

WHY I REMEMBER . . .

By Dana Mariko Kawaoka

Dedicated to: Johnny, my future children, and all those who question why I remember.

You ask me why I remember
 "bad things of 50 years ago."
"Move on," you tell me,
 "Let that excess baggage go."
But so much of me has already been forgotten,
 so much of me already lost.
If I forget any more,
 I will cease to exist, and at such a high cost.

To forget is to deny that it could happen again,
 to deny that it could happen to me.
Just like Grandma, I could be carted off,
 and behind barbed wire is where I'll be.
To forget is to deny that nothing has changed,
 racist attitudes still prevail.
The year is 1996,
 but you wouldn't believe that from looking at Pete Wilson's campaign trail.

I still feel the legacy of camp,
 I still feel the hate.
I'm still a "Jap,"
 has that sealed my fate?
If I forget, what will happen to my children?
 Will they be told Internment didn't exist?
Will it be denied like it was all one big lie,
 or some government twist?

This is why I remember.
I remember because:
a language was lost,
a culture was tossed,
my family was suspected,
racist attitudes were resurrected,
people like me became the enemy,
black hair,
brown eyes,
yellow skin,
hey, that's me,
am I the enemy?
Or just a political pawn,
the "model minority?"

I remember because:
You've already forgotten,
 and had the nerve to ask.
Who are you-
 Yes you, the one behind the teacher's mask.

You, who teaches me my history
 from a perspective I can't understand,
making it all seem like a mystery,
 as if it happened in a far off land.
This is why I remember,
 because I can't trust you,
Facts are never right,
 and the truth misconstrued.

I remember because:
I wasn't mentioned in history books,
 "America" wasn't meant for people like me.
Instead I get dirty looks,
 as if I shouldn't reign free.
I've been exoticized,
 like some foreign creature,
Exploited sex, my only supposed feature.
 This is why I remember,
so I can end notions like this,
 make a change for the better,
stop the stereotypical abyss.

I remember because:
I'm not supposed to speak "good English"
 yet it's always a surprise that I do.
I remember because:
I wasn't allowed to speak Japanese
 yet everyone expects me to.
I remember because:
Many say I'm "too American"
 Yeah, well I wish something was said at the time
Then, I was "too Japanese,"
 As if that was a crime!
I remember because: the constitution failed us
 certain inalienable rights.
I remember because:
They just want us to "grin and bear it,"
 yeah, well, I'm tired of being polite.

So this is why I remember,
 All those "bad things of 50 years ago."
It's because they don't stop haunting me,

even if I wish it to be so.
Instead, I burn with this legacy,
and it prods me to remember and fight.
Hopefully, it will never happen again,
unless you blow out that light!

DON'T FORGET!!!

REMEMBER!!!

This poem was written while Dana was a student attending the University of California, Santa Cruz. "Why I Remember" has received awards in the 1997 "Growing Up Asian in America" Essay Contest and in the 1997 Visual Ink Student Guide Poetry Contest.

Dana Kawaoka is a fourth-generation Japanese American who came into consciousness in the 8th grade upon reading in her school-issued text book that, "Japanese Americans were interned during World War II for their safety." Shocked and appalled at the distortion of her community's history half a century later, Dana has worked the last 15 years to learn and share the experiences of Japanese Americans in the U.S. In 1999, Dana co-founded the NOSEI Network, a progressive Japanese and Japanese American network dedicated to political change through the creation of safe spaces and meaningful roles by actively engaging in a community building process. Currently, Dana serves as the Executive Director of Public Allies Silicon Valley which advances diverse young leaders to strengthen communities, non-profits, and civic participation.