Interview with Jane Jeong Trenka
By Shannon Fimbel

Between her musical background and knack for potent lyricism first-time author Jane Jeong Trenka balances a unique yet magnetic style in her memoir The Language of Blood. Yet, it is the heart-wrenching journey as she comes to understand her adoptive identity that drives this first-time author's book. According to Minnesota Monthly, The Language of Blood is "a beacon for adoptive families and a powerful addition to the literature of American identity."

As a child, Jane learned never to speak to her American parents about her adoption. When she moved from rural Minnesota for college in the Twin Cities, Jane began questioning her identity. An identity crisis that nearly spiraled out of control ensued. Through letters from her birth mother, she was able to piece her heritage and adoptive journey back together. In time, Jane reestablished a relationship with her birth mother and reunited with her Korean brother and sisters. Yet this reunion caused a great sense of turmoil as she found herself somewhere between her Korean heritage and American upbringing.

Jane graduated magna cum laude from Augsburg College with a dual degree in music performance and English. However, she never intended writing a book. On an afternoon trip to her local plumbing store, she happened to wander into The Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota where she picked up information about The Loft's Creative Nonfiction Mentorship Award. The rest, as they say, is history. She became one of five winners and was given the opportunity to work with authors Louise Rafkin and Aram Saroyan. Since, Jane has won fellowships from the Jerome Foundation, the Minnesota State Arts Board, and SASE: The Write Place, as well as a Blacklock Nature Sanctuary award, an Honorable Mention for Water~Stone Review's 2002 Brenda Ueland Prose Prize and a 2004 Minnesota Book Award.

Fimbel: Since writing is considered a relatively solitary form of art and for most of your life you have studied performance art in music, how has this change in expression influenced your work? How has the discipline you learned in music transferred into your writing both emotionally and physically?

Trenka: I have been playing the piano for 23 years. I think the most valuable skill I bring from the piano into my writing is the expectation that art takes practice. You don't expect to be able to play Beethoven out of the blue. Nor would you suddenly write a symphony without having done your counterpoint exercises. Likewise, writing is discipline and work. I practice my writing every morning six days a week, which is as much as I used to practice piano. Luckily, writing is the thing I most like to do.

When you're a pianist, you learn a lot by listening to other pianists. I used to work for The Schubert Club in St. Paul, and through that job I had the good fortune of being the page-turner for many world-renowned pianists. I learned just as much by watching those pianists as I did in many years of piano lessons. So this is why I don't feel impoverished by my lack of formal training in writing. I just read books, lots of books. This is how I learn from other writers--they are right there at my side in the book,

making their art, showing me how to do it. Thoughts themselves are not proprietary; we are free to borrow them, build on them, and think them--at least, in this country.

I also believe all art is balanced and interconnected. So, my music training keeps my mind open to many different kinds of art--visual art, performance art, film, music, folk art, dance, whatever. They all inform each other.

Fimbel: You have described writing The Language of Blood as an emotional journey during which you have said that you felt like you were rarely without a box of tissue. How did your work of mourning appear for you as a writer as compared to as a musician?

Trenka: Some say that part of grief work is forming a new identity for the self around the absence of the loved one. It was only after the death of my mother that I was able to make her a constant presence in my life, not through worldly experience, but through the act of writing. And only after her death was I able to create a coherent mythology of two families and two countries—and find my own identity within it.

In writing this, I was really able to start to verbalize my identity and grief. Which is kind of a big thing as a pianist. I've had a lot of emotions for a long time that were nonverbal and sort of got channeled through classical music. But in writing I was able to articulate exactly how I felt. That's huge for a person raised by stoic German Lutherans.

Fimbel: A student in one of my MFA classes said your book is the prime example of putting content into form. It was the book she had been searching for to tie her MFA together for five years. For example, when the book uses the drama or play scenes between the narrative sections, this was an ideal way to balance and explain what you couldn't say in narrative through dramatic interpretations.

Trenka: Different genres can be used to control emotional distance or to address what I can't or don't want to say in narrative. Straight-up narrative can be a real grind. For instance, in the chapter "Don't Worry, I Will Make You Feel Comfortable," I wanted to address the uglier aspects of racism and internalized racism, but I didn't want to mentally live there for a long time. So I just cracked it out in a couple of pages. There. Done.

I don't think about exactly why I do what I'm doing when I'm doing it. I think I'm completely intuitive when I write because of my lack of training in creative writing. When I write, I have a strong physical sensation about how things want to form, and they just come out in a certain way. It's almost like when I'm playing piano and I have a feeling for how fast or slow I want to play something, because there always feels like one right tempo that feels most right for a particular piece's expression, coming through the vessel of my body and my piano. Things settle where they want to be, as if they have a will of their own.

Having said that, when I look through my work, I can see intellectually why I wrote certain sections as I did, even though I didn't know it at the time. For instance, I had the privilege of taking two literature classes with John Mitchell at Augsburg. In one of the classes, he read "The Colonel" by Carolyn Forché. That's the poem in which the severed human ears that look like peach halves fall to the ground, and some of them are

listening. Forché's "poetry of witness" made a huge impression on me. Of course, poets are the high priests of literature, and I am only a mere prose writer, or, as one of my colleagues has said (but hopefully not about me), "a competent maker of sentences." Anyway, poet or not, what grew out of that encounter with "The Colonel" in Mitchell's class was an interest not only in who is doing the acting, but who is doing the watching. Who is listening? And what is the responsibility of the witness?
In one of my "plays for imagining" in the book called "Highway 10," I have a built-in audience. They are the witnesses. The "play" is as much about the audience as it is about the actors, the main actor in this play being my sister at the age 4 1/2, shown on the night we came to America. I feel very strongly about what I write, which is why I don't really think about form when I'm doing it.

Fimbel: In the first section The Language of Blood waivers between an American and Korean identity, it says, "Jane Brauer is missing. She is gone—only a memory in the minds of those who imagine her. Meanwhile, in the mountains of Korea, Jeong Kyong-Ah fills her pockets with stones and blinks hard in the sunlight, as if awakened from a deep sleep, or perhaps a very long fugue." The struggle seems to become finding an identity balanced between both worlds rather than one over the other. By the end of the book, I had the feeling that you were becoming more secure in your developing identity as a Korean-born American adoptee. Would you say this is true?

Trenka: I think it's an ever-changing process. I'm only 32 and I don't feel that there is an adequate vocabulary to describe what's going on with my identity. The adoption vocabulary in existence is not helpful to me because there is not enough nuance. The way that people verbalize identity is very polarized, even though what's going on is much more subtle.

The weird thing about adoption is that it makes identity very stark, very literal. For instance, I have to get a visa to go to Korea this fall because I'm staying longer. Korea has different kinds of visas for people depending on what the person is doing and what their ancestry is. Because of the way my adoption papers are, I cannot prove to anyone that I am who I say I am. I cannot prove my family is my family. So I will probably end up getting the garden variety of visa that is for "foreigners", even though I should be entitled to one that is for Korean-Americans because I was born in Korea and have family living in Korea. In the end, it's the practical aspects of navigating identity in a culture that values written documents over story that can be awfully frustrating, and at some point, these practical things must have an effect on an emotional level.

In an entirely other sense, because my book is in hardcover format and has entered the realm of written documents, readers--especially adoptive parents who want their kids to turn out less screwed up than I am--want some sort of catharsis, some sort of happy ending. But I don't think I really gave it to them in this book. I try to write myself into being a better person. So I'll shoot a little bit further past the perimeter of where I am now because I want to be happier; I want to be better; I want to be more moral. But when I read some letters and reader reviews, it seems that some people are all torked off that I did not give them an impression that I am solidly happy with my identity and whatever that means to them. But I wrote about my experience, and I can't change that to make people feel better.

Fimbel: As a reader, I was taken by the incredible honesty in which you explored the complexity of family relationships. What gave you the courage to pull it together; how did you come to terms with writing about your family so directly? Were they okay with it?

Trenka: Yeah. I had the blessing from my older sister in Korea. I talked with her about it. Of course, what you can talk about in translation its hard to know. In translation, you're never really sure how much information is getting conveyed or exactly what they said. Translation is always surreal because you feel like you're missing something. Korean language is so long and then they give you this little bit. For example, *Kamsahamnida* means thank you. It's like 60% more syllables than English or something. So it's hard to know if everything you say is being translated. So I think she understands and I think I have her blessing. And then I talked with my older sister in America about the book and it has healed our relationship greatly. And my American parents said, "We don't want to read your book; we don't want to be a part of your book; we don't want to hear about your writing; we don't want any part of it." So that is fine. I don't talk to them about. I do a lot of jockeying to protect them from journalists, which they have no idea about.

Fimbel: But you still have a relationship with them?

Trenka: Yeah, they're my parents but I would call it polite. I am a piano teacher and I have a professional relationship with the people who come into my studio and that is the kind of relationship I have with my parents. The sad thing is that's the level that they operate on so it's fine with them. They don't notice that anything is missing. So as far as gathering up courage, you know, it just sort of happened. I didn't know I was writing a book; I was just writing. And then one day I printed it and I said, "This looks like a book."

Fimbel: How do you think your Korean mother would feel about you writing this book?

Trenka: In my heart of hearts, I think she's okay with it. I say that in present tense because I feel that she is with me still, even though she physically died about three years ago. In her lifetime, my mother was not an ordinary Korean woman; she was not interested in keeping up appearances for other people's approval. She divorced my father, which is extraordinary for a woman of that generation. So, although there is a cultural expectation that you do not talk about your family in Korea--whether good or bad--I think my book is okay with her. She knew that I became an American. She knew what my adoption did to me, to her, and our family. I hope she can see that I've tried to bring her and birthmothers in general into the picture; usually they are completely left out. On a soul level, I know it's all good.

Fimbel: How are the holidays for you? For example, how do you celebrate Mother's Day?

Trenka: I'm sending a card to my American mom. Mother's Day is an American holiday, so I don't feel torn between mothers or anything like that. What was hard last year was Chuseok, the Korean Harvest Holiday. It's a three-day weekend when everyone goes to his/her ancestors' gravesites to tend the graves and bow and have a picnic--because Koreans love to have picnics. (laughs). This year Chuseok was really hard because I understood what it was about. When my mother was living I didn't know about Chuseok. This is my thing with Korean culture: I understand just enough to know what I don't have. Some adoptee friends and I celebrated in the best way we could. But I felt really robbed about the whole thing because I have to sit down at the Internet and try to learn about my heritage in a second-hand way from the Ministry of Tourism. It's just so suckwad not to be able to fully understand; not to be able to participate; not to be able to honor my ancestors. So that is what I am going to do when I go back to Korea this fall: I'm going to go and honor and bow to my mother. And dammit, I will have me a picnic!

Fimbel: In my opinion, your book sheds a great deal of light into Korea culture and traditions in ways that I didn't expect. The strongest of these ways was during your mother's sickness. Aside from the basic care differences between American and Korean cultures, the text unites the mother and daughter. It says, "I came to know your body, each part of it, your nakedness never shocking to me nor embarrassing to you. I saw you for the first time what you as a mother already knew: I am made in the image of you; I am the daughter after your body and after your heart. Even if I fail to create you again in words, I will carry you with me, in the language of blood." This section works as the heart of the text, their bodies rather than words unite the mother and daughter. Is this because they can understand their vulnerabilities or because they understand what unites their spirits? Do you think this understanding evolved from your developing sense of Korean culture?

Trenka: I think it's more like I am a big sac of genetic information, and I am half my mother. Really. One of my good friends, who is adopted, told me, "You are the most eloquent expression of your mother and your father." I believe this is true. In America, we have what I think is a romanticized and misguided notion about the individual. Sure, we are all individuals, but we are also born of our parents; we are the continuation of our ancestors.

I have one sister living here in America, and two sisters living in Korea. I can't tell you how amazing it was to meet my sisters and to see that we all have mix-and-match physical characteristics and personalities. Of course we do, why wouldn't we? We have the same parents. The very first time I visited Korea, my family picked me out of an airport crowd the moment they saw me because of the way I walk--exactly the same as my sisters. "The language of blood" refers to the book's epigraph, which is a quote from Joyce Carol Oats' *I Lock My Door Upon Myself:* "Because we are all linked by blood, and blood is memory without language." When I talk about the language of blood, what I mean is the trust that resides in me--when I am open enough to perceive it--that is passed to me from my ancestors through my physical body to know things. I cannot rely on my head. My body is the last thing that I have that is truly, 100 percent Korean, and the only thing Korean that I have access to 100 percent of the time. I do not even have the Korean

language. It is my blood that connects me with my mother, with the land of Korea, and with my ancestral memory. Blood does not need language.

Fimbel: What type of books did you study and what makes your book different from the other books about adoption?

Trenka: There are so many books written by adoptive parents in first person, the narrator being the adoptee. My book is actually from the adoptee's perspective, which may not seem all that big of a deal to someone who isn't completely obsessed with adoption, but it is true that white adoptive parents and social workers have dominated the literature of adoption for fifty years. We desperately need more adoptees, of any opinion, to write and publish just to begin to correct this imbalance. It's imperative that we speak for ourselves in our adult voices.

Fimbel: Where do you feel the most welcome?

Trenka: I feel most welcome in the adopted Korean community. Until I found that subculture, I didn't realize that what I felt was normal. You go and people understand; you walk in and everyone just knows. You don't have to explain anything. You don't have to explain your white husband or your white parents, your inability to speak Korean, or your incompetence in a myriad of areas.

Fimbel: What do you want people to know about adoption?

Trenka: There are many kinds of adoption, I can speak best about inter-country adoption. In that case, I would like talk about money. Money is a neutral energy and you can harness its energy to work for or against justice and equality. What is the effect of spending $10,000-$40,000 to adopt a child internationally? What would that same amount of money do if it were given to empower and expand choices for women and children of developing nations? What could $40,000 of aid do in, say, sub-Saharan Africa? How can we use our American resources to promote female literacy, to keep families together, and to strengthen the fabric of communities? Moreover, let's consider what the effect of American money is on the economies of countries where they are exiling children for the purposes of adoption. Doesn't this income create a dependence on the export of the country's most precious natural resource--its children? Korean adoption, which began as an emergency measure, has now been in existence for fifty years. South Korea is no longer a poor nation; they have one of the world's largest economies. But they have become dependent on the adoption program; exporting children enables them to make social reforms a low priority. That said, if a country makes the choice to stop sending children away once it has started an adoption program, such as Romania, we need to figure out how we can help that country support and protect children within its own borders. That also goes for countries that have no adoption programs whatsoever, such as North Korea. And we need to better protect children in our own country. Imagine this for a second: There have now been over 40,000 Chinese children adopted into the United States, half of those over the past four years. Turn that

around and imagine 40,000 *American children*--and yes, lots of them have special needs and lots of them are Black--being adopted out of the foster care system, into our own American homes. Imagine the ramifications for our whole society, both now and for future generations.

Fimbel: In writing this, what did you learn most about yourself? Did you become closer to your Korean side?

Trenka: One of the things I learned is that I'm not really Korean as far as the kind of person that Korean nationals will recognize as Korean. They have a thing about who's allowed to call themselves Korean, and a lot of that has to do with facility in the Korean language, if you are "overseas Korean" or if you are hapa, meaning mixed-race. Less specifically, I'm a transracially adopted person which means I have a disadvantaged birth mother and was adopted into a white family and this happens globally across all national lines and lines of ethnicity.

Fimbel: When do you plan to return to Korea?

Trenka: I'm returning this fall. And I'm starting my study of Korean language at the Inje Institute, which is near Busan. I'm intentionally not staying with my family. I'm getting the full meal deal this time and staying there. There is an enormous amount of prejudice against adopted people in Korea. And I've never experienced that because my family has always protected me. In Korea, being adopted implies that you're an orphan, and therefore -you don't have a father. In that culture, you are nobody without your family and family registry. Korea has a 5,000-year-old history and it's very important to be able to trace your line. So people like my friends who are not able to connect with their birth families experience things differently in Korea.

Fimbel: Because you have visited Korea and you look Korean do you think you will be able to blend into the culture and assimilate easier this time?

Trenka: Oh hell no. Look at my shoes. I look like an American. It's the dress and mannerisms. I'm going to stick out like a sore thumb. Plus, there's the language issue, which is a huge stumbling block. And there are all kinds of cultural things that I have no hope of knowing without a good grasp on the language. Without being able to speak Korean, I am not going to blend in, either linguistically or culturally. Probably a good measure of cultural competency is whether you get the native jokes or not. You have to know a lot of subtext and cultural norms in order to get jokes, and you have to be very skillful with language in order to make a joke. So it's pretty unrealistic for me to think that I'm going to ever truly blend into Korean culture. I laugh at American jokes with my mouth wide open. I show teeth for photographs. I write memoirs. I'm too old to do the assimilation thing again; I was probably too old at age twelve, which is about when all those paths in your brain start to get rather stubborn about where they are and what they want to do. So, no, I'm not going to be able to do the assimilation thing again, nor do I want to. At this point, I'm too busy traveling on my own path. I'm way out there and I don't intend to come back.