

INADA

*Legends
from
Camp*

Legends from Camp



"*Legends from Camp* is a masterwork of American poetry. A poet-musician in the tradition of Walt Whitman and James A. Wright, Inada plays the music of the continent itself: the song of the Rogue River pines and the song of the humble bunchgrass become Buddhist prayer. Inada celebrates be-bop and jazz; he sings love songs and laments from history, the Sand Creek Massacre and the imprisonment of American Japanese families only fifty years ago. Inada's ear for the musicality of English is unsurpassed; *Legends from Camp* is a veritable symphony you must not miss!"
—Leslie Marmon Silko

A major voice in contemporary letters, Lawson Inada's work has appeared in many surprising forms. His poetry is inscribed in stone alongside the Willamette River, and was the inspiration for an orchestral composition by noted American composer Andrew Hill. He is a leading figure in the field of education, and serves as a multicultural consultant for schools & agencies throughout the nation. He has taught at Southern Oregon State College since 1966.

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HOUSE
PRESS



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Preface

I

It was a fresh, invigorating Indian summer morning in Phoenix, Oregon, where I was getting my car serviced—my transmission, actually. I went across the street to the steps of a pizza parlor to sit and wait. It was early, and business was just getting underway.

Suddenly, I heard sounds overhead—a couple of geese were calling, circling and calling. They circled and called for several minutes before getting underway, heading toward the mountains. And then they were gone. They left, but didn't leave—I could still see them, hear them, overhead in the sky of my mind. And as they called and flew, I felt a transmission from them—something passing, transmitted, from them to me in the form of thoughts and feelings. It was a wonder, a mystery—as geese and thoughts and feelings are—and I reached for my notebook and began to write, to follow where all that would lead me.

A poem emerged on the page: "A Couple of Geese Over Phoenix." A poem, yes, but also somewhat of a song, a meditation, and a painting—in about 200 words. That was it, that was enough; the poem emerged, happened, my transmission was serviced, and I was underway.

The point is: If it weren't for the geese, the feelings wouldn't have happened. And if it weren't for the poem, the thoughts and feelings would have stayed submerged, unexpressed, gradually fading and dispersing in my consciousness. And that would have been a shame—because those geese and that experience were worth sharing.

Such is the way, the gift, of this ancient and universal way known as poetry. Without it, and with the way our society is, I doubt that I could have shared the experience, really done justice to the geese and their messages. Instead, if I mentioned it at all in conversation, it would have become chit-chat and trivia: "Hey, guess what I saw today? Yup, boy, it was really something . . ."

Or, from another perspective, consider how I might have been described by a clerk in a store: "Hey, look at that guy out there! He's been sitting there for over an hour, writin' a letter or something . . ." "Well, I guess that's okay—as long as he's not in the way . . ."

The point is: Poetry happens—wherever, whenever it wants—and the poet simply has to be ready to follow through on the occasion. That's the way I do it, and it's always a wonder, a mystery, when it happens—something like a trance, a transmission, a “higher state” while sitting in the state you're in: you become a vehicle while awaiting our vehicle.

It's actually rather simple, ordinary, like the daydreams we all experience. Thus, it's no big deal—I just happen to write mine down, as poetry.

The poems in this book are arranged into sections—like chapters or movements—and each section has an introduction. I wanted to provide background settings, contexts, for the poetry, in an informal, informal way. Enjoy.

Introduction

We went through a petrified forest to get there. Chunks of stone trees sprawled in the sand as we bumped and swayed slowly by. When we arrived at our destination, men on horseback topped a rise, coming down to greet us.

Where were we? Where was I? A summer camp, the Navajo Nation—brush arbors, corrals, sheep, horses—a high plateau, with mountains all around. Earlier that morning, I was passing through on asphalt when two women in traditional dress waved me down. Their truck had overheated; they needed a ride.

Sure, why not? As Agnes explained, they were getting supplies for “First Night”—the first of three nights, for a healing ceremony, a “sing.” Each event would be held at a different site—in the mountains, and reached by horseback. I drove, they sang—a soft melody, over and over. Red earth, blue sky, petrified.

Grandmother was kneeling at the fire. She looked me over with her one good eye, then poured me coffee from an enamel pot. Children, adults, elders were seated all over—on rocks, on the ground, in shade and sun—chatting, laughing, eating . . .

They didn't pay me much mind, which was fine with me. After all, they had things to plan and do—things I knew nothing about. And it was a delicious feeling, actually (along with the delicious food—hot fry bread, steaming coffee, sizzling mutton), to be so ignorant in their midst, so I just sat there, enjoying the day, enjoying their way.

After a while, Grandmother said something to Agnes. “Grandmother asks who you are, where you're from.” (Up to then, I was simply “Lawson from Oregon”—the driver with the foreign plates. They didn't pry, and neither did I. This question, though, was important.)

“Please tell her that my name is Inada, and that I am a Japanese from California.” This got translated—perhaps the first time in the history of the world that “Inada” was spoken in Navajo—and Grandmother immediately replied, with something of a smirk, a smile, and a humph.

“Well, Grandmother says she doesn't know about all that. Grandmother says you're probably a Yazzie—maybe Delbert Yazzie's son, from up by Shiprock.” I broke into a wide smile, and nodded—and Grandmother, smiling, nodded back. Then she continued.

"Grandmother says we would be honored to have you at First Night, and she also thanks you for giving us a ride." We nodded, smiled. Please tell Grandmother thank you for the invitation and this wonderful food. The honor is mine."

Now, as far as I know, I'm still Fuzzy Inada's son, from Fresno. And because of that, I've been in many such similar situations—"tribal," with "clan" affiliations. I've been there all my life. I'll be there after death. Let me explain.

I've heard it said that the Japanese are "one big tribe." Well, I don't know about that—it's a convenient generalization—but for the sake of convenience I'll stay with the generalization, because I do know this much: wherever, whenever we may meet, or simply encounter one another, there's something in the air between us, a "spark of recognition" that might be termed a "tribal connection."

It runs deep, and is just there. It doesn't have to be mentioned. Call it kinship, if you will—something shared by "kindred spirits"—because, to me, it's more of a feeling than anything—like meeting a relative, or even meeting an ancestor. It runs deep—this sense of "our people."

It's also like "meeting yourself." And when you meet yourself, you elongate. Which means that, while being an individual, you are also a crowd.

Now I don't want to get mystical here (or deal with the "Japanese mystique," whatever that's supposed to be); rather, what I'm talking about is "no big deal," just the way it is, and maybe it's the same for everybody. (Or could be; after all, we all stem from tribal societies.) So, we're common as clay, regular as rain; nothing exotic or special about us—and we just happen to have our own ways of keeping track, and "keeping with the times."

No big deal, actually. Just history, pure and simple—lineage, legacy. It simply comes with the territory—and if you don't like it, you can do something about it. For instance, one of my students told me: "Yeah, you might say I'm a Japanese American, but back home in Idaho I'm just your basic redneck cowboy." Okay, good enough, dude. Or, from another student: "Yes, I am a woman from Japan, but I think of myself as an artist first—and from here I will go to Spain, to study painting." Well, right—go for it!

Myself, I'll admit—I haven't always liked being Japanese, and there are some Japanese I don't necessarily like. No big deal, as I said. I've learned to live with it, even work at it—by reading about a country where I've never been—and I'm often surprised by how Japanese I really am: "Hello, I'm calling to inquire about your academic . . ." "Are you Japanese?" "Well, uh, sure. Are you?" "Yup. Now what did you want to know about . . ." "Hey, wait a minute, lady! Who are you? Where are you from?"

And then we're off and running—the customary procedure of sharing "tribal" and "clan" affiliations, and so on down the line . . . "No kidding? I'll be darned."

Let me do the same for you. A simple show-and-tell procedure—some places, some dates. Do with it what you will. And for the sake of convenience, let's just go back a ways to the petrified forest.

Dusk. Little summer breeze. Full moon rising. Stars. Birds, insects. Scent of juniper, sage. Sand, earth. Way over there, in the mountains—maybe that's the First Night campfire. Let's proceed—striking "sparks of recognition."

For starters, let's say these rocks over here are Japan. Close enough. My mother's clan, Saito, comes from, and is still in, Wakayama Prefecture, on the main island, not all that far, "walking distance," from Osaka and Kyoto—which means that her parents had a semi-urban experience, at least for the 19th century. This other rock is the island of Kyushu, the southland, my father's clan being from Kumamoto Prefecture—the "sticks." (Or the "fields"—since "Inada" means "Rice-field." You get the picture.)

Prefecture-of-origin is very important to us—causing nods of recognition, acknowledgment—because the "lay of the land" says something about who and how we are, in Japan or elsewhere. As a matter of fact, I could stop right here, at these rocks, because they have my history and destiny written all over them.

But let's go over here, to America. (Down there, of course, is South America—where there's more of us than here. And naturally enough, my Brazilian clans speak Portuguese. And these little rocks are Hawaii—where my Inada grandfather labored on a plantation, for passage to the mainland.)

More "islands," right—this big flat one being Fresno (urban/Saito/Fresno Fish Market, mother born in back of the store, 1912), and this

SECTION I

For Janet, Miles, Lowell,
and
Masako and Fusaji Inada

Camp



Camp

"Hello, Lawson? This is President Roosevelt speaking. Now, as you may know, son, we're at war with Japan, so I'm going to have to put you and your family in camp." That phone call never came, but the effect was the same. And three years later, when the president died, we were still in camp.

We've lived with the experience since—on a continual basis. And I've often wondered: What does it all mean? History offers clues: The *American* camps are part of the American experience, with many patterns and connections; also, there are international ramifications to consider, going back at least to President Fillmore in 1854, and the "opening" of Japan. (Actually, Columbus was heading to "Cipangu," Japan.)

Still there's a remoteness to history, and to simply know the facts is not always satisfactory. There's more to life than that. So you might say I've taken matters into my own hands—taken the camp experience in my hands, stood in the sun, and held it up to the light.

What did I find? What I *expected* to find: Aspects of humanity, the human condition.

Presidio of San Francisco, California
May 3, 1942

INSTRUCTIONS TO ALL PERSONS OF JAPANESE ANCESTRY

Living in the Following Area:

All of that portion of the City of Los Angeles, State of California, within that boundary beginning at the point at which North Figueroa Street meets a line following the middle of the Los Angeles River; thence southerly and following the said line to East First Street; thence westerly on East First Street to Alameda Street; thence southerly on Alameda Street to East Third Street; thence westerly on East Third Street to Main Street; thence southerly on Main Street to First Street; thence westerly on First Street to Figueroa Street; thence northerly on Figueroa Street to the point of beginning.

Pursuant to the provisions of Civilian Exclusion Order No. 33, this Headquarters, dated May 3, 1942, all persons of Japanese ancestry, both alien and non-alien, will be evacuated from the above area by 12 o'clock noon, P. W. T., Saturday, May 9, 1942.

No Japanese person living in the above area will be permitted to change residence after 12 o'clock noon, P. W. T., Sunday, May 3, 1942, without obtaining special permission from the representative of the Commanding General, Southern California Sector, at the Civil Control Station located at:

Japanese Union Church,
120 North San Pedro Street,
Los Angeles, California.

Such permits will only be granted for the purpose of visiting members of a family, or in case of grave emergency.

The Civil Control Station is equipped to assist the Japanese population affected by this evacuation in the following ways:

1. Give advice and instructions on the evacuation.
2. Provide services with respect to the management, leasing, sale, storage or other disposition of most kinds of property, such as real estate, business and professional equipment, household goods, boats, automobiles and livestock.
3. Provide temporary residence elsewhere for all Japanese in family groups.
4. Transport persons and a limited amount of clothing and equipment to their new residence.

The Following Instructions Must Be Observed:

1. A responsible member of each family, preferably the head of the family, or the person in whose name most of the property is held, and each individual living alone, will report to the Civil Control Station to receive further instructions. This must be done between 8:00 A. M. and 5:00 P. M. on Monday, May 4, 1942, or between 8:00 A. M. and 5:00 P. M. on Tuesday, May 5, 1942.

2. Evacuees must carry with them on departure for the Assembly Center, the following property:

- (a) Bedding and linens (no mattress) for each member of the family;
- (b) Toilet articles for each member of the family;
- (c) Extra clothing for each member of the family;
- (d) Sufficient knives, forks, spoons, plates, bowls and cups for each member of the family;
- (e) Essential personal effects for each member of the family.

All items carried will be securely packaged, tied and plainly marked with the name of the owner and numbered in accordance with instructions obtained at the Civil Control Station. The size and number of packages is limited in that which can be carried by the individual or family group.

3. No pets of any kind will be permitted.
4. No personal items and no household goods will be shipped to the Assembly Center.
5. The United States Government through its agencies will provide for the storage, at the sole risk of the owner, of the more substantial household items, such as iceboxes, washing machines, pianos and other heavy furniture. Cooking utensils and other small items will be accepted for storage if crated, packed and plainly marked with the name and address of the owner. Only one name and address will be used by a given family.

6. Each family, and individual living alone, will be furnished transportation to the Assembly Center or will be authorized to travel by private automobile in a supervised group. All instructions pertaining to the movement will be obtained at the Civil Control Station.

Go to the Civil Control Station between the hours of 8:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M., Monday, May 4, 1942, or between the hours of 8:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M., Tuesday, May 5, 1942, to receive further instructions.

J. L. DEWITT
Lieutenant General, U. S. Army
Commanding

144 CIVILIAN EXCLUSION ORDER NO. 33

Instructions to All Persons

Let us take
what we can
for the occasion:

Ancestry. (*Ancestry*)
All of that portion. (*Portion*)
With the boundary. (*Boundary*)
Beginning. (*Beginning*)
At the point. (*Point*)
Meets a line. (*Line*)
Following the middle. (*Middle*)
Thence southerly. (*Southerly*)
Following the said line. (*Following*) (*Said*)
Thence westerly. (*Westerly*)
Thence northerly. (*Northerly*)
To the point. (*Point*)
Of beginning. (*Beginning*) (*Ancestry*)

Let us bring
what we need
for the meeting:

Provisions. (*Provisions*)
Permission. (*Permission*)
Commanding. (*Commanding*)
Uniting. (*Uniting*)
Family. (*Family*)

Let us have
what we have
for the gathering:

Civil. (*Civil*)
Ways. (*Ways*)
Services. (*Services*)

Respect. (*Respect*)
Management. (*Management*)
Kinds. (*Kinds*)
Goods. (*Goods*)
For all. (*All*)

Let us take
what we can
for the occasion:

Responsible.

Individual.

Sufficient.

Personal.

Securely.

Civil.

Substantial.

Accepted.

Given.

Authorized.

Let there be
Order.

Let us be
Wise.

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 state,
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, sewer
engineers, and all the untold thousands who provided the material
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 thin

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,
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?

Poems from Amache Camp

I.

"Dear Lawson,

2 Ys UR,
2 Ys UB,
I C UR
2 Ys 4 Me!

Your friend,

Bobby"

II.

"Dear Lawson,

I meet you early,
I meet you late,
I meet you at
Amache Gate!

Always,

Naomi"

Concentration Constellation

In this earthly configuration,
we have, not points of light,
but prominent barbs of dark.

It's all right there on the map.
It's all right there in the mind.
Find it. If you care to look.

Begin between the Golden State's
highest and lowest elevations
and name that location

Manzanar. Rattlesnake a line
southward to the zone
of Arizona, to the home
of natives on the reservation,
and call those *Gila, Poston.*

Then just take your time
winding your way across
the Southwest expanse, the Lone
Star State of Texas, gathering
up a mess of blues as you
meander around the banks
of the humid Mississippi; yes,
just make yourself at home
in the swamps of Arkansas,
for this is *Robwer* and *Jerome.*

By now, you weary of the way.
It's a big country, you say.
It's a big history, hardly
halfway though—with *Amache*
looming in the Colorado desert,
Heart Mountain high in wide

Wyoming, *Minidoka* on the moon
of Idaho, then down to Utah's
jewel of *Topaz* before finding
yourself at northern California's
frozen shore of *Tule Lake* . . .

Now regard what sort of shape
this constellation takes.
It sits there like a jagged scar,
massive, on the massive landscape.
It lies there like the rusted wire
of a twisted and remembered fence.

Looking Back at Camp

I. THE FRESNO ASSEMBLY CENTER

To get into the fair,
You have to pay admission.

We got in for free,
To the Fresno Family Prison.

II. JEROME CAMP

Every so often,
I sit down with
a neighbor.

I sit and listen
as he plays
the guitar.

He sings of love,
of luck, of want,
whatever he dares.

What he doesn't
sing about is
what's over there —

guard towers, guns,
big cabins beyond
the plantation.

Or, at night,
how searchlights
find us here.

And then he sings,
soft and low,
about Chicago.

III. AMACHE CAMP

I work on campus.
I try to concentrate.

Still, things sneak
up to remind me:

"This is *not* Amache!"

SECTION II

Fresno

