print in a darkroom when I was thirteen. I've had almost a dozen different cameras since then, but I still own the Pentax SLR that I first learned to shoot with. Last winter, I won a camera in Leica's annual Das Plaetzchen holiday cookie contest. I'm not kidding—I baked and decorated some gingerbread cookies one afternoon and won a \$4,000 camera. So now, I spend far too much time taking photographs and then gawking at others on Instagram. When I'm not reading poetry, I'm reading about Edward Weston, Francesca Woodman, Wynn Bullock, Imogen Cunningham and other great photographers.

