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Transforming the Insult

In 1991 my husband returned to Canada from Iraq where he had been a UN Military Observer. He'd been sent to monitor the ceasefire which ended the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. He'd been in Iraq only three weeks in the summer of 1990, working in the south near the Iraq-Kuwait border, when Iraq invaded Kuwait. The next half-year was a nightmare for our family. We were out of contact, and it was only months later, when Ted was moved to Baghdad, that he was able to phone—even then, by grace or accident. It did not take long for him to learn that when the Muslim telephone operator left for prayers she could not disconnect his calls so he tried to time any attempt to phone home with the call to prayer. The first words he would say to me would be: "Do not criticize the present government. Do not criticize its leader." Everything we said to each other was, of course, recorded. Usually, we were disconnected almost immediately so we had to cram information and family news into the first few breathless moments. Only once were we left alone ten or fifteen minutes, and so amazing was this, we began to be carelessly reckless, even allowing ourselves to waste precious phone time. We even allowed ourselves to laugh.

The night before Baghdad was bombed, Ted and the last three remaining Canadian Observers were evacuated to Amman and then to Cyprus. I immediately joined him in Cyprus, the only country close to the conflict that was accepting international flights during the Gulf War. The only airline flying at the time was Swiss Air. Two bombs exploded in Larnaca the day before I arrived but I stayed there—just outside the city, for a month. In March, I brought Ted home from the war.

I wish I could say that that was the last time I brought my husband home from a war but it isn't. I've just returned from Croatia where I lived for over two months, between July and September, 1993. Ted has been working in Bosnia for ten months and was transferred to Croatia from Sarajevo for the remainder of the one-year posting. Again, most of the year, we've been out of contact. The day he phoned to say he was out of Bosnia, I purchased a ticket to Croatia. It's too hard, too stressful to live this way. And he was suffering the terrible aftermath of coming off the front lines, the terrible feeling of betrayal— leaving others behind. The victims of war. Families and friends in Sarajevo. He'd been shot at, kidnapped, his bedroom destroyed by mortars, and he'd been under constant attack by snipers. The ethnic background of his attackers varied. The Russian plane in which he was flown to Sarajevo, his first day in Bosnia, took a bullet through the cabin, entering on the pilot's side and exiting inches from the head of the navigator. They were coming in for landing so there was no sudden decompression. They landed safely.

And yet, and yet, all the while, Ted and I both know that during this long and terrible year he has been doing valuable and practical work. Helping. Saving. Getting food, clothing, water, medicine to refugees. To babies, children, women, the elderly, the innocent. Helping individuals get their papers in order. Helping towns and villages with safe water supply. Offering hope and interest in people's lives when there is no hope left. I've listened to the stories. I ask questions. He sends me his personal journals from the field. I follow these histories to the finish. I want to know every detail. I follow these histories to the finish. I want to know every detail. I want to know it all.

Why am I writing this? What is this to say? It is to say that I have intimate knowledge of the work this man has quietly done for his country, our country. I know the kind of unofficial ambassador he is and has been. In Iraq, Iran, Bosnia, Croatia, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Germany, Afghanistan-Pakistan. I've met some of his civilian and military co-workers; I know the respect he has earned. I see the kind of personal mail that follows him from post to post.

Ted is third generation Canadian-born Japanese, *Sansei*. He was born in Ucluelet and at the age of two-and-a-half, was interned in Lillooet where he spent seven years, 1942-49, as a prisoner of the Second World War. His family has lived in this country more generations than my own English and Irish ancestors. I have walked beside him on the street in Montreal and listened to a stranger ask, in ignorance, "How long ya' been over?" I have seen

a fellow officer with whom he'd worked for years call him by another's Japanese name because the man was not capable of differentiating Ted's face from the one other Japanese officer this man knew. I have watched Ted internalize overt blatant racist gestures and remarks. We have a family joke about the 'mask'—the face that neither reveals nor acknowledges the insult. But where, I ask myself, where does the insult go? How is it transformed?

Of course, I am going to write about this. How could I not? The experience of our mixed marriage, our now twenty-five-year marriage, seeps sideways into my work. It comes from inside now. My husband's family is my family. We have two bi-racial adult children. His ancestors are their ancestors.

In the fall of 1991, after our long separation during Ted's Iraq assignment, we decided to drive across the country, east to west, taking our time, using extra leave, visiting family and friends in British Columbia. W.O. Mitchell and Merna had for years invited us to join them to fish salmon at their Shuswap cottage, so we headed there for a couple of weeks and later, continued to the Okanagan.

We entered B.C. at a northerly point, and worked our way south from Prince George. As soon as we began to drive through B.C., I knew that something was terribly wrong. I knew it was racism but didn't know how I knew that. We hadn't travelled there for a number of years; perhaps things had changed, and changed again. At a home in the Cariboo, during a party (where only two of about thirty individuals were Japanese), the feeling of enmity in the room was palpable. We moved closer together and laughed. We stopped to buy our salmon licences the next day and as we entered the store, conversation ceased. There was something, something that could not quite be addressed, not quite articulated. Then, we arrived at the Mitchells' cottage and the episodes were forgotten while we were among close friends.

Later, we continued our journey. In Kelowna, the racism was so obvious I could not understand why I could not articulate it. I could not say what I, at Ted's side, was experiencing *with him*, this time.

A writer's disease is that she/he has to put everything into words. *What is it? What is it?*, I kept saying. I couldn't leave it alone. Are people staring? Do they...do they...I could not get it exactly right.

About four days after we'd been visiting his sister in Kelowna, I sat upright in bed in the middle of the night and woke my husband. "I know

what it is," I told him. "I know now what I've been trying to articulate. We've become invisible."

My brief experience that month in British Columbia only *two years ago* offered a small insight, perhaps even an understanding, of what my husband experiences every day of his life. I am thankful that I know even that small part. And of course, once I began to understand, it was easy to watch for. There's nothing startling and nothing subtle about this type of racism. People avert their eyes on the streets, in supermarkets, in restaurants, in the parks. We become invisible.

In a restaurant our last night in Kelowna, the two of us hosted the family for dinner. There were seventeen present, from 3 to 91 years in age. The waitress brought menus, returned a few minutes later, ignored the entire party and addressed me—the one 'white face' in the group. "Are you ready to put in the order?" she said. Assuming that I was the spokesperson for the sixteen Japanese.

It is not difficult to see why the literary art of Canadian Japanese deals with this experience, collectively and individually. This is true of our country and of the United States. not *all* art by and about descendants of Japanese immigrants, not *all* literature, but the history has to be written before the future can be imagined. I believe this is the state of this particular literature in Canada right now. In transition. Moving away from the preoccupation of the internment—that deep terrible lesson in what can happen, what did happen—towards some middle space. Where other 'present' possibilities exist. Where the first forty-five years of the century will not have to be carried along as baggage into the art of the next century, and the century after that. I am hopeful. I always carry hope.

Sometimes the impulse to make fiction comes before any necessary research; sometimes research around a particular topic stimulates fiction. I have a wonderful library of early Japanese-Canadian books and histories and I've read my share of microfilm. It was during a visit to East Lillooet—then, a bulldozed field—during the late sixties, when one of these random (perhaps not so random) impulses to make fiction occurred. A writer doesn't know how things are going to turn out, only that a particular detail of information is and is going to be significant. Something about the detail is recognized and stored for later connection—at least that's the

way I work. It is the meaningful connection that is the unknown. But if the writer trusts, it will be there. And a writer learns, over many years, to trust her/his instincts.

What I was seeing was the transformation of the man I was married to, in the midst of an abandoned field where no proof of human habitation was visible. Not a road, not a path, not a fragment of building or piece of shingle or pebble of cement. We were on the East side of the Fraser; the Japanese had not been allowed in the town of Lillooet, across the river, during the early years of the war. Suddenly, Ted was on his knees, digging in the earth. He'd recognized patterns in the grass, outlining parameters of earth cellars below invisible shacks, sixty-three of them, the contours of which he held only in his mind. An entire community had once lived here. His feet had taken him unerringly to his own family's square—indelibly stored in memory. He'd been nine years old when the family had left.

He began to dig. I went to the wood and returned with branches and the two of us scraped away the earth at the location he insisted was his own. Moments later we began to find dishes. Splendid blue and white china rice bowls, large fragments we were able to piece together. Later, we drove to Westbank, on Okanagan Lake, to visit Ted's parents, and we showed his Mother what we'd found. We were very excited about this. She remained silent, walked to her kitchen cupboard, and opened the door. She pulled out pieces that were an identical match to those we'd found in the earth. A glued-together rice bowl, missing one triangular piece of rim, is now in our *tokonoma*, our special corner, in our Ottawa home.

During the mid-seventies, when our children were young, and we were living in New Brunswick, I wrote this Lillooet experience into a poem called, "The Camp Revisited—1976," told from the point of view of an old woman, returning. Dorothy Livesay bought the poem for *CVII* (December 1976) and wrote to me about her own *Call My People Home*, a copy of which I have in first edition from The Ryerson Press, 1950. The poem inspired Takashima's art for the cover of my 1978 book of poems, *No Other Lodgings*: the broken rice bowl against the digs at Lillooet, on the Fraser.

It is not often that I write about the Canadian Japanese in my fiction and I never set out intentionally to do so. When I write, I come in from the side, so to speak, and try to pick up a dangling thread. I try, always, to be conscious of one of the things I've learned from Chekhov: Don't be judgmental. Only present.

In 1991, during our post-Iraq visit to British Columbia, I was having dinner at my Mother-in-law's senior citizen's apartment in Kelowna. She is now a widow. The family had gathered; we were celebrating, eating *tempura* and salmon; catching up, telling stories to one another. My husband and I had not visited for a long time.

And then, the unexpected happened. What every writer watches and waits for. My husband's older brother began to tell me the story of 'the burning of the dolls,' an event that took place the night before the family was forced from their seaside home in Ucluelet in 1942. He was amazed that I didn't know. But my husband had been only two-and-a-half years old at the time. He remembered other, later events. He had never heard about the dolls. After listening to the story, I found myself taking notes, asking questions, digging, digging into personal lives. Unwillingly, yet inescapably I was launched into another partial year of research, mostly interviewing *Nisei* and *Sansei* in B.C. and Ontario, learning more about their wartime experiences. I had thought I was finished writing about that period, finished with that history. But the stored moment of human exchange from that small Kelowna apartment, across the kitchen table, was too powerful. The story was too intense. My own fiction began to grow as prose in voices, each story told by a different member of one created family. What I had to do was to shape and form, to create what I believed were feelings, well concealed, behind the told events.

Neither my brother-in-law in the telling of that one story, nor I in the later writing, could have foreseen the startling drawing Takashima would later do for *The Canadian Forum* (July/August 1992). The drawing accompanied an excerpt from my fictionalized "Flashcards" which included 'the burning of the dolls.' The longer piece is in my forthcoming book, *Man Without Face* (Spring 1994).

Once again, I think I am finished writing this experience. I have closed the door, but I have not set the lock. At the moment I am working on a book of stories set in Duplessis's Quebec during the fifties. My husband has to return for a short time to Croatia, where he will continue to represent our country—quietly—perhaps, to some, even invisibly. He and our relatives and our Japanese friends have told me their stories without bitterness and without complaint. I see my part as a small part. Perhaps in my own way, I help to transform the insult. I am the storyteller. They want the story told.