

"[These essays] all testify to the lasting impact of that traumatic experience on the succeeding generations of Japanese Americans." — *The Washington Post Book World*

LAST WITNESSES REFLECTIONS ON THE WARTIME INTERNMENT OF JAPANESE AMERICANS

EDITED BY
**ERICA
HARTH**

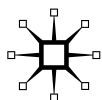


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palgrave
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Printed in the United States of America.

*To my first-grade classmates at Manzanar,
and in memory of my parents.*

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S T E W A R T D A V I D I K E D A

MIXING STORIES

FALL 1993: HOW CRUEL TO FIND YOURSELF HERE: in America's Dairyland, this old yellow house where Georgia O'Keeffe once lived; on Lake Monona, where Otis Redding died. In the year of Mogadishu, Rabin/Arafat, Pacific Trade, Baltic Europe and Russia, sit on the first porch you ever owned, watch the light soft-shoe across the lake, and catch a whiff of history. Chain-smoke, scratch items on your "to do" pad. Stranded in Madison, this Puritan town, listen down the phone to a friend describing the Manhattan skyline outside his window as if to a siren on a sex line. Kvetch about the dearth of baguettes, adult movies, dim sum. "I feel very ethnic." Say a little sadly, "Have to go teach my first class now."

197_: "You know what you are?" Grandpa said, eyeing me closely. Six o'clock shadow and happy hour made his expression mischievous. "A mutt, that's what. A mongrel." I became a mutt in 1970-something, before I learned of history, geography, race or any distance that distinguished me from family, friends, and universe. It would have been Friday evening, cocktail time in the white Philadelphia suburb; since the divorce, my father's parents took unofficial custody of me on weekends, holidays, and vacations. Some little ghoul on the schoolbus had called me "Chinky chongy" or "Nip" or, most likely, "Spic"—to look at me, almost any slur would do. Even "mutt": an epithet, I now know, meant to desensitize—a *hapa*,* half-something and half-something-else, racially mixed, but with echoes of "alone, adrift,

* From the Hawaiian *hapa haole*, literally "half-white"; formerly a derogatory term.

abandoned.” For him, divorce symbolizes all of America’s moral decline: our short memories, lust for complaint, and inability to go the distance. This was before I’d ever conceived of a creature, much less myself, as Japanese American, before my university studies inspired a novel exploring that identity in the context of World War II and my research uncovered that era’s central truism, *shikata ga nai*. I now think he meant: As a mutt, you’re left to wander, sniff for scraps. Only family is reliable, and now you can’t even rely on them. Now you will rely on me. It can’t be helped—*shikata ga nai*—but it can make you strong.

Fall 1993: Drive fast to campus, like you do when you still have out-of-state plates and are convinced you’re just passing through. Park the car. Be anxious. Head to your first day of work at the AASP, Asian American Studies Program office. Get a key and photo I.D., be hustled around, introduced to people. Feel not ethnic enough. Smile, make connections. Doubt these Midwesterners are as friendly as they seem and wonder what secret, sordid perversions lurk in them. Feign fascination by the copier, ditto, and facsimile—learn where to leave mail for franking. Be relieved an office is found for you to share, where you’ll meet with the young people you will teach about what you do and think. A small room, furnishings traditional black tin, lined with an officemate’s intimidating array of books and ancient computer. Slide wide the window curtains, crane your neck, stiff as a scarecrow, and stop breathing to prevent fogging the glass. Feel important to have an almost-unobstructed lake view. Wonder at the tiny rushing sloops below. Wish your grandfather could see. Open the new class roster addressed to Professor Ikeda. Feel you’ve arrived somewhere.

Pushing yourself out into the campus, climb, climb up past Abe Lincoln seated in bronze at the peak of Bascom Hill. Nervous, short of breath, have a smoke anyway. Notice the vibrant foliage, the rolling lawn, the predominance of red motor scooters and young blond people; feel astonishingly Japanese. Catch a whiff of cows from the nearby ag school. Wonder: How did you come here—to a place where they study cows? Do deep breathing, then pierce the building—down the hall, and pass: Dean of Students Office.

Order yourself not to sweat, but do so profusely. Stop by your room, 202, inflate yourself, rocky-jawed, massive chest, proud patrician brow upright—be John Barrymore waiting in the wings. Tilt your great profile higher. Radiate confidence, authority as you walk. “Good afternoon, class!” Too loud. Flop your writer’s bag—a laptop computer bag, pockets for stories, floppy disks, and pencils—on the table and be aware it’s not a professor’s case. Grip the

biggest piece of chalk, feel powerful to screech on the blackboard as you write your name.

Pronounce it for them, both ways. Eye-key-duh: the East Coast, *bakujin* way, how you said it for twenty years. Ee-keh-duh: the California way, how an AASP professor must say it. Figure they'll mangle it anyway; recall one is from Nagasaki and feel ashamed, figuring *you'll* mangle it with your hopelessly Philadelphian accent. Feel more WASP than Japanese. Say, pronounce it how you like, but you must spell it right. Tell them of junk mail to "Stuart D. Arcadia" or "Steward Akita." Provide exotic cultural background: Akita is a Japanese dog. Say, professional writers check their spelling.

Observe the word you've written—"Ikeda"—and realize its inadequacy.

Winter 1990–1991: This quest for "Ikeda" begins in Ann Arbor, where I start my career as fledgling writer and Japanese American in the University of Michigan fiction MFA Program. It leads me back fifty years to World War II, the mythical temporal space of Back Then—when our young country commandeered so much of the map to become a superpower. It is 1991: Cole Porter's on the charts again, and Grandpa has just received mixed news—he's been diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis, an irreversible lung disease; simultaneously, a \$20,000 government check in reparation for his wartime uprooting arrives. While health allows it, he will take Grandma to Alaska, the only state they've never seen, to celebrate their golden anniversary, a tragic, final trip. Redress lifts a veil of silence from my own family, our history, as it has for so many Yonsei, and I am bursting with questions and extremely pissed off. Cornering Grandpa, narrative vampire that I am, I demand, "Okay, what's the story? *All* of it, straight—the whole thing."

And because I am not yet a *good* writer, I imagine the story must begin with a bang—with a dramatic spectacle of war. I start with Pearl Harbor. What was it like?

But it is 1991, and America commemorates its own golden anniversary on the airwaves—replaying World War II on the Discovery Channel, then on CNN, and I learn what it was like firsthand. One night, in Nicholas Delbanco's fiction workshop, we're about to dig into a story when a cleaning woman rattles by with a monstrous cart of janitorial supplies and a transistor radio. She knocks.

"Um, sorry to barge in," she says. "We've just bombed Baghdad. Thought you'd want to know." She rattles off again.

That week, I dream of an elderly Japanese man and a white boy outfitting a scarecrow on a farm; a gusty, westward breeze rocks the straw sentinel, and I know it's the aftershock of Little Boy extinguishing Hiroshima. The curious

image spurs six years' labor on a historical novel in which I can explore all the questions I could never ask my family. That's where this starts.

190_: On the West Coast of North America there lived an ambitious boy who'd seen something of the world. Though he considered himself—in the language of his day—a “bird of passage,” he died there, too. But I get ahead of myself. Born second son on an island to the Far West of California, he early on heard and believed the gospel—the promotional campaigns and recruitment posters promising adventure, a good living, and the free pursuit of happiness. Perhaps he heard that Chinese travelers called America the Gold Mountain, and with his older brother—the *chonan*, the eldest—just coming of age, young Shigeki Ikeda was a little short on that metal then. Restless, bored as a teenager can be, of course he responded to those posters, those invitations. Borrowing the fare, he sailed far into the east, reveling in the sea breeze, elated by his youth, strength, courage, and enviable good looks. After many long Pacific days he landed somewhere on America's oceanic skirt, maybe Angel Island. Upon docking, he leaped from the deck and was amazed as the ground gave way beneath his feet, not gold-paved at all, but soft and clayey.

But young, strong, and very good-looking, he would mingle, mingle, mingle, talk to some savvy fellows, meet some sweet girls, buy a map and decide which town would get to have him. En route to that town, however, he noticed his wallet deflating and took jobs, only temporary, slinging fish, selling vegetables, painting houses, mowing lawns. He worked as a “schoolboy” for a rich family while he went to business school, where he learned of laws prohibiting him from owning property, but learned too the American saying, “Where there's a will, there's a way.” Degree in hand, he was led by his pioneering, entrepreneurial spirit through many odd jobs, and although he was now not so young, he was still strong and very good-looking, thus optimistic. Then one day, he walked down a broad Tinseltown boulevard, electric with anticipation, his wallet warm and thick as a corned beef sandwich in his pocket, flipping a shiny quarter in the air until he tripped. The coin fell tinkling at his feet. Bending to retrieve it, he saw set into the concrete pavement a handprint and beside it—like an X on a treasure map—a winking gold star. Hungry for a piece of this pavement, he had a think. He needed American children. Donning his one dress suit, he had a photo taken in a fancy borrowed automobile and wrote to an uncle of his need for a wife—a fruitful one. After months of letters, exchanges of fuzzy, deceptive snapshots, the match was agreed upon.

Or so I imagine. There's so much in this story that my grandfather does not or cannot say.

Summer 197_: It was actually a *bakujin*, my mom, who first spilled the beans about World War II. Like me, she'd overheard the rare, veiled references to "camp," and imagined canoeing and bonfires, like at the summer cabin on Michigan's Lake Houghton where she finally heard the story. Mom's memory is cloudy, but I imagine: She and Grandpa smoking filterless butts, drinking gin into the night, loudly yapping about It, waking everyone. I can hear him booming: "The *dumbshit* Californians locked us up in *horse* stables! But *I* wasn't gonna stay there," and "Your mother-in-law gets mad when I say this, but I think, Hell, the Japs asked for it, too. All stuck together in these communities, you know, they're sitting ducks. It's easy to get a *bead* on them." The way Mom tells it, my grandmother "flew out of the bedroom like a ghost." I see her in a knee-length nightgown, maybe that sparkly hairnet, her face pale with night cream. "Don't!" she hissed. "Just don't!" She's a tiny, graceful woman (I'm only five-six, and when we hug, her hair brushes my chin), but the way she said, "Don't!" the two drunken loudmouths in the living room listened.

For a long time, I listened, too. If history is the tale of the victors, then I fear many Japanese American losers consider our omission from the textbooks natural, logical. Trying to recover and restore those scraps strewn about the editing room floor, I often wondered: What does Grandpa think about our interest in him, in this history? That we gather round him like orphans starving for those details he and our country have spent years forgetting? Does he feel like a man who's offered a few bucks for an antique rotting in his barn: *What, you wanna buy this old piece of junk?*

My own cloudy remembrances of those Houghton summers are of cameras flash-bleached white, Canon, Nikon, that Japanese shutterbug gene bred into Grandpa's bones. His archives contain miles of Kodachrome, Polaroid, Super 8s recording the first smile, trip, haircut or Big Wheel of his first grandson. His face was round and wide as a sandwich plate then, hair cropped like G.I. Joe's, his belly soft-round as I pressed into it, climbing up to probe his nostril with my pinkie. His loud, restless sleep habits made my grandparents often take separate rooms, so there was usually space in his king-size bed for me to slip into at night after pinching his nose to stop his snoring. I remember him teaching me to shave with a toy razor and pee standing up; the fumes as he tanked up his Olds after driving hours from work in Delaware to pick me up on Friday; how he came to Parents' Day at school, endured my

excruciating violin recitals; how he carved out rituals for my life . . . as if for an orphan.

1917: A feisty and fisty boy, Carol Ikeda was born second son in a litter of nine. The Ikedas made a formidable gang of toughs in the tiny town of Havre, Montana, and after a few schoolyard rumbles they made the *bakujin* be their friends or else. There was Albert, the *chonan*; then sister Yuri; and himself, Carol; then brother Bill; and after a respite, Dorothy, then Otto, Don, and Ted. Later came sister Sue, who was adopted by the “rich” man who led the minuscule Japanese Association there. The organization did little more than bolster small business or hold picnics on the emperor’s birthday, but it did form a language school where my great-grandma, Asako Arai, taught Saturday classes—an offense that would warrant her FBI arrest in 1941. Still, Carol managed not to learn Japanese until forced by business in middle age. For those kids, as for me, Japan mostly took the forms of a trade issue and martial arts movies; they could barely follow the foreign dialogue of the imported samurai film screenings, where they sat in the back throwing popcorn, aping the sword fights and grunts.

Havre was a railroad town. The Ikeda clan lived in an old wooden boxcar on the Great Northern property. The boys slept sideways like sardines in one bed and used their dog, Brownie, as a footsie-warmer; the girls and folks had their own beds. The thin-walled boxcar was heated by a cast iron coal stove with a reservoir for heating water, enough to fill a large galvanized tub once a week. “In the winter it got so cold, Mom would stoke that stove up to warm us while we took our baths Japanese-style: the old man first, then the boys, then the girls, by age. Mom always got the dirtiest water, going last.”

Winter 1990: Exactly how thick is blood, how determined heredity? I’m left to wonder what I’ll pass on (besides bad teeth, bowed legs) along with the name of the C. K. Ikedas. My grandfather was an accomplished industrial chemist who could tell you the precise difference in molecular heft between H₂O and that conglomerate of corpuscles. To me, “acid” and “base” are what you hallucinate on and slide into before you’re tagged out, but he tried to give me science, save me from a life of destitute artsy-fartsiness. Despite strong reservations and an essential frugality, he was in fact the one to pay my tuition to a performing arts school, where I began farting artfully.

Still, I’m part Asian, thus naturally scientific. My concern with heredity’s chemistry has recently become more dire, as the origins of his pulmonary fi-

brosis remain uncertain. His doctor claims it's not hereditary and thinks it incredible odds that the same disease recently killed brother Don. I've no proof, but I suspect the culprit may be industrial chemistry practices Back Then. How the hapless experimenters baked untested materials in kilns, sucking in toxic vapors, protected only by goggles or maybe oven mitts. Thus speculating, I once joked in typical American fashion, "This smells to me of a lawsuit."

"No," Grandpa said, more serious than I had been, "the company took care of their workers. They were good to me." The Quaker overseer who offered him his first and last job after internment also helped with moving costs and a housing search.

Anyway, now retired in Arizona, my grandfather has rotten lungs, a gold watch, and many patents. If your home is in America and contains paint, carpeting, or fireproof materials, chances are you're surrounded by some of his work. I'm proud of his contribution to the world, and used to think it an adequate (albeit invisible) legacy. I was wrong.

Christmas 1990, he wants to bequeath something else to us, more enduring, and does it in a wordless manner my family regards as "Japanesey." Outfitting us like Green Berets with hiking boots, Nikons, Canons, and a heavy video setup, he drives my fiancée Tasha, cousin Keith, and me out to the ruins of the Gila River concentration camp. The only life in this desert wasteland is a tiny orchard of fruit bushes covered with burlap to protect them from freezing at night. Even in December, though, days are so hot that I am sweating as I bounce along shooting video footage: framing Keith on the site of his mother's birth, here in the makeshift hospital now reduced to a few concrete slabs sunken into the scorched dirt. There: sitting upended, bleached and half-buried like a dinosaur's skull, a porcelain toilet—from Back Then? The only testament to the Japanese American civilization that lived, loved, birthed, and died in this place is an awkward concrete monument atop a low crest. A horseshoe-shaped platform pointlessly semicircled by thick pillars bracing nothing, it looks like an abandoned UFO landing pad. The Pima and Papago residents of this reservation have made some use of this otherwise useless structure: empty rifle casings and shattered glass bottle targets litter its floor; its pillars are streaked with spiky, bored graffiti. Useless, except to make a mark: standing here, amidst the endless expanse of cactus-ed nothingness, of dull, red-brown sameness, one can say at least, "I don't know where I'm standing, but I am standing somewhere." From the heights, you can still see the rows upon rows of foundation blocks outlining the barracks. So many. You had not thought there would be so many. The tape runs out.

Back at home, we opened a pack of audio cassettes, aimed the microphone at him, and pressed “record.” “Okay,” he said. “What’s your question?”

190_: Shigeki first came to Montana as a rep for a Seattle oriental trading company that sold Asian foods to the railroad workers. In entrepreneurial fashion, he identified these lonely men’s other hungers and devised a slew of “bright ideas to make him a millionaire.” He tried photography (that bug again), built a darkroom and studio. He had only Japanese customers, though not for lack of imagination. In a brilliant stroke, he bought the chassis of a dead automobile, wherein his customers posed for prospective brides, wearing an air of American affluence. Too much overhead, too few Japanese, the enterprise failed. His restaurant project failed even faster.

The Nisei Ikedas’ earliest secret fantasies—one cannot say “ambitions”—were to be railroad engineers. Havre’s highest social stratum, those men had “*a lot of money.*” Their children enjoyed elaborate birthday fests, with splendid party favors befitting the “top of the heap.” Then there were the laborers who worked at the roundhouse and serviced the engines. A boiler-maker was a skilled man who could rivet and weld. On the crews, the flagmen placed torpedoes on both flanks of idle trains to anchor them in place. Then there were those at the bottom: the boiler washers. When the engines came in, they cleaned the ashes out of the fire box, cooled it down, then scrubbed the inside of the boiler, scraping slake from its ribs, unplugging the tubes of mineral deposits. The work called for small men, Chinese and Japanese. Finally, after several failed projects, as times grew lean and the family plain grew, a twenty-something Asako commanded, “You’re going to get a *job* with the Great Northern,” and Shigeki climbed under the heap.

Shigeki knew the destructive capacity of nine idle children. His “bright ideas” made Carol moan “because they just meant work for us boys. He was “What do you call them? A manic depressive. When he got these ideas, he’d work the hell out of Billy and Albert and me. We’d go along with the program, knowing pretty soon he’d get depressed and forget about everything, or go out of business. The downs would only last so long, but when he was up . . . oh boy!”

With a steady income, still Shigeki moonlighted. “He was going to make a mint raising rabbits to eat and sell. He had us build hutches underground in the dirt floor of the garage; we sectioned it off and dug holes, put a box down there where the rabbits could live. Rabbits are called bucks and does, but he always called them bucks and *sows*, and we never corrected him because he was always right. He’d put the ‘sow’ and buck in the pen for a couple of days, and we’d

watch them fornicate. We fed them coarse bran from a hundred-pound sack (Pop thought, Hmm, if it's good for rabbits, it's good for us!—but we revolted). After a while, all these little rabbits popped out of the ground, ran around the garage, and we separated them from the mother. The problem was that after watching them grow, they became *pets*. When they reached a certain age, my mother would say, 'It's time to slaughter them,' and we had to decide which ones to eat. You had to hold it up by the ears and hit it in the back of the neck with an axe handle, an operation that can kill your appetite. Mom cooked them, but when we sat for dinner, Albert said, 'I'm not eating the bunny.' He got ham, so then I said, 'I'm not eating it either.' She said, '*You're* eating rabbit!' But we all refused, and that project failed, too."

But Grandpa admits, "Pop worked hard, you know. He worked in the shops at the railroad roundhouse from four to eleven at night, then got up in the morning and took in home laundry. After us boys picked up the dirty wash, lugging it home on a wagon for a nickel tip, he would boil and scrub it in suds in the basement. Mom pressed sheets, tablecloths, and linens in a commercial mangle. At about two in the afternoon, he'd take us out to the yard and hit us pop flies, then go to the roundhouse."

Shigeki Ikeda, I think, believed in American one-upsmanship until the end. When the war came and the FBI took his wife, he was easily convinced to join the advance crews who built their own prison in Manzanar, in exchange for first dibs on the best barracks for his family. It was his final failed enterprise. Through some mishap causing a family rift that has lasted fifty years, the other Ikedas were sent to Gila River. Shigeki did not complain, though. Yes, times were temporarily tough, but he did not plan to die here.

Winter 1990–1991: For us newly Nipponized, these wartime revelations spawn outrage, and outrage gives way to resentment: *Why didn't you tell us?* Then: *How could you sell out like that? Why didn't you revolt?* Our grandparents could say, "Well, you didn't *ask*," and "You weren't *there*," but they don't. Instead, they struggle to remember themselves at twelve, fifteen, twenty—the Jack Armstrong wannabes, the teenage lovers, the collegiates—and to relate just when they became burdened with alien parents and enemy genes and things started to go wrong. So we press them and press them until by the end of the millennium young Japanese Americans will sometimes say they're tired of hearing about the camps.

Yet, Christmas 1990, the camps are *all* I want to hear about—the only thing I really hear. I am almost disappointed to learn that Grandpa wasn't actually interned at Gila River with my grandmother. That he managed a release

from the temporary camp at Tulare to start school and find a job, a home for his family, strikes me not as lucky or clever or just. Rather, it dulls the luster of my outrage, distorts my self-image as samurai-poet defender against an absolute injustice, my family's oppression. For my college studies and politicization have led me to conclude that the power of this story rests in what was done to Japanese Americans, not what they themselves felt and thought and did. There is great drama inherent in a fifty-year national lie and outsized racial violence, and I am not yet a fine enough novelist to see beyond the most obvious spectacle. As an older man and better writer, I will observe those minority students who enter my class like rabid wolves, still feeling raw, betrayed after taking intro lessons in the tale of the losers. Their poems are propaganda, their stories antiwhite wish-fulfillments, characters caricatures of victim-heroes. In critiques, I will gently say, "Yes, I see Japanese America in this story, but I don't see a Japanese American."

Christmas 1990, however, I too am thinking: *Screw the rabbits*. "Yes, yes," I say, impatient as a vampire at dawn. "Back to the evacuation. How many guards were there? Did they have bayonets on their guns?"

Now that redress has convinced Grandpa, like other Nisei, that he can at last speak without shame, it annoys him that I persist in asking the wrong questions. So he sets out to construct an alternate record to my novel, to tell his own story in his own, nonliterary way. He decides to transfer his gazillion old photos and films to video, doing a voiceover himself. We buy a top of the line, high-def dubbing VCR with floating heads, a slide easel, a titling machine, a sound mixer; hooked to multiple decks, remotes, and the stereo, these make the den an unnavigable jungle of patch cords. Thus he begins reliving his life again, rabbits and all. Although ten hours of tape barely make a dent in his archives and he finally gives up, I get to see many images for the first time, including their newlywed shots. How handsome! How dashing were his wide, double-breasted jackets, baggy pants, suspenders, black wingtips; his hair thick and wavy, cheeks high, chin strong. And my grandmother, in those fabulous shoulder-padded suit dresses, matching satin gloves snaking up her arms, a chic veiled bonnet, heels and those stockings with seams, hair flipped up like an Andrews Sister. They looked like movie stars then, and full of promise.

Spring 1942: At my age, the newlyweds hung on promises—made by Washington, by church, by Madison Avenue—of a better life to come. What did they have to lose? Any step away from California, where they met and married, must have been in the right direction. In April 1942, Grandpa's college

mentor, the Nobel laureate Linus Pauling, helped secure his release from the Tulare stables to a Ph.D. fellowship at the University of Wisconsin. They planned that my grandmother, now pregnant and due in August, would follow once he'd settled in Madison. A hitch occurred, however, that remains between them to this day.

I imagine the young father-to-be rattling along on the train, stretching over two seats, thankful that no passenger will sit with him. Leaning heavily against the window, its shade pulled up showing only desert, he runs his palm over the worn vinyl onto a dog-eared copy of *Life*. He reads the Science section first, always that. He reads war news of Italy, where brother Bill—already in the service before Pearl Harbor—has insisted on promotion from sidelined mechanic to front-line paratrooper, and brother Albert will soon go for broke. I imagine he skips the review of a new Disney film starring that ridiculous, speech-impaired duck in a navy uniform. And what about the feature on the girls' beauty school, the Before and After photos like so many mug shots? All the young, fat-faced round eyes, lips painted into harlequin lines, blond bobs curled at the edge; on their knees, pins bristling in their mouths like daggers in the teeth of movie pirates, hemming each other's party gowns? Does he desire them?

"No," he told me. "Interracial dating was out. It was inviting trouble. You just didn't date white girls, though white guys asked Yuri out a few times." He *could* date other Asians, maybe blacks and Chicanos, but Asako forbade this and besides, who wants to belong to a club that will accept them?

"Every face," the *Life* article tells him, "has its own standards of beauty. The brown mascara that enlivens Betty's eyes would make Joan's look tired and narrow."

A technology buff, he also scans the ads, promises from GE and Philco: the toasters, fridges, and washer-dryers that are currently war *materiel*, but all well-earned and indispensable for the Atomic Age, after Victory. At prolonged station stops, he wrangles with vigilante telegraph-operators and petty stationmasters on guard against an enemy invasion of Sacramento. "Who are you? You a Jap? You got documents?" Finding a bench in the empty concourse, he props his feet on the suitcase—maybe smokes a Lucky, nods to the colored shoeshine man ordered by the stationmaster to keep an eye on the Jap. He rises with his bags to approach a nervous redhead behind a concession counter. Keenly aware of his pitiful, shrinking store of small bills and coins, like a hemorrhage of currency, he opens and closes his fist inside his pocket, jangles the change—it will become a lifelong habit.

"Can you take my order, please?" he asks. The girl blinks at him, rooted to the counter. *It speaks*. He repeats the request. What to say? Loose lips sink

ships, but she nods, decides to risk national security. Oh, fragrant Liberty! A medium burger strewn with sautéed onions, sizzling french fries, a frothy malted. Does he release a heroic, appreciative belch? Say *Itadakimasu* or Grace? He wipes his mouth with a paper napkin, then mangles it into a tattered, browned ball—also a future habit—his most annoying—and tosses the remains onto the counter. He will remember this Sacramento.

Spring-Summer 1991: I begin to feel my first novel going down the tubes, and feel punch-drunk with the realization that I don't understand my grandfather at all, not really, except in that irksome, roller-coaster logic that comes with love. It begins during the Gulf War.

I learn quite a lot about what happened to him during World War II through watching news of Operation Desert Shield on CNN. It begins when a newscaster announces that someone with enough brass has called for FBI surveillance of Detroit's sizable Arab American population. Grandpa thinks it a sound idea, and I fear he means it, just as he means it when he insists that Arab American soldiers who refuse to fight in the Gulf should be "locked up."

"How can you say that?" I howl. "How can you of all people say that?"

His brothers, he insists, had to make the same hard choices: They bought American, they fought the Japanese.

I can't let this ride because of *The Note*. In the sort of profound cosmic irony that drives people to religion or revolution or drink, our argument comes on the same week I first saw an actual copy of the national apology. Of some 120,000 former internees, half lived to see the 1988 Civil Liberties Act authorize \$20,000 restitution; my grandparents were among the far fewer still who lived to see the mailman clap the postbox lid shut on that check and the accompanying modest memo. The crisp white half-sheet stationery gave no return address but "THE WHITE HOUSE, WASHINGTON." Simple type: a 10-point Courier, block format, left-justified. It's not everyday one gets a personal note from the President, and with such a limited target-mailing, it is worth reprinting here in its brief entirety:

A monetary sum and words alone cannot restore lost years or erase painful memories; neither can they fully convey our Nation's resolve to rectify injustice and to uphold the rights of individuals. We can never fully right the wrongs of the past. But we can take a clear stand for justice and recognize that serious injustices were done to Japanese Americans during World War II.

In enacting a law calling for restitution and offering a sincere apology, your fellow Americans have, in a very real sense, renewed their traditional commitment to the ideals of freedom, equality, and justice. You and your family have our best wishes for the future.

Signed “Sincerely, George Bush,” the President’s script makes it appear more like “Guy Burl,” and only future history can attest to its sincerity. Grandpa, however, thought it sincere enough to vote for Bush in his losing reelection bid.

“That’s a concession,” I say, “not an apology.”

“It’s symbolic,” he says. “It’s something.”

His neighbors at Ahwautukee Retirement Village—playing poker at the rec center, putting over the golf course, or leaning over backyard fences—have been slow to renew their commitment. “It’s not right,” one told him. “Why should you get *all that dough?*”

“It’s not enough,” he replied, but he never told them the rest of the story—of lost homes and property, contracts and promises and psyches broken, of lives uprooted, wasted, and extinguished. I’ve met some of these friendly family men—veterans like my mom’s dad, like George Bush, who occasionally reunite with their squadrons to recall their glory days. Some of them helped my research, doling out war stories as generously as sidewalk pamphleteers. I’m sure they take redress as another example of crybaby liberal abuse of the greatest country in the whole blammed world, but don’t think poorly of my grandfather. As he wheezes off in his golf cart, they might shrug and say, “Aw, Carol’s all right. Nice work if you can get it, though.”

My grandfather is a real patriot. Before I was a skeptical global villager, he raised me to be a patriot, too. Not the gaudy kind—not Old Glory boxer shorts, styrofoam Miss Liberty crowns, or plastic mini-flags; but with the intensity of a man trying to convince himself that all’s well, he often took me on excursions into Philadelphia’s Old City, where I know every inch of Independence Mall—the Bell, the Hall, Betsy Ross’s House. His penultimate vacation before the illness was a seniors’ mini-course in Washington, where he and Grandma visited the Capitol, learned the intricacies of checks and balances and the circuitous route a piece of paper can make around that town. Today, in the jaded folds of academia, I am frequently ashamed of my impulses to patriotism—to be, when I let my guard down, a believer.

During my next visit, in the throes of now-Desert Storm, we patriotically spend our nights watching the fireworks on CNN. As is our custom, we sit with personal rice bowls of Chex Party Mix, which Grandma makes by the barrel. We watch the fancy new “smart bombs” gut high-rises with, the Pentagon

assures us, “surgical precision.” In my obsessive research of the war after the war to end all wars, I had found an ad for the B-17 Flying Fortress, the Ultimate Weapon of Victory. “Precision bombing will win the war!” its makers proclaimed. Equipped with the “incredibly accurate Norden bomb sight, which hits a 25-foot circle from 200,000 feet,” some 330 of these careful planes carpet-bombed Dresden. Hailed as “the poorest targets yet developed,” about 22,000 of these were downed before Victory. In my novel, a slightly fictionalized B-17 bombs a halfway-secured Pacific island, killing a beloved character in what today CNN calls “friendly fire.”

“Surgical precision,” I say sarcastically. “Isn’t that great?”

“Humph,” he says. He says that he’s not long for this world, and so doesn’t really care, but thinks “we should just drop the bomb over there instead of dragging it out.”

“What?” I yell. Maybe he’s just feeling picked on, but I don’t think so. He batters back my protests with (what it now occurs to me was a largely Asian) history. Korea. Vietnam. Cambodia. He’s lived to see much, and the lesson he imparts to his grandson is: *shikata ga nai*. “There’s nothing you can do about it,” he says. “Drop the bomb: we’ll lose a lot less lives in the end.” With frightening surety, he says, “I’ve seen it all happen before, and mark my words: you’ll see it happen again.” Then, he adds, “If you live long enough.” It’s on the following day that I’ll fly out of Phoenix and my grandparents will leave on their anniversary trip to Alaska where, amidst the icebergs and caribou, he catches a near-fatal pneumonia, driving his already weakened lungs into their accelerated, relentless deterioration.

Impatient with Desert Storm, I beg him to read my manuscript. He turns off the war and dutifully disappears with a red pencil and my book, which he returns the next day with unsettlingly few margin notes. “I can’t help much,” he admits. I can tell he doesn’t like it. “I wasn’t in the army, of course; Uncle Bill could help you there. You’d have to ask Grandma about camp.”

Spring 1942: After Sacramento he heads to Montana, where sister Sue’s foster family is in dire straits. A boycott has driven her father, the “rich” Japanese Association leader, out of business, into a borrowed shack and poor health, and Carol thinks they’d have done better in camp. Almost broke, he takes Sue out to buy her much-needed eyeglasses. From Montana, a heartline trip up and down the country’s belly, and finally: Madison. He first sees Lake Mendota, so lovely in summer, with boaters, bathers, and picnickers. He feels he’s arrived somewhere. He writes a note to Grandma of his plans to bring her out of camp.

Then, reporting at the university, he presents his papers and says, "I'm ready to start my fellowship."

"I'm sorry," he's told. "They declared the university off-limits to anyone of Japanese ancestry." Word of a new navy program had just come down from the Dean of Students Office the day before.* "You can't matriculate here. Stick around anyway. Maybe something can be found for you to do." ("Well," Grandpa says, "I stuck around about two weeks. *Nothing*. Nobody would *touch* me.") He then goes to Chicago, where sister Yuri lives exiled, and spends the summer seeking work, applying to other schools. One scholar at Penn State, shooting down the application, writes, "You don't have it so bad. Just think of all our boys who have to go to fight overseas in Germany." He could not know, of course, of the Nisei begging to enlist, and those soon to be drafted right out of camp; nor of how impossible it was for Carol to imagine short, gentle Billy being pooped out of an airplane into the smoke-filled clouds above Italy. Carol is himself nervous about being drafted, but this turns out to be unnecessary: his lonely wife writes from Gila River, and now he's a father.

Summer 1992: To be American is to accept the incursion of technology into the most intimate nooks of one's life. Exiting the flying metal tube after mere hours to find that Detroit has become Phoenix can still astound me, like an audience volunteer at a hocus-pocus show who has survived the magician's saw. I ride the airport moving stairs; the exit doors swing wide, open sesame; I don't take these things for miracles. The first time I see Grandpa's miraculous portable breathing apparatus—his "leash," we joke, in the manner that those in deepest denial make light of the horrific—is in August, on my birthday. On a bench outside baggage claim, I wolf down smokes and fistfuls of mints before the folks come to fetch me. "No smoking near the house," I'd been warned. "There's this new machine, this air problem."

When their bargelike white Buick pulls up, I cannot see through its tinted glass. Grandma steps out of the driver's side (I always forget how small she is) to open the trunk. I hug and kiss her, the way I've reluctantly learned to from Tasha's family, who are Soviet Jews, touchers, squeezers, hand-jivers and knee-patters; their kisses last for minutes, alternating between cheeks, wet and loud, as if afraid to miss a spot. My grandmother's cheek is very, very soft.

* Universities engaged in military research did not accept students relocating from camp.--Ed.

Opening the passenger door, I find Grandpa curled up uncomfortably, his hand resting on a foot-long, burnished steel oxygen tank set at his side like a lapdog. From its snout, a length of clear plastic tube hoops through his belt like Indiana Jones's bullwhip, then runs up his thin chest, bifurcating at his upper lip, nestling at last in his nostrils. Its noise shocks me—I'd expected a hiss, but this travel tank's regulator delivers air only every other breath: *whiss, click, whiss, click*. I swallow my alarm and the impending joke I feel compelled to make. I plant a big, beefy Jewish kiss on his cheek—it is scratchy; he says even shaving winds him these days—and let it linger. I don't look at his face for fear of seeing it redden.

Back at their low ranch house, I offer to lug the tank inside, but he's determined to go it alone as long as he can. The house is cool but bright with pure Arizona sunlight. It smells clean—Grandma makes certain to keep it dustless now. I follow Grandpa in and out again onto the back patio. He disconnects his portable tank, hooks up to a new umbilicus, several yards long attached to a machine in the porch corner; the size and shape of a plain basement dehumidifier, it clanks and gurgles, punctuated by a little muffled bell, and now my grandfather sounds like Darth Vader. Watching this ritual, already so natural to him, I'm made stupid with heartbreak and fascination.

"Pretty fancy piece of equipment you got there," I say. Technology: I'd imagined a new west wing, a great looming supercomputer, like a CAT-scan suite at a hospital. How can such a rickety tin can sustain life? "Um, what about blackouts?" The model Boy Scout is always prepared: a man who does his taxes early, opens college funds as soon as the rabbit dies, and who, as I learned that visit, had already arranged his own death, funeral, house sale, and future life-care for his wife. Backup tanks for several days sleep in every room—some lean and short as house cats, one massive as the cannons I played on when he took me to Valley Forge as a kid. By the guest room waits a collapsed, lightweight wheelchair "just in case."

We talk much that visit. Yet, he subtly makes clear I am still asking the wrong questions when, after hours of taped interviews, he sneaks off and breathlessly, secretly answers the *right* ones. I will discover this only much later, getting around to the transcriptions at home. Wearing my Walkman, I listen to his secret story to me, his wheezing so lifelike on Memorex. Finally I notice how animated he grows recalling a particularly memorable Fourth of July in Havre, when a stray rocket ignited the entire pile in one dazzling explosion. Not until transcribing the two dozen tapes do I see how deeply ensconced he was in the past, speaking pages of direct dialogue in character voices, even providing sound effects, banging on a table, clinking a glass, his descriptions lively with onomatopoeia.

Illnesses and accidents of the body are etched in his memory. The bright red quarantine sign hung on their door when Albert and Asako contracted typhoid. A battered Albert in the hospital, his leg shattered after being struck by a motorcycle. Or when Albert chopped off his finger trying to stop the blades of a neighbor's lawnmower, and Asako had run back with the weeping Carol, found the tip, preserved it in ethyl alcohol. Shigeki: his appendix rupturing, or being robbed and beaten in Chicago after camp.

For as long as I can remember, Grandpa's palette has been dull, his ear tin, maybe due to his hidden sinus and breathing problems. Yet, most of his boyhood memories are olfactory, culinary, and incredibly vivid—such as the infamous “gardening at night.” Though he and Albert had briefly been Boy Scouts, they quit, disillusioned when their leader was arrested for theft. With such a model, they joined a band of little pirates, white and yellow, that was infamous among neighboring farms for its nocturnal raids, stealing chickens, corn, apples, tomatoes. Hauling the loot back to their forest campsite, they had royal feasts and afterwards drew straws to see who must share a tent with one awkward, stinky boy who always peed in his sleep. Early morning, they returned to town, stole milk from stoops, some sugar and ice from outdoor storage bins, and made ice cream behind the school.

“We were always hungry,” Grandpa says.

With boyish glee, he recalls hiding with Billy in the putrid-smelling outhouse, trying not to gag or giggle as Yuri sought them nearby. He describes his before-school chores, collecting dirty linens for his folks' laundry service, hugging a newlywed couple's balled-up, sticky sheets and being overwhelmed by an alien musk. Or the thousand reeking fryer chickens he beheaded, plucked, and gutted for a living one year.

“Nothing tastes good anymore,” he now says. “Can't smell a damned thing.”

Winter 1993: So much of the story is lost, fragmented. Why did Asako immigrate? Was she a picture bride? With the rare distinction of having graduated from the Nippon Joshi dai-gakku, the women's college in Tokyo, and from a prosperous enough family, what could have drawn her across the Pacific to Shigeki Ikeda? How did such a woman, whom the mayor of Tokyo himself congratulated at graduation, arrive in this hostile land, where she was barred from becoming American yet punished for remaining Japanese, bounced around federal pens, then dumped in the desert? Later, she was relocated to Chicago, tired and old, so old that my only memory is of a shriveled munchkin—like the Jedi master Yoda—whom Grandpa had to carry several blocks from the parked car to the restaurant

on her last Mother's Day. America: where she raised her litter out of a boxcar in the desperate Montana winters to be surgeons and chemists and businessmen, who saw her at last become American, like them, but hardly knew her at all. How can it be that the Nisei Ikedas, and her umpteen grandchildren and great-grandchildren could never, ever manage to ask the one, true question: *Why?*

"Pop was kind of quiet," my grandfather says, shrugging. "And Mom: we were always curious, you know, but you just couldn't ask her those kinds of things. Then it was too late."

In the course of this writing, Tasha's Israeli grandmother, Sara, passed away. A tough, round woman as bellicose as Attila, alluring as a starlet, and proud as the most powerful matriarchs can be, she was an art collector, physician, and lifelong Zionist who witnessed the rise and fall of both the Reich and the USSR. Mere months earlier, she visited during our first week in Madison. We sightsaw, hiked, tested local cuisine, swam every morning in Lake Monona. I suspect she knew she was ill. The news that she'd fallen into a brief coma stirred a flurry of phone calls and flight arrangements. I tried then, really tried to help Tasha rehearse the last scene, to guess what was important to say, to do.

"Tell her you're fine," I said. "Promise her you'll be happy," I suggested. "Tell her *we're* fine. Tell her we take care of each other." Maybe that wasn't important, though. "Tell her you'll be a professor. Tell her you're good and smart and respected." Or, "Say nothing: it's enough to just be there." So we rehearsed, but I'd lost Tasha in the eye of the hurricane, and really I was talking to myself. After I put her on the plane, I raced home to call my grandfather. I didn't want to scare him, but I had to tell him about Sara, because I wanted to say, "You did a good job. You led a good life. You've been a good man."

I couldn't say this, though, and perhaps I won't know why until I'm his age. What I can do is be of use, to write and leave a trace.

190_: En route to the fairground, little Carol chased the annual parade of circus carts and animals and freaks down First Street, Havre's main drag. "We couldn't afford to pay our way in to see the show," he explains. "Instead, we'd work for the circus people—help them erect the tents, unrolling the canvas and carrying the small tent poles. We'd carry water for the elephants, horses, and other animals. At first, we'd take our tickets, go in for the matinee, then never return at night to finish our work, so the crew foreman began holding articles of clothing hostage. Well, after a few years of this, we all wised up. We made sure to wear our worst clothes to the circus."

December 1993: If redress permitted him to tell his story, and I badgered him to, his own body now demands it. It's been a record-setting, miserable winter here in Madison, and even in Phoenix, and I'm concerned. After Alaska, I admit I braced myself for a deathwatch, but his Boy Scout readiness paid off. A golf cart and the travel tanks let him play nine holes, go to movies and museums, dine out. But winter severely limits socializing since, with his steroid-weakened immune system, a mere snuffle or mild flu can be deadly. The "just in case" wheelchair now gets frequent use. The steroids also make him hyper, though, and one day he telephones me with an astounding proposition. Fueled by a long-standing, umm, *difference of opinion* with a relative who also meant to compile a family history, he has decided that *he* wants to work on a biography.

"She'll mess it all up, so I'm taking over," he informs me. "And I've decided *you'll* write it."

"Really?" Trying to convince him I won't starve as an artsy-fart, I had sent him copies of my first two post-MFA publications, both stories about young, contemporary, urban black characters. "These are good," he decided. "I wasn't crazy on that novel, but you've gotten a lot better." So having passed his test, I say, "It'll have to be honest—no holds barred."

"I know you won't be able resist taking your 'poetic license,'" he says. "So I'm gonna edit it."

February 1994: The process of helping each other peel the layers of years and habits is touchy. Each day with my own work and freelance deadlines, I sit at my computer and flip through files—my work or his? That book review or my family history? A resume item or an enormous home-made Christmas gift—and will next Christmas be too late? When I sit transcribing, the headset's sponge earphones warm over my ears, and hearing him talking, wheezing, talking, I know my fingers are in a race against his lungs. He's lost weight, he says. No appetite. Can't sleep.

"Take vitamins!" I prescribe over the telephone. "Don't entertain guests."

The deadline sometimes sits crushing my fingertips, unmoving, like the succubus that sits on my own chest on nights of uneasy sleep.

"Keep warm," I tell him. "Don't go outside. Don't forget to eat."

Compiling his memories, I divine thematic patterns of labor and hunger, going beyond typical immigrant education and work ethics to an ethic of survival. Beauty, wisdom, and even love are infrequent characters in his tales. Instead, the

greatest compliment he can bestow is: “She had a hard life, but she worked hard. She put food on the table.”

One prepubescent summer, he lied about his age to join a railroad extragang, netting a buck a day. They lived in boxcars and breakfasted on coffee, eggs, toast, sour-milk pancakes: “The food wasn’t all that great, but there was a lot of it.” He started as a waterboy but was too small to carry the full buckets. Then they made him a gandy dancer, shoveling gravel beneath the wooden ties or extracting bent spikes with a crowbar, until a division inspector spotted him and sent him home. Two summers later, he returned to work for three exhausting months, and by the time he quit, school began immediately. He complained bitterly that he’d had no vacation at all, and Asako sniffed in her cool way, “Well, if you don’t like that kind of menial labor, then you’d better get some education.” And at fifteen, Carol “got ambition.”

“I did it.” The intolerance of the self-made man—like that of the reformed smoker—can be violent. Somewhere, sometime, someone told my grandfather, “Pick yourself up by your bootstraps, Jap!” and he did it. We argue about welfare, immigration: My ready-made liberal defenses are loaded and cocked on my tongue-tip—charges of class privilege, of displaced self-loathing—but falter. Does the fact that he maximized a few acts of kindness from strangers comprise collaboration with the Man? Where do brainwashing and repression end and his native, ethical disdain for the culture of complaint begin? And what privilege can I attribute to his skin—what doors opened to him as a yellow man, not brown or black?

Certainly not this door to the Dean of Students Office in Bascom Hall, a door I pass daily en route to class. Grandpa: how it must baffle you, to work your whole life to secure for me a privilege I now criticize—to ensure that this door would never slam on another Ikeda, a Jap, even as my work here in Madison sends me spiraling back to you, desperate to recover what remains Japanese American in me before it is too late. *What do you make of me?* I want to ask, but cannot, just as I couldn’t quite muster the heart to dig in about the Arab American soldiers, welfare, affirmative action, forced assimilation.

“I did it,” he says, and I feel that to argue—to say, “At what expense?”—would be to say, “No, you’ve been had.”

“What is a mutt?” asks the AASP professor—a question that must be answered in the light of, and not in spite of, love. My class discusses critical issues of authority, representation, political coalition, models of assimilation and cultural pluralism; we read Robert Olen Butler and the anthology *Aiiieeeee!*, asking: is Asian Americanism a birthright or a sensibility? I explain that my maternal grandfather was a good man, a sports-loving country doctor of an old

WASP family, who spent the war bombing the Japanese in Burma, ostensibly to defend the very liberties denied to my paternal grandfather, also American, a good man, ousted from his home, stripped of property, and imprisoned *as* a Japanese. These men—in their work ethic, concern for propriety, and profound distaste for public displays of emotion, intimacy, sensuality, complaint, wealth, or anything else—often seem interchangeable, or at least harmonious. Mom's lines hail from the United Kingdom, some Irish and Italian. She delights to point out genetic quirks: "You're getting my double chin. You've got my cowlicks." My "Japanese chest" is bald but for a few sprouts of wirelike hair ringing my aureoles, my "Italian" nipples.

"Stew," Tasha often jokes, "is Japanese and WASP, but also Italian: he has passionate emotions, but can't express them." Very funny. True: I've inherited a double-dosage will to silence, and the resulting chronic, teeth-grinding jaw aches. Today, Mom said she'll kill me if I write about her in this essay ("A true WASP makes the paper only thrice: birth, marriage, and the obituary"); Tasha has forbidden me to write *certain* things. And how do I write what it meant to my newlywed grandmother that each envelope from the Midwest arrived already opened, stamped by camp censors, and without the train ticket that it was *supposed* to contain? How do I write what it meant to lie with her legs strapped open on the rough gurney in the desert prison hospital, pressing my aunt into the world feeling utterly alone, abandoned, betrayed, when all she will say to this day is, "He wasn't there"?

Negotiating the distances between Burma, Gila River, and Madison demands a kind of honesty, but I'm not eager to hurt or embarrass my family, and I've had to be clever. No wonder my old mentor Charles Baxter characterized my more confessional (and rare) autobiographical writings as "relentlessly theatricalizing, cavalier and distancing."

If it's a wrenching process becoming part Japanese American, equally difficult is coming to grips with being white in America. I reject the lie of the cultural schizophrenia supposed by white and yellow racists to lurk within the Amerasian—I reject utterly the chopstick versus fork dichotomy. Yet, the world demands: *you stand with us or against us*. Without feeling divided myself, I do often and increasingly feel alone, my empathetic capacities exhausted, and all around me I find new chasms widening between me and those closest to me, white and yellow.

Teaching, writing, living, I've had a special concern for engaging with non-yellows. With PBS TV show hosts who sniffle in phony, quasi-British accents that "There is no race problem in America." With politicians who would revive the Yellow Peril. With Ugly Americans who vacation in Japan, then insist, "I

know more about being Japanese American than you do!” With the feminist poet who, despite repeated correction, remains certain that my course must actually be listed in Asian Studies. With the most well-meaning, progressive scholars who can distinguish Asian from American but crow, “I *love* Asian American culture!” But how can this be? Surely they don’t love all of it, when there’s much there also to despise? A closer look sees a side of our history that is in-fighting, kowtowing, appeasing, and often wishy-washy in relation to other minorities. In short, it is American—good, bad, and ugly.

Above all, I have grown particularly wary of a white liberal impulse to kill discussion with guilt: “Isn’t it terrible what *we* did to the Japanese Americans,” they say, not seeing that therein lies a story that for once isn’t about what *they* did, terrible or not. Wary, yes, for I too harbor white liberal guilt and its resentful flip side. It will tire. As Germany, when the opportunity arose, made clear it won’t keep paying old debts forever, the last of white guilt will exhaust itself, and it will be time to be white again; by then, America will look *very* different, and will we too rise to the occasion and knock down our own wall? An argument says we have far too many stories about being white, but I disagree—these detail whiteness against a white backdrop or, recently, a black one. A time will come for white to be a color and not, as a shy student of mine believed, vacuity of color and culture.

I’ve been hard on my mother, who—in her die-hard 1960s hippie humanist idealism—does not seem to conceive of racism in terms more gray-shaded than backwoods, nineteenth-century Georgia lynchings. Yes, she has black friends, marched for civil rights. Yes, she’s a feminist, a self-made professional woman and single parent who thinks we’d all do well to grow up, go to school, and act much *more* Japanese. Still, she scoffs when I protest that the “model minority” stereotype invites resentment, scapegoating—not among a handful of extremists, but regular old people. I can’t convince her that Vincent Chin’s is no isolated, temporary burp in the great legacy of the flower child, or that hate crimes, supremacist groups, and separatism are waxing. “*You’re* not Japanese, you’re American,” she insists, “like Grandpa Ikeda,” but to me this resounds of “white,” or else assimilated like-white. “Right,” I say. “I’m a Japanese American. I choose to be.” She’s proud of her WASP heritage, good-doing Protestant aunt, gentle father, and the family names that trail back through centuries of society pages to Philadelphia’s founding, and it saddens her that I veer away from this history. When I say, “White Americans have an awful lot to answer for and think about,” she thinks I mean people like her, when really I mean people like me.

Above this chasm where acceptance hinges on assimilation and multiculturalism verges on separatism, there stretches a bridge as material as a gasp of

fear, and that is where I find myself standing these days. Many among my parents' generation so dearly wanted to bridge that gap that they sacrificed even their bodies to construct . . . me. How painful it is to face my mother—my standard of beauty, of woman, of American—and perceive a great blind-spot of her generation, the myth that love is color-blind. Like me, she's a believer; but like my grandparents', my parents' generation was had, too.

Fall 1993: Look at the word you've written on the blackboard—"Ikeda"—and realize its inadequacy. Chalk out the course title and try not to screech: "Topics in Asian American Studies 240: Creative Writing Workshop"—and realize its inadequacy. Turn, at last, to look at the class. Count the black-haired heads, the red and blond, and the face ratio, freckled pale to the shiny brown, clumped around the table. Hand out the syllabi and give them five minutes. Meanwhile, sit behind your writer's bag and try not to hyperventilate. So far, so good, tell yourself. No one's left yet. Be encouraged, feel like Sally Field winning an Oscar, maximize the momentum.

Tell them they must complete assignments on time. Realize you don't know what will happen if they lapse. You want to say: If you skip class you will not live up to your potential or tap the creativity you will squander as junior account execs and computer technicians; you will die without leaving a trace that you breathed and lived and loved in the face of imminent extinction. Recall you failed Yoga as a freshman acting major, dropping your GPA to a C. You're allowed only three absences, you say ominously. You *must* bring an excuse note.

"Why am I here, in Madison, Wisconsin, in this class, standing at this blackboard, talking to you?" you wonder, and feel nauseous to realize your lips have moved, your diaphragm compressed, and the question has floated out of you aloud.

Squirm as they look at you—expectant, hopeful, dubious. Why are they staring at you like that?

Oh, yes.

You are a teacher now. You are armed. You are ready to love them and help them tell their stories.

Spring 1994: For a chemist, my grandfather has been a surprisingly good collaborator—his margin notes on our transcribed interviews show a sensitivity to style; he returns edited manuscripts promptly and has an elephant's memory for dates. Each day his voice grows weaker, and merely tying his

shoes exhausts him, but his zeal for research is impressive, and we've just begun an exchange of articles, stories, and poems, learning new things about the war era together. A lifelong consumer of Zane Grey novels and pulp mysteries, he's now developing a literary palette; he sends me the fiction contest issue of the *Rafu Shimpo* and I send him poems by David Mura and Garrett Kaoru Hongo, stories by Hisaye Yamamoto. We confer weekly by phone. He charts the ups and downs of his health. I bitch about the weather and Madison, then ask, "What's this word on page ten, 'meboshi?'"

And sometimes, like now, I will sit in my office at the university, read the word "Ikeda" on the door, then stare out over six stories onto Lake Mendota—dotted by isolated madmen with their ice-fishing huts, frozen and silent as if in prayer—and I am overcome by gratification and gratitude. At such times I suspect there is a cosmic scoreboard, and if the game goes well, if the cosmic goalkeeper is alert just a bit longer, Carol Ikeda may yet see the results of our work—as I read this now, it's impossible to say where his story ends and mine begins, what's real and what's true. And maybe all those unsaid things between us don't matter so much. For now, we're beating the clock, and we've got work to do.

"Oh, 'meboshi!'" he'll say, and his breathing momentarily blossoms with life again. "That's pickled plum, eaten with rice. Verrrry salty. That was my lunch when I worked on the railroad," he'll say, and I think he sounds happy.