

# A Cold Wind From Idaho

poems

Lawrence Matsuda

with an introduction  
and afterword by  
Tetsuden Kashima



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*This book is dedicated to the following:*

To my late mother and father, Hanae and Ernest K. Matsuda, who lived dignified lives, often under undignified circumstances. They lost their grocery business, their home, a stillborn child, and were incarcerated in Minidoka, one of ten American concentration camps during World War II. Their imprisonment lifted them, along with 120,000 other Japanese and Japanese Americans from their communities across America, without their having committed a crime and without due process.

To my Hiroshima relatives who told me their stories of survival when I visited them in 1995, which was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the atomic bombing: Mitsugi Yamada, Akiko Nagata, Yoko Tamino, Mitsuko Doi, and Isao Nishimura. Three Hiroshima poems deal with their stories. My mother lost many Hiroshima cousins, but my relatives who survived would not speak about them.

The deaths and suffering of over 500,000 civilians underscore the message of Hiroshima and Minidoka—let it not happen again. For my son Matthew's sake, school children all over America, and those who will choose never to let this happen in America again—it is my hope that this book becomes a reminder to America to fulfill its promise of liberty and justice for all, regardless of race, during times of war and hysteria. Numbers alone cannot adequately quantify the humiliation and shame that these poems address. Mindful of the anguish of those untold thousands who live on after such soul-tearing events, the families and friends who do not forget, and who re-suffer these losses and are unable to express or redress their losses—I write this book for them.

Thanks to my family—Karen Matsuda, Matthew Matsuda, Alan Matsuda, Tom Yamada, and Pamela Yamada Krute for their continued support. Thanks to Tess Gallagher for mentoring me on this journey, Carol Bengé and Judith Skillman for their editing assistance. I am indebted to Linda Ando, Alfredo Arreguin, the late Professor Nelson Bentley, Carole Koura Kubota, Frank Kitamoto, Susan Lane, Susan Lytle, Professor Tets Kashima, and Roger Shimomura for their encouragement.

## INTRODUCTION

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order [EO] 9066 on February 19, 1942, resulting in a cataclysmic series of events affecting all persons of Japanese ancestry then residing on the West Coast of the United States. So calamitous were these actions that a noted scholar asserted that they constituted “the defining event in the history of Japanese Americans.”<sup>1</sup>

What does this have to do with a book of poetry titled, *A Cold Wind from Idaho*? Americans familiar with the Pacific Northwest Japanese American World War II experience will understand the imagery wrought by the title as being both evocative and apt. The metaphor of freezing winter winds entering the bodies and souls of those affected conveys how the Japanese Issei<sup>2</sup> and Japanese American Nisei survived the bitter cold of Idaho’s winters while being confined in a primitive American barbed wire concentration camp.

The poetry in this volume reflects values that are embedded in the Japanese American tradition. As a result the

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1. Yamaoka, Kazue, “Japanese Americans,” in Jackson, Yo, *Encyclopedia of Multicultural Psychology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006

2. Issei, or literally, “first-generation,” are the original Japanese immigrants to Hawaii and the continental United States from the late 1800s to 1924. Their children, the Nisei, literally, “second-generation,” are American-born citizens; their grandchildren, the Sansei, literally, “third-generation,” are likewise American-born citizens but were so young that few experienced the incarceration in 1942.

themes, actors' actions and reactions in each poem are infused with the values and norms found in the Japanese American ethnic subculture. Without a rudimentarily understanding of the historical and social relationships operating within the Issei and Nisei, as a group, their actions under the stress of confinement can be easily misunderstood.

This introduction and the Afterword section describe some cultural values and circumstances that explain why the Japanese behaved the way they did. But most of all why they went to camp willingly when ordered by the United States government and why they did not openly resist the government order when caught in what they considered to be an unconscionable existential dilemma.

### **Issei and Nisei Internment and Incarceration**

During World War II, the United States government removed and incarcerated under EO 9066 nearly 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry, two-thirds of whom were American citizens, without charge, trial, or other safeguards of the American legal system. This action encompassed all those residing in the western half of Washington, Oregon, the southern half of Arizona and the entire state of California. In a nation where the legal foundation of "innocent until proven guilty" is paramount, nearly all West Coast persons of Japanese ancestry were summarily expelled from their homes in the spring of 1942 to suffer confinement in desolate sites surrounded by barbed wire. They committed no crimes or deeds inimical to the war efforts of their natal or adopted country. Moreover, other Americans, notably of German or Italian ancestry, were freed from this same horrendous action of mass exclusion and imprisonment.

In contrast, the Territory of Hawaii had a Nikkei<sup>3</sup> population of 150,000, mostly Nisei, but the military command there did not consider it necessary to institute such acrimonious

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3. Nikkei is defined as a person of Japanese ancestry. It therefore includes the Issei, Nisei, Sansei, and subsequent generations.

actions as promulgated on the West Coast. In spite of President Roosevelt's desires, there was no mass exclusion or incarceration.

The World War II imprisonment saga starts with the bombing of Pearl Harbor.<sup>4</sup> From December 7, 1941 and onward, Department of Justice [DoJ] agents such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], along with the U.S. military, and local law enforcement officers fanned out throughout the United States, Hawaii, and Alaska, to arrest pre-designated resident aliens of Germany, Italy, and Japan living in the United States in the early days following the attack. The government authority for this action was the Alien Enemies Act of 1798 and by the end of this internment program in 1948, nearly 32,000 alien nationals were kept for up to six years. The majority of them, or nearly 17,500 were Issei or their dependents. These arrests effectively stripped influential Issei from their ethnic community leaving it largely leaderless and defenseless. The Japanese were especially vulnerable because they were a visible minority that was largely unassimilated, living in largely ghettoized settings. Without the Issei leadership, the Nisei who were citizens assumed more responsibilities and power. The Nisei considered themselves Americans and not Japanese, so their loyalties were clearly directed towards the United States.<sup>5</sup>

The mass evacuation started months later in 1942 under the authority of EO 9066. Initially, the Army created fifteen temporary confinement sites it called "assembly centers" in county fairgrounds, migrant labor camps, and horse race tracks—the latter sites still reeking with the aroma of horse manure. Here, the remaining Issei nationals, not taken in the post-Pearl Harbor round-up, and virtually all American citizens of Japanese American ancestry living in the West Coast states were brought to these centers. Later a new civilian agency, the War Relocation Authority [WRA], established ten permanent centers situated in isolated and desolate areas of Arkansas, Arizona, California,

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4. See Kashima, Tetsuden. *Judgment Without Trial: Japanese American Imprisonment during World War II*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003.

5. Op. cit., p. 124-125. Among the Larry Matsuda's poems, "Hiroshima Family Graves, III" and "1942 Nightmare" directly relate to the arrest procedure.

Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming. It was in Idaho, where the Minidoka WRA center was located—the camp where Larry Matsuda, his family, and nearly 8,000 Nikkei were incarcerated.

These centers were surrounded by a multi-stranded barbed wire fence complete with guard towers manned by armed military guards. The incarcerated lived in hastily erected military-style barracks covered with tarpaper. The lack of privacy was especially difficult for women forced to suffer the use of common Army-style latrine facilities. In addition, the confinement broke down the family structure as the WRA systematically denigrated the Issei pre-War Japanese values, norms, and language and attempted to inculcate American middle-class values and norms such as “Americanism” and egalitarianism. Nevertheless the Japanese value of “Gaman” which means to bear the unbearable with dignity helped the Japanese endure the hardships.

There are numerous examples of adversities that the government imposed on those so incarcerated. For example, in 1943, the Army and the WRA required incarcerated males and females seventeen years and older to respond to an ill-conceived questionnaire that became known as the “loyalty questionnaire.”<sup>6</sup> Two particular questions created considerable turmoil and dissent within all the WRA camps. One referred to military service, and asked if the draft eligible Nisei male would serve in the armed forces wherever ordered. When a number of Nisei said, for example, that they would serve “if their parents were released from incarceration,” those answers were viewed as a “qualified” response. A qualified or “No” response to the two “loyalty” questions usually resulted in an abrupt transfer to the Tule Lake camp in California which housed people who responded “No-No” to the “loyalty questions.” As a result Tule Lake was designated as the camp to

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6. The second question asked about forswearing allegiance to Japan. This was especially difficult for the immigrant Issei since answering “Yes” could be interpreted as self-declaring oneself to be a person without a country since early in 1922, the United States had legally defined the Issei as “aliens ineligible for [United States] citizenship.” The WRA correctly substituted another question after the uproar in all the camps.



house “suspect persons” and renamed as a segregation center. The ensuing harsh administrative style there led to increasing levels of inmate discord and agitation. To quell the actions of those defined as “troublemakers”, Congress passed legislation whereby an American citizen could renounce his or her citizenship in the United States and the WRA and Justice Department used this action to “encourage” selected Nisei to do so. Those Nisei who did “renounce” would then be classified as “alien enemies” and the WRA could ship them to the DoJ internment camps.

A second example revolves around the government’s desire to increase the numbers of Nisei soldiers. In 1943 the Selective Service changed the Nisei’s earlier draft status from 4-C, or alien, to 1-A, allowing it to send draft notices to 2,213 eligible Nisei men between January and August 1944. The majority of these Nisei complied and joined earlier volunteers from Hawaii and WRA camps in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team [RCT] fighting in Europe and the Military Intelligence Service linguists serving in the Pacific Theater. These Nisei soldiers performed brilliantly and the 442nd RCT became the most highly decorated unit for its size and duration of service in all of U.S. military history.

Other Nisei men, however, took another route—267 refused to report and 91 refused to be inducted. They were known as the “resisters”. They believed it was unconstitutional to be incarcerated as a military necessity and then later drafted from the camps. Resisters in the Heart Mountain and Minidoka WRA camps were tried, found guilty, and sent to Federal prisons. In July, 1944 twenty-seven resisters at the Tule Lake WRA segregation center appeared in court. U.S. district court judge, Louis Goodman dismissed the indictment against them stating that, “It is shocking to the conscience that an American citizen be confined on the grounds of disloyalty, and then, while so under duress and restraint, be compelled to serve in the armed forces or be prosecuted for not yielding to such compulsion.”<sup>7</sup>

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7. Muller, Eric, *Free to Die for their Country*, [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003: 143]

Other difficult issues occurred during their imprisonment years in both the internment and incarceration camps mostly to maintain control over their inmate population—for example, at four camps Army guards shot and killed unarmed Issei and Nisei who ventured too close to the enclosing barbed wire fences; the Tule Lake segregation camp director built a separate prison enclosure within its enclosing perimeter; and the WRA and the DoJ also created additional and separate centers, besides the Tule Lake Segregation camp, with maximum security features to hold their prisoners.

As World War II wound down, the WRA started closing their incarceration camps starting in June, 1944 and ended with Tule Lake in March, 1946. The DoJ/Army internment camps, as we saw, opened earlier and then closed later—releasing the last Nikkei families in September 1947 after keeping some for six long years.

The internment and incarceration story contains material for an epic drama filled with strife and reconciliation, love and hate, benevolence and malevolence, anxiety and reassurance, and fear and security. These issues comprise the larger tapestry of history and circumstances that encompasses the Issei and Nisei experiences of World War II. Yet, each image is composed of individual threads that weave together into a panorama of imprisonment. The following poems focus on those cultural threads embedded in individual experiences which provide insights to comprehend and understand the Japanese American's perspective. Equally important, those threads extend out to the successive Japanese American generations who were fortunate not to have faced this particular anguish of their grandparents or parents. Yet, through no fault of their own, the fourth and fifth generation may bear the burden of the poignant imagery crafted by third-generation American Larry Matsuda: "I carry my own fence. Barbed wire encircles me always."

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I.

The Noble Thing

They say when you die, your name  
is written in the clouds.

—Anne from *Out of the Past*, 1947 RKO Pictures

## Too Young to Remember

Minidoka, Idaho—War Relocation Center

I do not remember the Idaho winter winds,  
knee deep mud that oppressed 10,000 souls  
or the harsh summer heat and dust.

I do not remember miles of clotheslines,  
mounds of soiled diapers, clatter of families crowded  
into barracks, the greasy closeness  
of canned Vienna sausage,  
of pungent pork and sour brine  
exuding from mess halls.

Floating in the amniotic fluid,  
rethured in salt sea, odors  
nourished by fear and sadness—  
my Mother's anxieties  
enveloped and nurtured me.

Maybe it was the loss of her home,  
the sudden evacuation,  
being betrayed by her country.  
Or maybe it was the stillborn child  
she referred to as It,  
sexless blob of malformed tissue,  
a thing without a face that would have been  
my older sibling.  
My aunt described it as *budo*,  
a cluster of grapes.

I recall what Barry, my psychiatrist friend,  
said about parents emotionally distancing themselves  
from children born immediately after a stillbirth.

Sixty years later on drizzly Seattle days,  
when November skies are overcast,  
and darkness begins at 4:00 p.m.,  
I feel my mother's sadness  
sweep over me like a cold wind from Idaho.

I search for Minidoka,  
unravel it from the memories of others.  
Like a ruined sweater, I untwist the yarn,  
strands to weave a tapestry  
of pride and determination—  
the “children of the rising sun” once banished  
to desert prisons, return from exile  
with tattered remnants, wave them overhead,  
time-shorn banners salvaged from memories  
woven in blood and anguish.

I wish I could remember  
Minidoka. I would trade  
those memories for the fear and sadness  
imbedded in my genes.

## The Noble Thing

Dad never talked about Minidoka.  
That was the noble thing.

Before World War II,  
there was Garfield High School for him,  
ice skating on Greenlake,  
dances at Lake Wilderness Lodge,  
later his ownership of Elk Grocery  
on Seneca Street.

He and my mother were  
married in 1941,  
ten months later to be removed  
...forced...into the Minidoka concentration camp.

Mom was five months pregnant in August  
with my older brother, Alan.  
With black-out curtains drawn, the train  
left Puyallup and climbed the Cascade mountains  
until the land flattened and the inescapable sun  
transformed the train cars into a moving sauna.  
People gasped small, panicked breaths  
from the superheated air.

*Shikataganai*—"It can't be helped."

The train stopped by the side of an unmarked road  
in the Idaho desert, released  
its passengers miles from any station.  
Rumors spread they would be shot  
or marched to death—their bodies stacked, then  
carted to some awaiting ditch.

Nowhere to run, they walk in their best shoes  
in the gritty sand as on the face of the moon.  
The heat caused some to faint  
as they carried all they could.

Three years later, Dad returned  
to Seattle after the War,  
developed a bleeding ulcer,  
lost his janitor job at the Earl Hotel.

Depression took Mom away  
like invisible armed guards. She was  
a stranger—a stick-like figure with arms  
and legs poking out of a white smock,  
pacing the sidewalk next  
to the Western State Hospital turn-around.

Dad never talked about it, none of it.  
I never heard him say the word *Minidoka*...

*Gaman*, “endure the unbearable with dignity.”

*Shikatagani*, my best friend’s mother chose pills for suicide.  
After school, Randy my neighbor, opened the garage door  
and found his father in a black suit, his best, hanged  
by the neck, *shikatagani*, the same path other  
Seattle Japanese chose—  
numbers unknown. *Shikataganai*.

We, however, never talked about it.  
That was the noble thing to do.

## Therapy

I wish you learned to cry for yourself.  
You don't pay me enough to cry for you.  
—Leslie, my therapist

i

If this scene were a Freudian dream,  
her basement furnace pipes  
extending throughout the house  
would be an octopus representing something sexual.

Since Leslie is a Jungian, she would say  
whether the furnace heats with oil, gas or electricity  
is what's significant.

I gaze out her back window.  
Gravel covers plastic sheets for a lawn,  
a bathroom countertop and sink  
lie upside down for the remodel.

Leslie sits in her high backed chair.

*What is it?* she asks.  
I pull myself out of the overstuffed leather chair  
and glance at her Sony tape recorder  
with twin omni-directional mikes on the desk.

*I am samurai. My sword sleeps under my bed  
waiting for night prowlers to feel its keen edge.  
My ancestors weep knowing this samurai  
jogs around Greenlake wearing color-coordinated sweats,  
worries about snails in the garden  
and whether the dog has fleas.*