

***Family Heirlooms***  
*a collection*

*by Sam Hamashima*

## *Language.*

I had always wanted to speak Japanese.

In case I fell into an old well and came out the other side in an Edo-world<sup>1</sup>.

In case Sailor Moon<sup>2</sup> showed up at my door asking for my help.

In case I had to prove I was really Japanese to someone.

In case I needed to prove I was Japanese to myself.

I started going to class in Seventh Grade.

Me, 7 weeaboos<sup>3</sup>, and Suwa Sensei.

Two hours every Monday at the North Carolina Japan Center.

Yes, there really is such a thing as the North Carolina Japan Center.

After class we would go to Grammy's house.

I showed her my textbook. My *こどもものにはほんご*.

She told me she had one just like it.

I asked her to show it to me. She said no.

She said it was gone.

Burned. Ashes.

Smoldering in a trash can

still coughing up smoke in her mind.

This is the first I heard of the Japanese American Concentration Camps.

After coming from a class learning how to say phrases like

*こんばんわ* and *おはよう* and *げんきですか* and *はじめまして*

I learned the Japanese phrase

that I find most important to a lineage of forgetting.

“*しかたがない*”

I know “*Shikata Ga Nai*”. was passed from Obaasan to Okaasan to Ko. I am sure of it.

The textbook smoldering in a trash can. The curfew. The taking by the FBI.

The executive order. The assembly center. Sleeping in horse stalls. The trip to the desert.

The fences. The barracks. The trauma. *The trauma*.

The picking up of everything again. Everything again with nothing from before.

*Shikata Ga Nai*.

I was 13 when my Grammy accidentally told me about her

Japanese American Concentration Camps.

I know it was an accident because Father did not find out till he was 23.

Grammy did not plan on giving me the news about cultural erasure a decade early.

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<sup>1</sup> reference to Inuyasha, a popular Japanese Anime.

<sup>2</sup> a popular Anime Magical Girl.

<sup>3</sup> non-Japanese people obsessed with Japanese Culture

## *Stories.*

There is an old Japanese Storybook in my home.  
The spine, cracked and fractured.  
The pages, yellow and aged.

I imagine this book passed from hand to hand in Tokyo.  
A stowaway on a ship bound for America.  
From Obaasan to Okaasan to Ko.  
A book older than grandparents.

This year, I found the book sleeping.  
It snored in a forgotten shelf.  
Dust, like sleep-sand, caked the pages and cover.  
I opened it up to find  
it was bought at Walmart.

The story I remember the most is Momotaro<sup>4</sup>.  
A boy that was born from a peach.  
Half boy, half peach.  
Did he wonder what it was like to be a peach too and not just a boy?  
Did he think about it?  
Did he look at the fruit and wonder how?  
Or did he just not care.  
I wondered. I wondered.

I am Hapa. half Japanese and half White.  
I am also, like Peach Boy, a little fruity.  
Perhaps this is what keeps him in my mind.  
Some sort of sexy Japanese storybook hero  
that I wished would sweep me off my feet.  
Fight off the DMV employee with a katana  
when she tells me my eyes are closed  
in my license picture and we must retake it.  
Parry the attacks from Full Asians that say I am “not pure” Asian.  
Hold me on a moonlit hill and whisper  
“you are Asian enough”.

I know what it is like to be fruity too.  
I know what it is like to be half of something too.  
One half you know so well. And the other is.

The other just is.

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<sup>4</sup> Peach Boy, an old Japanese Fable.

## ***Pearl Harbor.***

My father told me about his first day of school,  
when pencils and erasers reconnected  
and tin lunchboxes made new friends.  
He would go to the history book as  
classmates talked of summer trips and cicada shells  
And flip from page to page.  
Look at the units and the chapters.  
Lewis and Clarke exploring. Trails of Tears.  
See the years go by in an American History.

My father looked for Pearl Harbor in the pages.  
He knew it would come up right after pictures of white Flappers.  
After Prohibition and Jazz.  
He would flip the page to find Pearl Harbor.  
And then he was Enemy.

He guessed it would take two months to become enemy.  
He had two months to prove he was not.  
A few chapters to prove he was not.  
But my father told me. Year after year.  
That two months of friendship and proving  
would never make a difference.  
To them he was Enemy.

Perhaps the children went home and told their parents that Enemy was in class.  
Perhaps the parents, over a plate of spaghetti for dinner, would tell children what a Jap is.  
And perhaps the children threw Jap like stones at my father.  
After two months of sharing answers to homework  
there was war on the playground.

I think this happened during his childhood arc<sup>5</sup>.

He has not told me of the stones thrown. (Masculinty, y'know?)  
But I can see the scars on his arms.  
The bruises on his back.  
The way in which it has given him a limp that cannot be fixed.

My father, the Enemy.

## ***My Father's Advice to Me.***

Keep your head down. Let them say what they want to say.  
But if they call you a Jap, punch them right in the face.

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<sup>5</sup> "Arcs" are sections of a long anime/manga series

## *Desert Fences.*

I took a trip to Seattle for work.  
It was my first time going to the West Coast.

I had envisioned a Hayao Miyazaki<sup>6</sup> spectacle.  
A Studio Ghibli<sup>7</sup> dream.  
Some sort of grand homecoming where all my ancestors  
had escaped the barbed wires  
holding them to the desert and  
greeted me.

I wanted ghosts of my Aunties telling me I looked thin and to eat more.  
Asking if I had a girlfriend and me blushing at the question.  
I wanted Maneki Nekos<sup>8</sup> dancing in the streets and  
Tanukis<sup>9</sup> stumbling drunkenly out of bars.  
Maybe Sailor Moon would pick me up at the airport and ask me for my help.

But it was not an anime adventure.

It was not a homecoming.  
I was a stranger in Seattle.  
There were no Maneki Nekos dancing in the streets and  
no Kitsunes playing tricks.  
No relatives lined up to greet me.

The desert fences did their job.  
Cutting one from the other.  
Separating a past from a present.

I hate those desert fences.

Seattle was not a home for me.  
The West Coast brushed past me not recognizing our past.  
The Pacific Ocean did not ask me on a second date.

The desert fences did their job.

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<sup>6</sup> Japanese animator and storyteller. Co-founder of Studio Ghibli.

<sup>7</sup> Japanese animation film studio.

<sup>8</sup> Japanese Yokai, "Lucky Cats". Lucky spirit.

<sup>9</sup> Japanese Yokai, "Raccoon Dog". Shapeshifter and Trickster spirit.

## *To Feel \_\_\_\_\_.*

When I feel like I am not who I am  
there is a list of things I do.

I make instant ramen with furikake and shoyu.

I watch an old VHS of My Neighbor Totoro<sup>10</sup>.

I buy Japanese trinkets and boot up my GameCube<sup>11</sup>.

I try hard to feel Asian.

And perhaps this is what my relatives did  
in some inverted way.

When they felt like they were not who they are.  
They made apple pie with cinnamon and nutmeg.  
They bought baseball cards and Ford Trucks  
They tried hard to feel White.

How funny they made a mixed kid like me.  
The ultimate “made in the USA”.

And now the mixed kid wants  
to feel Asian.

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<sup>10</sup> A Studio Ghibli Film.

<sup>11</sup> Nintendo’s best console so far.