

POEMS BY LAWSON FUSAO INADA

*Legends
from
Camp*



Legends from Camp

PROLOGUE

It began as truth, as fact.
That is, at least the numbers, the statistics,
are there for verification:

10 camps, 7 states,
120,113 residents.

Still, figures can lie: people are born, die.
And as for the names of the places themselves,
these, too, were subject to change:

Denson or Jerome, Arkansas;
Gila or Canal, Arizona;
Tule Lake or Newell, California;
Amache or Granada, Colorado.

As was the War Relocation Authority
with its mention of “camps” or “centers” for:

Assembly,
Concentration,
Detention,
Evacuation,
Internment,
Relocation,—
among others.

“Among others”—that’s important also. Therefore, let’s not forget contractors, carpenters, plumbers, electricians and architects, sewage engineers, and all the untold thousands who provided the materials, decisions, energy, and transportation to make the camps a success, including, of course, the administrators, clerks, and families who not only swelled the population but were there to make and keep things

shipshape according to D.C. directives and people deploying coffee in the various offices of the WRA, overlooking, overseeing rivers, cityscapes, bays, whereas in actual camp the troops—excluding, of course, our aunts and uncles and sisters and brothers and fathers and mothers serving stateside, in the South Pacific, the European theater—pretty much had things in order; finally, there were the grandparents, who since the turn of the century, simply assumed they were living in America “among others.”

The situation, obviously, was rather confusing.
It obviously confused simple people
who had simply assumed they were friends, neighbors,
colleagues, partners, patients, customers, students,
teachers, of, not so much “aliens” or “non-aliens,”
but likewise simple, unassuming people
who paid taxes as fellow citizens and populated
pews and desks and fields and places
of ordinary American society and commerce.

Rumors flew. Landed. What’s what? Who’s next?

And then, “just like that,” it happened.
And then, “just like that,” it was over.
Sun, moon, stars—they came, and went.

And then, and then, things happened,
and as they ended they kept happening,
and as they happened they ended
and began again, happening, happening,

until the event, the experience, the history,
slowly began to lose its memory,
gradually drifting into a kind of fiction—

a “true story based on fact,”
but nevertheless with “all the elements of fiction”—
and then, and then, sun, moon, stars,
we come, we come, to where we are:
Legend.

I. THE LEGEND OF PEARL HARBOR

“Aloha or Bust!”

We got here first!

II. THE LEGEND OF THE HUMANE SOCIETY

This is as
simple
as it gets:

In a pinch,
dispose
of your pets.

III. THE LEGEND OF PROTEST

The F.B.I. swooped in early,
taking our elders in the process—

for “subversive” that and this.

People ask: “Why didn’t you protest?”
Well, you might say: “They had *hostages*.”

IV. THE LEGEND OF LOST BOY

Lost Boy was not his name.

He had another name, a given name—
at another, given time and place—
but those were taken away.

The road was taken away.
The dog was taken away.
The food was taken away.
The house was taken away.

The boy was taken away—
but he was not lost.
Oh, no—he knew exactly where he was—

and if someone had asked
or needed directions,
he could have told them:

"This is the fairgrounds.
That's Ventura Avenue over there.
See those buildings? That's town!"

This place also had buildings—
but they were all black, the same.
There were no houses, no trees,
no hedges, no streets, no homes.

But, every afternoon, a big truck
came rolling down the rows.
It was full of water, cool,
and the boy would follow it, cool.
It smelled like rain, spraying,
and even made some rainbows!

So on this hot, hot day,
the boy followed and followed,
and when the truck stopped,
then sped off in the dust,
the boy didn't know where he was.

He knew, but he didn't know
which barrack was what.
And so he cried. A lot.
He looked like the truck.

Until Old Man Ikeda
found him, bawled him out.
Until Old Man Ikeda
laughed and called him
"Lost Boy."
Until Old Man Ikeda
walked him through
the rows, and rows,
the people, the people,
the crowd.

Until his mother
cried and laughed
and called him
"Lost Boy."

Until Lost Boy
thought he was found.

V. THE LEGEND OF FLYING BOY

This only happened once,
but once is enough—
so listen carefully.

There was a boy
who had nothing to do.
No toys, no nothing.
Plus, it was hot
in the empty room.

Well, the room was full
of sleeping parents
and an empty cot.

The boy was bored.
He needed something to do.
A hairpin on the floor
needed picking up.

It, too, needed
something to do—
like the wire, the socket
over there on the wall.

You know the rest
of the story—
but not the best
of the story:

the feel of power,
the empowering act
of being the air!

You had to be there.
Including the activity
that followed.

Flying Boy—
where are you?

Flying Boy—
you flew!

VI. THE LEGEND OF THE GREAT ESCAPE

The people were passive:
Even when a train paused
in the Great Plains, even
when soldiers were eating,
they didn't try to escape.

VII. THE LEGEND OF TALKS-WITH-HANDS

Actually, this was a whole,
intact family who lived
way over there at the edge
of our Arkansas camp.

Their name? I don't know.
Ask my mother—such ladies
were friends from "church camp."

Also, the family didn't just
talk with their hands.
The man made toys with his,
the woman knitted, and the boy
could fold his paper airplanes.

And, back in those days,
a smile could go a long ways
toward saying something.

And we were all ears.
Talking, and during prayers.

VIII. THE LEGEND OF THE HAKUJIN WOMAN

This legend is about legendary
freedom of choice, options—

because this Hakujin woman
chose to be there.

She could have been anywhere—
New York City, Fresno, or over

with the administration.
Instead, she selected an ordinary

barracks room to share
with her husband.

IX. THE LEGEND OF COYOTE

Buddy was his name. And, yes, he was a Trickster.
He claimed he wasn't even one of us.
He claimed he had some kind of "tribe" somewhere.

He claimed he "talked with spirits."
He claimed he could "see God in the stars."
He claimed the "spirits are everywhere."

He was just a kid. We were just barracks neighbors.
And the one thing Buddy did was make paper airplanes
out of any catalog page or major announcement—

and I mean to tell you, those things could fly!
Those things would go zipping off over barbed wire,
swirl by amazed soldiers in guard towers,

and, sometimes in the swamp, they didn't seem to land.
That was when another claim came in—they went
"all the way to Alaska" and also "back to the tribe."

Buddy. If I had smarts like that, I'd be an engineer.
Buddy. His dreams, his visions. He simply disappeared.

X. THE LEGEND OF THE MAGIC MARBLES

My uncle was going overseas.
He was heading to the European theater,
and we were all going to miss him.

He had been stationed by Cheyenne,
and when he came to say good-bye
he brought me a little bag of marbles.

But the best one, an agate, cracked.
It just broke, like bone, like flesh—
so my uncle comforted me with this story:

*"When we get home to Fresno,
I will take you into the basement
and give you my box of magic marbles.*

*These marbles are marbles—
so they can break and crack and chip—
but they are also magic*

*so they can always be fixed:
all you have to do is leave them
overnight in a can of Crisco—*

next day they're good as new."

Uncle. Uncle. Uncle. What happened to you?

XI. THE LEGEND OF SHOYU

Legend had it that, even in Arkansas,
some people had soy sauce.
Well, not exactly *our* soy sauce,
which we were starved for,
but some related kind of dark
and definitive liquid
to flavor you through the day.

That camp was in the Delta,
where the Muddy Waters lay.

Black shoyu. Black shoyu.
Let me taste the blues!

XII. THE LEGEND OF THE JEROME SMOKESTACK

There is no legend.
It just stands there
in a grassy field,
the brush of swampland,
soaring up to the sky.

It's just the tallest
thing around for miles.
Pilots fly by it.

Some might say it's
a tribute, a monument,
a memorial to something.
But no, not really.

It's just a massive
stack of skills, labor,
a multitude of bricks.

And what it expressed
was exhaust, and waste.

It's just a pile of past.
Home of the wind, rain,
residence of bodies, nests.
I suppose it even sings.

But no, it's not legend.
It just stands, withstands.

XIII. THE LEGEND OF BAD BOY

Bad Boy wasn't his name.
And as a matter of fact,
there were a lot of them.

Bad Boy watched. He saw
soldiers shoot rats, snakes;
they even shot a dog.

Bad Boy learned. He did
what he could to insects—
whatever it took to be a Man.

XIV. THE LEGEND OF GOOD GIRL

Good Girl was good. She really was.
She never complained; she helped others.
She worked hard; she played until tired.
Good Girl, as you guessed, was Grandmother.

XV. THE LEGEND OF THE FULL MOON OVER AMACHE

As it turned out,
Amache is said to have been named
for an Indian princess—

not a regular squaw—

who perished upstream,
in the draw,
of the Sand Creek Massacre.

Her bones floated down
to where the camp was now.

The full moon?
It doesn't have anything to do
with this. It's just there,

illuminating, is all.

XVI. THE LEGEND OF AMATERASU

The Sun Goddess ruled the Plain of Heaven.
She did this for eons and eons, forever
and ever, before anyone could remember.

Amaterasu, as a Goddess, could always do
exactly as She wanted; thus, She haunted
Colorado like the myth She was, causing

wrinkles in the heat, always watching You.

XVII. THE LEGEND OF GROUCHO

Hey, come on now, let's hear it for Groucho!
Groucho was a florist by profession
and the doggone best natural-born comedian.

It was said by some, with tears in their eyes,
that ol' Groucho could make a delivery to a funeral
and have everyone just a-rollin' in the aisles.

Even on the worst of bad days, he was worth a smile.

Groucho was Groucho—before, during, after.
Wherever he was, there was bound to be laughter.

And the thing is, he really wasn't all that witty.
He was actually serious, which made it really funny—

him and that broken English and the gimpy leg.
He was a reserved bachelor too, a devoted son
who sent whatever he had to his mother in Japan.

Still, he had that something that tickled people
pink and red and white and blue and even had
the lizards lapping it up, basking in it, happy!

Maybe that was the magic—he was “seriously happy.”
And not only legend has it, but I was there,
when a whole mess of pheasants came trekking clear
from Denver, just for Groucho and the heck of it,
and proceeded to make themselves into sukiyaki—

with the rest of us yukking and yakking it up all the while!

Ah, yes, Groucho! He brought joy out in people!
And when he finally got back home to Sacramento
and the news, he threw his flowers in the air,

toward Hiroshima—and of course he died laughing!

XVIII. THE LEGEND OF SUPERMAN

Superman, being Superman,
had his headquarters out there
somewhere between Gotham City
and Battle Creek, Michigan.

Superman, being Superman,
even knew my address:

Block 6G , 5 c
Amache, Colorado
America

And Superman, being Superman,
sent me his Secret Code,
based on all the Planets—

with explicit instructions
to keep it hidden from others,
like “under a bed, a sofa,
or under stockings in a drawer.”

Superman, being Superman,
didn't seem to understand.
Where could anything hide?

And, since we all spoke code
on a regular basis, day to day,

Superman, being Superman,
gathered up his Planets
and simply flew away!

XIX. THE LEGEND OF OTHER CAMPS

They were out there, all right,
but nobody knew what they were up to.
It was tough enough deciphering
what was going on right here.

Still, even barracks have ears:
so-and-so shot and killed;
so-and-so shot and lived;
infants, elders, dying of heat;
epidemics, with so little care.

It was tough enough deciphering
what was going on anywhere.

XX. THE LEGEND OF HOME

Home, too, was out there.
It had names like
Marysville, Placerville,
Watsonville, and Lodi—

and they were all big cities,
or at least bigger than camp.

And they were full of trees,
and grass, with fruit
for the picking, dogs
to chase, cats to catch

on streets and roads
where Joey and Judy lived.

Imagine that!
The blue tricycle
left in the weeds somewhere!

And when you came to a fence,
you went around it!

And one of those homes
not only had a tunnel
but an overpass
that, when you went over,

revealed everything
going on forever up to
a gleaming bridge
leading into neon lights
and ice cream leaning
double-decker.

Imagine that!

XXI. THE LEGEND OF THE BLOCK 6G OBAKE

I still don't mention his name in public.
And I'm sure he's long since passed on.
As a matter of fact, he may have died in camp.

He was that old. And he was also slow—
slow and loud enough to frighten
grown men out of their wits.

And all he did was go around our block
banging a stick on a garbage can lid
and chanting, droning, "*Block 6G Obake.*"

He did that every evening, when the ghost
to him appeared—his personal ghost,
or whatever it was that haunted the camp.

He was punctual, persistent, specific.
And then I guess he either moved or died.
Whatever it was, we never spoke of him.

Because, the thing is, he was right.
Amache really was haunted. As it still is.
Amache was, is, are: Nightly, on television.

XXII. THE LEGEND OF BURNING THE WORLD

It got so cold in Colorado we would burn the world.
That is, the rocks, the coal that trucks would dump in a pile.
Come on, children! Everybody! Bundle up! Let's go!
But then, in the warmth, you remembered how everything goes up
In smoke.

XXIII. THE LEGEND OF TARGETS

It got so hot in Colorado we would start to go crazy.
This included, of course, soldiers in uniform, on patrol.
So, once a week, just for relief, they went out for target practice.
We could hear them shooting hundreds of rounds, shouting
like crazy.
It sounded like a New Year's celebration! Such fun is not to
be missed!
So someone cut a deal, just for the kids, and we went out past the
fence.
The soldiers shot, and between rounds, we dug in the dunes for
bullets.
It was great fun! They would aim at us, go "*Pow!*" and we'd
shout "*Missed!*"

XXIV. THE LEGEND OF BUDDHA

Buddha said we are all buddhas.

XXV. THE LEGEND OF LEAVING

Let's have one more turn
around the barracks.
Let's have one more go
down the rows, rows, rows.
Let's have one last chance
at the length of the fence—

slow, slow, slow,
dust, dust, dust,
billowing behind
the emperor's caravan,
king of the walled city.

Head of State.
Head of Fence.
Head of Towers.
Head of Gate.

Length, height, weight,
corners and corrections
duly dedicated
to my dimensions
and directions.

It's early, it's late.
I'm in no hurry.
An Amache evening.
An Amache morning.
Slowly, this date
came dusty, approaching.

One more turn,
another go,
one last chance—

fast and slow—
before I go.

Who would have known.
Who would have guessed
the twists, the turn
of such events
combined in this
calligraphy of echoes
as inevitable,
as inscrutable
as nostalgia

jangling the nerves,
jangling the keys
of my own release.
Let's have one more turn
of the lock, the key.
Let's have one last look
as I leave
this morning, evening.

All my belongings
are gathered.
All my connections
are scattered.

What's over the horizon?
What's left to abandon?
What's left to administer?
Will anyone ever need
another Camp Director?