

# Return

Mata Ashita

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This publication is a celebration of the writing and art that has come out of Mata Ashita's pilot workshop series.



## Introduction

Dear reader,

Mata Ashita was created to honour the stories that have shaped Japanese Canadian experiences, and to acknowledge the many others that still need to be shared. During the first half of 2021, 61 emerging writers from Japanese Canadian communities across the country joined authors Joy Kogawa, Sally Ito, Michael Prior, Jeff Chiba Stearns, Lillian Michiko Blakey, Hiromi Goto, Erica Hiroko Isomura and Ruth Ozeki for monthly writing-for-wellness workshops, giving participants a chance to build community and rediscover their family histories during the COVID-19 pandemic. This zine features some of the incredible work created during our first season together, marking a resurgence of Japanese Canadian literature as a medium for exploring layers of belonging and intercommunity solidarity in times of injustice.

In this collection, Mata Ashita writers return to the memories that simultaneously propel and restrain them, in order to forge lasting connections to each other: Raymond Nakamura captures moments of warmth and discovery in workshop; Megan Wray reminds us to “write yourself out of stories you’re too afraid to tell”; Sachiko Okuda reflects on a perfect game and an imperfect encounter with a rediscovered home; Lillian Nakamura Maguire finds fleeting beauty in what remains; a family’s resilience is passed down through the flicker of a smile; Yuko Fedrau illuminates the shades of guilt that guide her eyes; Misty Cozac reclaims what is buried beneath history; Suzanne Elki Yoko Hartmann cuts to the core of a history shaped by honour and inequity; the scent of mushrooms brings Pat Rose back home; photo by photo, Kimiko Yamada leaps through memory; I. J. Kent unearths a lost generation within; in remembrance, Kyoko Sato carves space for confidence; Colette Macarios longs for a city, miles away; and at his mother’s request, Eli Hamada McIlveen searches for light in his grandmother’s poetry and an empty park.

Through these collected stories, poems and snippets of memory, we are beginning to reimagine what it means to be Japanese Canadian in the face of an uncertain future. Whatever we have gained or lost over the years, what keeps us together is the promise of the return—that even if we sometimes feel far from our own histories, and the places that tie us together, our commitment to being in community with one another remains. In our words, in the way we care for ourselves and the people around us, and the hope that our stories will ripple into others, the way we have found ourselves carried on by stories this year. Thank you for being part of this wave.

Mata Ashita. See you tomorrow.

Leanne Toshiko Simpson  
Sen Canute  
Nicola Koyanagi

July 2021



## never-arriving home

mountain top views blind you to what's underneath — a solid ground, hiza, ashi holding you strong, a fleeting moment falling further every second as your heart rate accelerates pumping red to your white skin.  
remember the pulses of the taiko drums in an empty gymnasium — sakura blooming in your bones, suki's geta ringing across the pacific.  
pull back your temples, slick your hair smoothly. stick hashi in your bun as your nimble fingers crease golden red paper. stop asking questions over udon, strategically line your eyes, crinkle your locks into soft waves. feel defeated, but bury it down.  
find stolen glances in koi pond shimmers, let lingers of simmering oil and shoyu scents guide your feet forward.  
celebrate inquisitiveness even if it's just deep dives on wikipedia from the darkness of your bedroom. let the blue light burn your eyes, but warm your mind.  
lose it all again, writing yourself out of stories you're too afraid to tell from the rooms trying to fit you into checkbox identities. double-mark the bubble sheet, let the scantron machine freeze.  
apologize to your mother, her mother, and her mother's mother.  
ask questions over udon again.  
learn to use hashi.  
let the whispered spirits guide you to rice vinegar and nori, miso and sake. rinse the rice and repeat. just for once, trust yourself. feel them taking over.  
doubt yourself. do it anyway.  
share stories about grandmothers' kitchens and wonder if you're all defined by discomfort.  
consider that maybe this is exactly what you were looking for all along.  
there is always company at this never-arriving home.

## abundance

grandma lines wicker bowls with paper towels and fills them to the brim with lays bbq chips and munchie mix  
at grandma's house, we don't eat to survive we eat because we can  
my cousins and i slurp udon noodles in each other's faces as we spill shoyu on the table  
grandma puts the minnie mouse printed bottle back into its bowl — it's home safe now  
on holidays, we're exiled to the living room we sit on the ground legs turned under our knees in true japanese fashion  
it is built in our bones  
or is the table just close to the floor?  
once our tummies are full we gorge on fruit salad jello layers and jeanne's cake brownies and cookies and chocolate-covered strawberries  
yonseis groan as we stuff down the last of our treats when i can't fit any more in my belly  
i suck the cocoa off one last strawberry plopping it back on my plate  
my uncle eats the remaining fruit and i don't understand why  
he takes photos while we wave jello in each other's faces and i don't understand why  
he documents history  
a life in excess  
a generation untied from their tightened reins from rations and repossession  
i get my grandma chocolate for christmas and i finally understand why

## Three Ladies from Qualicum Beach

In April 1983, a year after I moved from Montreal to Ottawa for my first full-time job, I travelled for the first time to the West Coast. On the eastern shores of Vancouver Island I boarded a bus that took me to my mother's hometown of Qualicum Beach. My mother's name was Shima, which means, "island," and it always amused me to think that she had been born on an island. And now, finally, I was there. I had promised her that I would call on Jenny Switley, a childhood friend who now lived in an apartment at the retirement complex run by the Qualicum Beach Kiwanis Club.

Jenny had distinguished herself by seeking out my mother in an extraordinary fashion, decades after her relocation to Eastern Canada. One day in the late 1970s, my mother received a large, slightly damp cardboard dress box in the mail. Inside the box was a sheaf of pussy willows that Jenny had gathered at Qualicum Beach and had sent all the way to Montreal. This uncommon and totally unexpected gift sparked an exchange of letters that lasted a few years until Jenny had a stroke that made her lovely, pre-war penmanship spidery and shaky, and her use of language uncertain and a little hard to understand.

My visit with Jenny was important to my mother, who had not set foot at Qualicum Beach since 1942, when all coastal Japanese-Canadians were banished inland road camps, internment camps and sugar-beet farms. In fact, because of Shima's wartime internment in the B.C. interior and after her relocation to Toronto in the mid-1940s, she had never once returned to B.C. And now ill health prevented her from travelling there ever again; she was in the latter stages of pancreatic cancer and would be dead within a few months.

Jenny's apartment was sunny and her kitchen well scrubbed. And she struck me as a sunny type of person, quick to laugh and visibly happy to see me. Despite her difficulties with speech—she made frequent word substitutions ("buggy" for "bunny"; "not meatballs" for "pasta sauce"; "hornet" for "horn")—she was more than able to entertain me with stories about colourful characters she had

known: a militaristic teacher from the 1930s named Captain Berry; her ex-husband who had "run off with a woman he had made pregnant"; a "cowboy from Edmonton" who owned the former Qualicum Beach Hotel, now the George Inn, "complete with strippers." Her memory was remarkable, but as she put it, her mind was "two paragraphs ahead" of her mouth.

What surprised me was the fact that she still drove, and she took me in her red Honda Civic to see the former locations of the old schoolhouse and my mother's family home. Back at the apartment she served me tea and a slice of rhubarb pie with a squirt of whipped cream. Before I left, I promised to write, with the understanding that she did not have to write back. We said good-bye and I went off to explore the town on my own.

My 35mm camera was new, and I was still learning how to use it properly. I had stopped under a tree to consult the instruction manual when a voice called out, "Welcome to Qualicum Beach, dear!" The voice belonged to a woman in her early 70s, with a majestic crown of silver hair pinned up on her head. When I explained that my mother had lived at Qualicum Beach before the war, the woman, whose name was Aileen Gillan, cried out with delight, "Oh yes, I knew the family! I remember Shima and her brother and the other girls!" Aileen invited me over to her house and, like Jenny, captivated me with her stories.

Aileen had left Qualicum Beach at the age of 15, to study "legal secretaryship" in Victoria. She divorced her first husband at the end of the war and had remarried in 1953. Tragically, in 1957 her second husband was involved in a catastrophic accident—his car was T-boned by a logging truck that had lost its brakes—and by the time I met her, he had been hospitalized for more than 26 years.

What surprised me was Aileen's car—a large, stately, 1961 black Mercedes. In Montreal, cars just did not last that long because of the harsh winters. Aileen took me in her black Mercedes to see the tiny, local airport, the mansions on Judges' Row and the "old doctor's" house that had been converted into a hotel. Back at her

house, she served me milk and cookies and offered to take me with her the following day to Long Beach, way over on the western shores of the island, a tremendous offer that I had to turn down because of another commitment in Victoria.

Before I left, I asked Aileen if I could take her photo. Earlier I had asked Jenny, who had declined because, as she said, she did not want to break my camera. In contrast, Aileen was more than pleased to have her picture taken. Swiftly she swept the pins from her hair, which cascaded over her shoulders and down her back in a silvery torrent. With one hand on her hip, she struck a pose, looked directly at me and asked, “Is my hair still red?”

Sadly, in Victoria, when I opened my camera to change the film, I discovered that I had not threaded the roll correctly, and as a result, all of my photos from Qualicum Beach were ruined. My disappointment was immense and profound. I had nothing to show my mother of her hometown. But when I went to see her in Montreal, she just smiled and repeated the names of the friends from her childhood, Jenny Switley and Aileen Gillan. It was enough, my mother said, for me to have met them. And as for the absence of photos, she just said, “Shikata ga nai.” (It can’t be helped.)

## Perfect Game

Instead of a wedding band, my father wore a signet ring on the third finger of his left hand, with “450” in raised, gold numbers on a little tile of black onyx. The ring was a gift from the McGill Alleys in Montreal, in commemoration of the perfect game of five-pin he bowled there in 1948. For those unfamiliar with five-pin bowling, 450 is the score for a perfect game of 12 consecutive strikes, and its achievement is indeed worthy of celebration.

In his youth, Rosie—the Anglicized form of his name, Hiroshi—was an accomplished amateur athlete, earning a Big Block athletic sweater at the University of British Columbia in the mid-1930s for his successes as a sprinter and as a soccer player. He also played baseball and, in the late 1930s, before the expulsion of all Japanese-Canadians from the West Coast, he had been a player-manager for one of the junior teams of the legendary Asahi baseball organization. Unfortunately, shortly before his relocation to Tashme, the largest of the internment camps for Japanese-Canadians, located just outside the town of Hope, B.C., Rosie was struck by a motorcycle and sustained permanent damage to his right leg. As a result, his career in sports came crashing to a halt.

Enter bowling; Rosie’s love of precision, his sense of focus and, I think, his introversion, made him a natural convert to bowling in the years following his final relocation to Montreal on New Year’s Day, 1944. Bowling not only gave him the opportunity, once a week, to spend an evening in the masculine atmosphere of cigarette smoke and sport, it also provided him with a certain sense of fulfillment that was missing from his everyday life, which he spent working at whatever jobs were available to a former occupant of an enemy internment camp.

Of course, as I was not born until after my father had given up bowling, I did not witness his perfect game in 1948, but I try to imagine what it was like...

*It’s a hot night, and it’s hopping at the bowling alley. Rosie is 33 years old and his hairline has already begun to recede, but he is*

*looking trim and handsome in his club shirt, and tonight things are definitely going his way.*

*It's not until he bowls a "turkey"—three strikes in a row—that the possibility of a perfect game takes shape in the minds of his teammates, but in Rosie's mind, it's always been there.*

*Fourth frame, strike! "Hey, Rosie, whaddya been drinking?"*

*Fifth frame, strike! "By crackey!"*

*Sixth frame, the bowlers in the neighbouring lanes have taken notice. "That guy, the little Jap over there in Lane 8, looks like he's going for a perfect game!" Strike!*

*Seventh frame, strike! "Son of a gun!"*

*Eighth frame, strike! "Jesus Murphy! I never seen anything like it!"*

*Ninth frame, by now, all eyes are on Rosie's lane as all the bowlers in the McGill Alleys have temporarily put their own games on hold. Strike!*

*Tenth frame, first ball. Rosie's gaze shifts from the ball in his right hand to the pins in the distance. He takes aim and sends the ball. Strike!*

*The cheers that erupt are hastily suppressed as Rosie's teammates motion for silence. Rosie hears nothing and sees nothing beyond the gutters of his lane; his only thought is on his next ball and where it must go.*

*Tenth frame, second ball. Strike!*

*The cries from all corners of the bowling alley reverberate for several seconds, only to be stifled by a crazed, collective tension that is bursting with anticipation, and a measure of dread, too.*

*This is it: make or break.*

*Tenth frame, final ball...*

*The pin boy behind the wall between Lanes 7 and 8 wipes the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. It's been hot work tonight, jumping down from his perch to reset the pins in Lane 8. He grins as he dares to dream of a tip.*

*Yuki, Rosie's best friend on the team, is also sweating. His heart races, he feels dizzy and he has to sit down. Rosie has never bowled better than he has tonight, but...can he really pull it off?*

*As for Rosie, his head is clear; he knows it's time; he knows it's his time. He wipes his hands on the small towel that travelled with him to Montreal all the way from Tashme, then picks up a ball and raises it to chest level. He takes a moment to listen to his breathing; it's steady. He swings his arm back, and then swiftly, smoothly, purposefully, he glides with his whole body into his forward swing and releases the ball.*

*The ball never wavers; it thunders straight down the centre line of the sixty feet of golden, varnished boards in Lane 8 and crashes into the head pin, sending it and all the other pins flying. STRIKE!*

*The jubilation in the McGill Alleys is unrestrained, and the resulting din rings in Rosie's ears. Rosie's heart takes a joyous leap, and he is swept up in the adulation that encircles him, fuels him and fills him with a feeling that is very close to love.*

## Untitled Haikus

I  
Hiroshima shadows leave behind new silhouettes

*Previously published in Haiku Canda Review Anthology, 2021*

II  
swish of the whisk  
green foam clings  
to Mum's tea bowl

*Previously published in Haiku Canada Anthology, 2018*

## Memory

When asked, she looked down,  
"I buried the pottery..  
I thought I'd be back."

## Approach

shikata ga nai  
was heard through the halls and tight mouths -  
it is what it is

# Content Warning

The following piece explores the theme of suicide.

## My Bachan's Smile

I can picture my Bāchan's smile, it is perhaps the brightest thing I have ever seen. When she smiles, it is as if her whole body lights up, not just her mouth or her eyes. She has been through more than I will ever know, but still her smile shines brightly, the definition of resourcefulness and resilience. But I know that just about everyone thinks their grandmother is an amazing person and the world really is full of amazing grannies (maybe it's a requirement for the position). So I won't waste your time telling you about why my grandmother just happens to be #1 on that list.

Sometimes though, I wished she had passed down that smile to us and that steadfast hold on life that seems to come with it. It would have been useful...

My brother tried to end his life a few times. I remember sitting in a run-of-the-mill coffee and doughnuts shop after one of those times. He was at the front, placing his order and my mother was telling me about how this hadn't been the first time. I remember those words destroyed me and even if just for a moment, the world ceased to exist. I remember the tears that streamed from my eyes as I sat there. I was mad, at my mother but more at myself. How had it come to this and where had I been? I mean I had been there physically speaking, but it must have been just a shell of an existence. I had been gone too long.

Now though, I can see flickers of my Bāchan when my brother smiles and I know that it was never anything that she could have passed down to us, at least not directly. They weren't born with their smiles, they are the products of their pain, the products of a life wholeheartedly lived. They are the scars of their resilience. Yet for a scar, they shine so bright.

## Ojiichan

Once there, no longer  
The Kunitachi City  
Lonely without you

Guilt is a dark, furry creature who lives at the base of my skull.

She's lived here for a while now,  
quietly watching my life unfold.

She always stays silent,  
but I can feel her breathing.

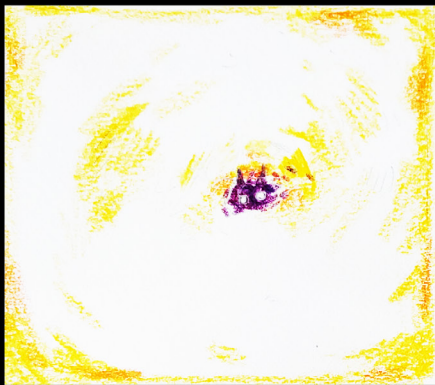
Sometimes, when I know I've gotten  
away with too much, she expands,  
filling the empty cavity of my chest  
with shadowy fur,

extending her long tail into my hollow arms,

right down to my fingertips.

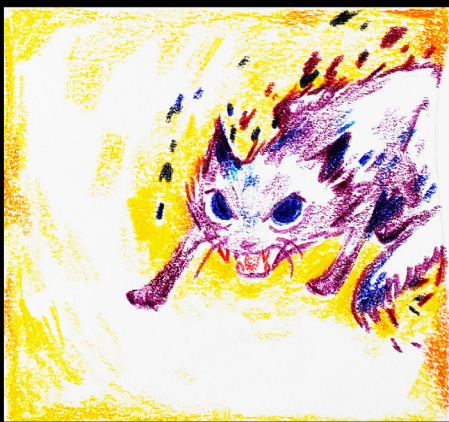
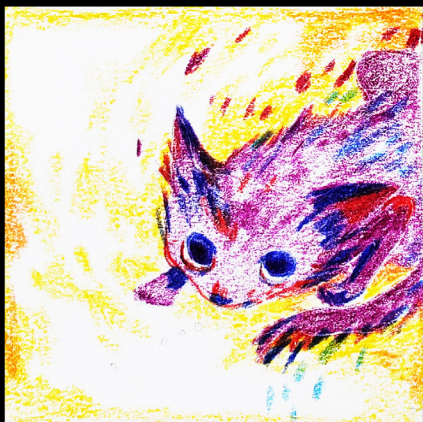
The more I avoid,  
the heavier she gets.

I wait for her, gently.



Coaxing her out.

I name her, giving her a shape.



(here, kitty kitty.)

(she trusts that I'm not going to hurt her.)



And slowly, cautiously,  
she peers out from my eye-shaped windows.

## Excerpt from “Miss Tokyo”

I am not quiet or demure: yakamashi not yasashii. I’m too restless to sit still or hold my tongue. Like my Japanese grandfather and German father, I’ve always believed language should be spoken plainly and to the point. Years of working in television taught me to be brief, if not blunt. I never got the hang of this “inside and outside face” prevalent in the JC community. My straightforward and stubborn character made it difficult for me to maintain different personas: one for inside the home with family and close friends, and another one for outside in the public at large.

My non-Asian work colleagues might say they found me too serious, overly formal, cold even. I had grown used to roaming, moving around in different circles. I never liked saying goodbye, so I never really said hello. I may have excelled in the mainstream workforce as a reliable employee with a solid work ethic but being a woman—an ethnic woman—became an impediment and limited my options.

When I retreated to the Japanese community, I was at times considered brash and abrasive, a pariah: I boldly looked my elders in the eyes and did not bow my head or lower my gaze. I spoke directly, not in a high-pitched, sing-song or chirpy manner, but in my frank alto. Outspoken and willing to argue about something I believed in, I refused to be silenced or dismissed.

I became indignant when dealing with that dying breed of older Japanese men who spoke to us young women like we were children or patted us on the head like we were dogs.

For people like my grandparents, the old ways mattered. There were rules to be followed, traditions observed, status quo maintained, and strict hierarchies of rank and position. My ancestors knew their place and what was expected of them. Every generation feels compelled by responsibility to pass on their legacy in some way—this pride, duty and accountability. As a young woman, I resisted their lessons and rejected the notion I should carry on as they did. After all, to be a Japanese woman in the patriarchy

placed you at the bottom of the tier, and a biracial woman much lower than that.

For years, I tried to discard these teachings only to realize much later how much a part of me they actually were. Growing up, our days were infused with duality; my Japanese heritage a double-edged sword: A centuries-long, rich history full of both honour and inequity cloaked in cultural traditions.

As much as I love my family, instead of transforming into a graceful swan, I grew into an angry young woman once I realized: I was a second-class citizen. My own achievements were diminished by those whom I held most dear. Regardless of any effort, whatever my accomplishments—because of my gender, I was not the one who mattered. Only the men counted. I had always prided myself on being the first grandchild to graduate from university, until that time when Grandma proudly boasted that Bryan was the first grandchild to graduate.

“Don’t you remember Grandma, I was the first. . .” I began.

Annoyed she brushed aside my interruption and continued,

“Yes, he was the first *grandson*.”

Her words cut me to the core.

Like succession lines in Japan, the highest status in many families is granted to the first-born male. Never mind how many women came before or after. For the men in my family, their goals are considered more worthwhile, accomplishments deemed worthier of note and their pursuits of much greater importance. That was just the way things were—and to some degree still are.

Recently my sister Dee confided to me: “growing up, I never felt like I mattered to anyone.”

“You mattered to us.” I said.

When my grandfather was alive, as the head of the household, he always sat at the head of the table; no one ever considered sitting in his chair, his spot. Starting with him, the men were always served first. The male relatives, including the non-Japanese husbands and friends, flocked to the choice seats flanking Grandpa to enjoy this preferential treatment as honoured guests.

Behind this show of deference another power structure lay: the rigid rule of women. The true heart of any home is always the kitchen. And for us girls, conscription to kitchen began at an early age. Pressed into service like the generations of women who came before us, we must toil and serve to fulfill our lifetime of duty: Roll the sushi, present the food, pour the tea, wash the dishes. Unlike my male cousins, depending on my skill, status and aptitude, I'm expected to run through the trenches from kitchen prep to head cook, to be assigned to event planning and hostess duties, entrusted to do the shopping or relegated to the cleaning crew.

Somehow domestic servitude came to represent family loyalty. This idea was imposed on us and determined our worth above other contributions. Compelled by love and respect, I continue help of my own volition. In my mind, loyalty means putting other's needs ahead of one's own, acting out of love. Not from an embittered position of malice or the false face of martyred duty—a show of effort only for the sake of appearance. There were enough women doing just that.

The older women in my family and the JC community at large may have accepted their roles with honour and grace. For others like myself, this lack of freedom and autonomy will never sit straight. Even if we shared the pain and experience of being considered second-rate in our own homes, instead of supporting one another or banding together—as women and girls we often worked against each other.

Pity any Asian woman who fails on the home front. For it is here, in the household, where women are judged. Not by the men, but by the other women.

## Tadaima

I've run away again  
The old familiar house is gone  
With my childhood memories  
Dad grabs an apple before dinner  
Mom is cooking dried mushrooms for sushi  
I shouted, It stinks and slammed the door  
But the ghosts smiled  
Tadaima, I whispered

## Black and White Photographs

Unravelling items from the steamer trunk, was a boxful of photos of my parents. My mother arriving on the Hikawa Maru a young bride in 1937. Many photos of the newly married couple taken at Stanley Park, or in front of their home, Granville Island or Kitsilano Beach. To honour the visit by King George VI and Queen Elizabeth to Vancouver, spring of 1939, I am holding a small Union Jack flag, I am a few months old, sitting in a pram.

Kitsilano Beach, here I am, a toddler sitting on a rock holding a beach bucket and shovel, my mother sitting beside me. My father has taken the photo. Happy memories, happy times, 1937 to 1941.

A beautiful photo taken professionally of my mother and father walking along a street in Vancouver. My father is holding a wrapped package under his arm. He had just registered with the British Columbia Securities Commission and received his army blanket. Destination unknown us. My father has hand written the date, March 1942.

Another photo showing my father handling our baggage while I am standing behind him dressed smartly in a woollen blue coat, trimmed in navy velveteen that my mother had sewn. We appear to be on a platform ready to depart with the others.

I grew up haunted by flashbacks, visions of caged bars. I asked my mother in later years what this meant. She explained that she and I were assigned a cage at Hastings Park and lived there until she and I were assigned to a new destination, New Denver. As a child I never questioned this. As an adult I questioned this, she didn't want to discuss it.

I went on the Japanese Internment Camp Tour in July 2019. I had been on one earlier but this tour started at Hastings Park. I arrived in Vancouver a day earlier so that I could find Kitsilano Beach. I walked along the beach, sat on a couple of rocks. It was very emotional, knowing my parents had spent many happy hours there.

I took photos of cages housed in Hastings Park at the start of the tour. Interesting that now, the visions don't frighten me. I understand. I wish I could tell my mother.

The tour took me to New Denver where I had the opportunity to walk around on my own. Photos of girls clad in kimonos on the highway signage. I am in the first row as a child of five years old.

I have a photo of myself sitting on a blanket with a teenage girl on a beach at Slocan Lake. Seventy six years later, I found myself on the beach of the Lake and took myself back to those happy days.

Precious photos also of the Takashima sisters and cousins in front of our house whom we had shared a kitchen. Memories of Shizuye (Shi chun) Takashima, 11 years old and I sitting on a stoop in front of our house and her reading to me, sometimes they were only pamphlets. She became a successful watercolor artist and wrote Child in a Prison Camp. I am Kayko in the book.

The tour continued on to Tashme where we moved to because my father had decided to take the opportunity offered by the government to move back to Japan.

Six years old, but vivid memories of open paneled trucks leaving with families heading to Vancouver to their final destination, Japan. Families waving goodbye. How can anyone erase the memory of Hotalu no Hikali, playing over the loudspeakers.

On the last day of our tour, the archivist, tour guide touched on roadcamps. I was fascinated with the topic because my father mentioned it and I had found a handwritten piece of paper with some dates and sites. Lempriere being one. I questioned him and he gave a vague explanation that it was the name of a roadcamp. She mentioned Lempriere as one of the roadcamps. I asked her for further information.

As soon as I returned back home to Mississauga, I stayed up all night researching sites that mentioned Lempriere. I found a

newspaper clipping and to my surprise, there was a photo of my father sitting with his road gang. A large, clear photo jumped out at me.

It was very emotional. I broke down and cried. 77 years later, I found out where my father was sent to and the loneliness and hardship he must have faced.

I contacted the newspaper editor immediately to tell him that I had just returned from a tour and was moved to find the article that brought some closure to what had happened to my father. Regrets? If only I could sit at their kitchen table again, Japanese spoken, with my mother and father openly reflecting on their past, getting answers to questions.

Internment life 1942 to 1948. I am grateful to be able to share rich memories, stories, and photographs with my children and grandchildren who are intrigued by my history and have many questions.

## To My Father:

Had you remained in Kagoshima  
where you were cock of the walk,  
Strutting strong and proud,  
Your plumage eye catching,  
Instead of migrating to this foreign shore,  
A suspect species,  
Nineteen years old, feathers moulting  
In the unfamiliar clime.  
Would you have become  
This father—silent and morose?  
Beyond the reach of a child  
Yearning for attention,  
Ruffling the feathers  
Of a once proud bird,  
Stirring the embers  
Of smouldering rage.

## My Legacy

I am the lost generation  
Born after the internment  
Striving to belong  
In a white world,  
Always being asked  
“What are you?”  
I am the lost generation  
Shaped by the shame  
Of a past shrouded in secrecy  
By well intentioned parents,  
Who did not know  
That shame is corrosive,  
Eroding one’s sense of self,  
Leaving emptiness behind.  
I am the lost generation  
Struggling to reclaim an identity  
Stolen from my parents  
By a country that saw them  
Only as the enemy—  
Not Canadian.

## Fragments of Memory: Fragment One

I would have been in grade three. One morning, violent opening of a sliding door to my bedroom woke me up. I saw my mother standing in the doorway. I then heard her say:

“Get up right this instant and come to the living room.”

I glanced at a clock beside my bed. It was five. I should have been asleep for another two hours. I was never a morning person, and it always took me a great deal of effort to leave my futon, especially in Winter. But I sensed from the quality of my mother’s voice that morning that it wasn’t an option for me to take my time to muster up the courage to leave the warmth I managed to finally create in between layers of heavy blankets piled on me. I didn’t understand why she woke me up so early, and felt discombobulated. She yelled at me to come to the living room immediately, and left. I managed to get out of bed, sensing the urgency, and stumbled over to the living room. She made me sit down right in front of her on my knees. Soon we were sitting across from each other with our knees folded in tense knots. I’d seen the scene like this in a samurai drama: a father and son sitting like this when the son was in deep trouble.

My mother said that she had finally found out what I had been doing in my room lately. To the right of where she was sitting, there was a pile of papers and notebooks. They were a mix of tasteful colors of pink, yellow, indigo, and green. Some had floral patterns on the reverse side. Some others had hearts drawn all over them, by me. I chose them carefully. I wanted them to be aesthetically pleasing to look at. I spent my allowance on them. I have never spent so much money on some pieces of paper before or after that incident. I had carefully stashed them away into the depth of the drawer of my desk.

My mother told me that she had read all those letters I had written and the letters I had received from Shooji-kun. She said that the content of those letters was absolutely inappropriate for grade three kids to be writing about, even thinking about. She said it

was disgusting, and absolutely abominable. She told me to burn them all this morning. She also told me that I was not allowed to engage in such repulsive exchanges ever again.

I didn't say a word. I couldn't. I gathered up all the letters in my hand, went outside, put them in a front yard, and torched them. They burned disappointingly easily and turned into ashes in a matter of seconds. I observed the untimely frost on the hardened soil. I learned then that important secrets must be hidden away in places more secure than drawers of my desk. The holders of secrets cannot have physical and visible existence, because anyone can see them and eventually figure them out. Some people are so attune to discovering other people's secrets that they can practically sniff out where secrets are hidden. The best place to hide them is in me, and it is important also not to let anyone know that I have any secrets in the first place. Because there are always people who, as soon as they sense that I do or I might, launch an assault on me with prying questions and strategic invitations to open my heart to them so as to expose and take possession of such secrets. They do this with dogged determination because to know my secrets is the best way to manipulate me and bring me to submission.

My mother had passed away ten years ago on March 26, 2011. I would say it was a premature death. She was only 69 years old. For a Japanese woman, that's considered a prime age for her second life. I was planning with my partner to invite her to go on a trip to the West Coast of Canada in the summer of that year. She had often talked about taking a special train which goes through the Canadian Rockies from Calgary to Vancouver, or vice versa. It would have been the perfect thing for us to do together, with her grandson and all. Because for one, her wish would have been granted and I would have been the person who helped her dream come true, and for another, she would not have come anywhere near my closets or drawers where she could have easily been tempted to peek, to find out what I had really been doing all those years. But the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake, which changed the lives of so many people, put an abrupt end to my dreaming.

For the first few years after my mother's departure, I was terrified that she then had an ultimate "bird's-eye view" of my life. Up to the moment in which my mother suffered an aneurysm that eventually killed her, her mind was sharp. I was afraid that, with that sharp mind, she might be surmising all kinds of things, mostly negative of course, about me based on what I had tacked away not only in my closets and drawers but also in myself. Then one day, I had a dream. In it, my mother stood there in the dark without saying anything. She was holding a little girl's hand. I recognized the girl. I've seen her in an old family photo album.

Since then, I've been able to confide in my mother my secrets as they develop in real time. I'm still unable to tell her my past secrets, except for what I've written above, but I figure she requires no telling now.

## Fireflies

何処へ行く我が家を越えし一螢火  
doko e iku waga ie o koeshi ichi hotarubi

A single firefly light trails  
right over our house—  
where will it fly to?

When I was little, all the dreams I could remember seemed to be set at my Grandma's house.

It was set into a hillside amidst the apple orchards west of Norval, Ontario, and built by grandfather and my uncles in their spare time. By the time I was born, it was surrounded by gardens – flowers of all sorts near the house, with cedars and a big vegetable patch just down the hill.

My parents and I lived hours away, and only got to visit occasionally. But the memories are still vivid: the soft glow of Christmas lights. The sleepy little creek where Grandma and I lured minnows with bits of instant oatmeal. The pocket transistor radio under the coffee table that Grandpa listened to Blue Jays games on. The basement, full of faded floral scents from Grandma's dried flower arrangements. The creepy dead-end hallways behind the fireplaces, one on each floor, where the stairs had originally been planned to go.

And once, venturing out with Mum and Grandma to see fireflies in the meadow next door. We even caught a couple of them in a jar and watched them through Grandma's big magnifying glass, before letting them sail off again. (I've still got that magnifying glass. It's a bit dented, but it's a really good one.)

己が灯を炎やしきつたる砂螢  
ono ga hi o moyashi kitsutaru suna botaru

On the sand,  
its own fire consumed,  
a firefly.

Mum was startled to learn that her mother wrote haiku, and had been writing for years. Grandma had always been reluctant to share her poems with the family, or to try to explain them in her halting English, but finally published them in book form.

After Grandma passed away, Mum set about translating all those poems, wrestling with the unfamiliar grammar and pre-war spellings to create her own renderings. There are a lot of poems about snow. And there are several about fireflies.

Mum died four years ago today. Just a few days before she passed, she looked up thoughtfully from her hospital bed and said, "You should go look for fireflies."

I hadn't seen a firefly in years. My partner and I had just moved to Hamilton after spending a couple of decades in Toronto, and our house just happened to be near a park. Late that night, I walked with our dog Mae, through the trees and past tall grasses and weeds. And there they were: dozens of little stars blinking away high in the trees. I stood and watched for what must have been an hour, laughing and crying at the same time.

Every night for weeks, there were more and more fireflies, lighting up the park, and even our backyard.

I told Mum and thanked her. She just smiled.

草むらに点りし螢とびたてり  
kusamura ni chirishi hotaru tobitateri

Fireflies float away,  
becoming dots of light  
over the old field.

