
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Amy Uyematsu: Three Poems

Amy Uyematsu · Sunday, June 28th, 2020

On My Way to J-Town

1. At San Pedro & Second

He walks toward me,
right down the center of this
crowded street, daring drivers
who swerve out of his way.
I am stopped at the signal.
He rushes toward me,
glaring hard as he removes
his wool cap to slap my hood.
He's homeless but unlike
the others, whose eyes
are dazed, he feels menacing.
Little Tokyo seems to be his turf,
and he's not the least bit happy
seeing another car with
a Japanese face like mine.

2. Waiting to Cross Main

In his forties, or even fifties,
a homeless man who looks Asian –
perhaps from Laos or Cambodia –
in a city where most who wander
the streets are not Asian
and push shopping carts
almost too heavy to move.
But this man's arms are free –
over his heavy coat,
a long bunch of five or six

carefully enlaced plastic
bags dangle from each
shoulder – everything he needs
in this life just light
enough to carry.

3. By City Hall

The light's turned green but
traffic has stopped. Who finally
emerges is a man on a bicycle,
slowly making his way across
First Street but going in circles.
Once he reaches the sidewalk,
he keeps riding in loops
while we all move on.
“Just another crazy” is what
many think, but I can't
forget him, wonder about
all the wars we're fighting –
especially these latest assaults,
the undeniable dread
that's spreading within us –
as we try to go on
with our regular lives,
knowing the very idea of
normal has become
so distorted a man
biking in circles
and holding up traffic
makes perfect
and welcome sense.

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The Suitcase

– a Manzanar tale

In 1945 Dad and Grandpa
get a travel permit from Manzanar
officials to visit Star Nurseries,
the business Grandpa starts
back in the 30s and flourishes
even in the Depression years.
They take a bus bound for L.A.

Stopping in the small town
of Mojave, Dad tells
Grandpa to stay on the bus –
knowing the war is still
being fought and how
dangerous it is for them –
but Grandpa gets off anyway.

Like many issei, Grandpa
is short – 5’2” at the most –
not exactly threatening,
but as he walks downtown
the cops arrest him, put
Grandpa and Dad in jail
to spend the night.

Around 2 AM FBI agents
pick them up and drive
them to Fresno, never
suspecting the hatchet
Grandpa packs in his suitcase,
the hatchet not so unusual for
this gifted plant grower.

Dad recalls how dark it is
on the winding mountain roads.
Already nervous, he starts to panic
when one of the agents turns on
the light inside the car, looks
hard at both of them
sitting in the back seat.

Dad warns Grandpa, speaking
in Japanese, “Don’t do anything
to make them suspicious.”
The FBI never inspects the suitcase.
Once in Fresno, they are questioned
then put back on a bus to L.A. –
Grandpa’s hatchet in tow.

Note: Manzanar was one of the ten concentration camps for 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II.

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Voracious

– for my sister poets

I wouldn't call you flamboyant
well maybe a little bit wild
the same gluttonous glint
in your eye, a throbbing
from eardrum to womb

no matter how small
you keep singing
the moment
scraps of shimmer and dream
that you scribble and store

you live for the click
when it all comes together
your guts and your brain
in such hard-earned
effortless breath

until dark bleeds
into light
so luminous the lines
sweet incantations
kissing the tongue

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