

The Hymn of the Birds

By Joaquin Gossen

Dedicated to all the Japanese Canadians that went through the awful side of Canada.

The sun shined so brightly. The clouds drifted through the sky making way for flocks of birds. Akio imagined being a bird, flying to a place where his family could stay. And nobody would hate them in this place. That was what Akio wanted most of all; a place where he wasn't hated.

The train chugged along the tracks. All the people at the station were anxious to get on. About a day ago, Akio's dad was arrested. Akio knew that his dad was not a criminal, so when his mom said that he was leaving to go somewhere far away he did not understand.

Akio's mom was sick when they took them away. She was lying in bed. Akio was taught not to open the front door, in case someone threw a torch inside. When he opened the door they were all taken to the station. Every Japanese person was there. They stood there, at the station, for hours.

"DON'T MAKE ME TELL YOU AGAIN YOU STUPID JAPS, GET INTO THE TRAIN!" barked one officer. Everyone hurtled into a train car like cattle. His mother tried to climb up the stairs but people started shoving her. One man pushed so hard she fell down the stairs and hit her head on the concrete.

"AUGH!" she bellowed. One RCMP officer helped her up.

"Are you alright ma'am?" he asked.

She nodded. Then another officer came by.

"WHY WERE YOU HELPING THAT JAP?!" he exclaimed.

"She needed help." The officer smacked him on the head and pushed Akio's mother into the train. All the seats were taken so they had to stand.

"Madam, would you like to have my seat?" one man asked. She nodded and Akio and his mother sat down.

Akio woke up. His mother was asleep. They were still on the train. Two men who were standing beside Akio were talking.

“I cannot believe this. My father is off in an internment camp and I have to go plant sugar beets in dry fields.”

“I know Tojo, I don’t understand why. Just because some Japanese people bombed Pearl Harbor we all have to be punished. My family hasn’t been to Japan since 1901.”

Akio was confused. Pearl Harbor happened a few months ago and it was in the United States. Why was it that they be punished?

“If Japan wins the war, we will teach those Americans a lesson!” Tojo said angrily.

“Japan is counting on Hitler to win Britain. Once they do that, America will surrender Hawaii.”

“I hope Japan loses so that we can all just get this over with.” Tojo said wearily.

The whole train reeked of urine and sweat. The train smoke filled the car and people started hacking. Then the train stopped at a big open field somewhere near Raymond. The whole field was yellow. It was so dry outside. An RCMP officer opened the train car door and yelled, “ALL YOU FILTHY JAPS GET THE HECK OFF THIS TRAIN.” Everyone did, except for Akio’s mom who was sleeping. The officer pushed through the crowd to get to Akio’s seat. The officer grabbed Akio’s mother by her hair and threw her to the ground. The officer grabbed a baton and hit her over the head twice. Akio bawled.

“SHUT UP YOU STUPID FILTHY BABY KILLER!!” the officer shouted at Akio. His mother stood up and told Akio to get outside. Once they were outside they joined a crowd of Japanese people. An officer said, “WELCOME TO YOUR SUGAR BEET FARMS. YOU SURE AS HELL ARE NOT LEAVING THIS PLACE UNTIL THIS WAR IS OVER. FIND A SHACK AND THAT WILL BE WHERE YOU WILL STAY.”

All of the crowd started shuffling towards the shacks. Akio’s mom started walking and then fainted. Akio shouted “HELP!!!” A RCMP officer came by. He carried her to a shack with a big red door. He opened it and put her on a bed. “Take care of her.” the officer said.

Akio did not know why there were in the shack. It was boiling hot in there. Dead flies covered the floor, which had grass growing through the floorboards. Akio was tired, so he lied down on the floor and grabbed his suitcase. He opened it and took out a big red blanket. He tucked it over him and closed his eyes.

“Yesterday, December 7th, 1941 -- a date which will live in infamy -- the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by Naval and Air Forces of the

Empire of Japan.” The radio shouted. Akio was sitting in a chair listening to the radio with his father. Akio’s father put his head in his hands and cried.

Someone through a brick through the front door’s window making a huge mess on the floor.

Akio woke up. The flies on the ground were on his blanket. Akio stood very still. For 1 minute he did not move. He opened the door and ran. He ran up the hill that bordered the Farms. He saw a few RCMP people standing on the hill, making sure any Japanese people did not escape the internment camp. He then saw a Japanese man with two bags in his arms.

“Where is the money?” the guard asked.

“I...I am so sorry.” the man with the bag said.

“What did you do with it you filthy stupid no good dirty Jap!” the guard screamed. The guard grabbed his baton and beat the man repeatedly.

“I am getting it tomorrow. I promise...sir.”

“You will bring me that money and then...then I will think about giving you the freedom you want so bad.”

The man with the bags walked towards Akio.

“Why does he want your money?” Akio asked

“Why do you care?”

“I just want to know.”

The man with the bags turned around to face Akio.

“My name is Akira. He wants the money I am earning here to buy a car. If I give him the money I will be released.”

Akio was confused.

Akio worked the rest of the day. His mother was sleeping the whole day, and Akio had to plant the beet seeds. Akio thought of himself as a grape in the sun slowly turning into a raisin. He saw his life as the grape. One day the attack on Pearl Harbor started to turn that grape into a wrinkly raisin. Akio hated thinking about it.

Akio woke up the next day. He stood up to see his mother outside working with Akira. He stepped outside and asked mom what was happening.

“Akira has decided to help me plant the beet seeds.”

Akira told Akio’s mother to go back to bed and rest. Akira signaled for Akio to come closer. He whispered in Akio’s ear.

“Want to go have fun?”

Akio and Akira went to Akira’s shack. Akira grabbed his suitcase and opened it up. Inside were comics. Akira gave Akio a comic.
“Read it while I go work, okay?.” Akio nodded.

On the front cover was Captain America with his shield punching a man with long teeth, yellow skin and glasses. Above Captain America’s head was a speech bubble, which said: “You started it, Now-we’ll finish it.” Below was “Captain America vs. THE EVIL JAP.”

Akio was scared by it and turned to find another comic. In the suitcase were the titles *Captain America battles Hitler*, *Daredevil vs Hirohito*. Akio was shocked. He looked outside and saw Akira walking towards the hill where he had been yesterday. Akio followed. He saw the same guard standing in the same spot, Akira slowly approaching the guard.

“Do you have the money.” the guard asked.

“Yes.” Akira said
The guard handed Akira a cigarette. He lit it.

“Thanks.” Akira said.

“Now about that freedom.” the guard said raising his hand.
Akira stood slowly smoking.

Then, bullets ripped through his flesh, blood splattering all over his checkered shirt. The sound of gunfire echoed through the air. Akira laid dead. The guard counted the money and walked elsewhere. In the bushes was another guard with a machine gun. Akio was so scared he ran to his mother. But the door was closed. He tried to find the key under the doormat but it was not there. He looked through the window and saw the key on the floor of the shed. On the bed was Akio’s mother. She was lying still. She was very, very white. Her eyes were open, dead still. She did not move.

Akio knew that he had nothing to go back to. In the reflection of the window glass he saw the guard running towards him. Akio ran. He ran until the guard could not catch up. But Akio kept running. He ran up a big hill overlooking the farms. He ran to the top and ran down the other side. He ran and ran. He ran until he was far away from the camp. Then, Akio stood still, as the snow slowly fell. Akio cried. The snow was falling. It is spring, but the snow was falling. The snow fell and fell. Then, the snow stopped falling. The snow was free. It was not locked in the dark stormy cloud anymore. It was free. Akio was free. But Japan was not.

On August 6th 1945 a US bomber flew over the city of Hiroshima, Japan carrying the second atomic weapon ever created. The city below bustled until an air raid siren

went off. Within seconds the most destructive weapon known to man was dropped. The sky cracked as the explosion turned into a mushroom cloud 45,000 feet tall. Three days later a B-29 bomber flew over Nagasaki, Japan. The bomb that was dropped there was more powerful than anyone in Japan had ever imagined. A few days later the Emperor of the Empire of Japan surrendered to the United States of America.

“The thoughts and hopes of all America—indeed of all the civilized world—are centered tonight on the battleship Missouri. There on that small piece of American soil anchored in Tokyo Harbor the Japanese have just officially laid down their arms. They have signed terms of unconditional surrender.”

Truman said through the radio at the Galaxie Diner

Cigarette smoke slowly drifted across the floor of the place. Hans Schmidt sat at a booth slowly smoking his cigarette while slurping down a root beer float. Hans was young. He was 23 and was a well-known detective in Calgary, Alberta. He was dressed out in an undershirt with a slick black leather jacket on top. His hair was greased. Hans liked the way he looked. But at first he hated it. In 1939 Hans tried to get into the army but his German heritage just got him beat up. So he dressed as an American and tried again. He wore a leather jacket and greased hair but just got sent to prison for a month for faking his name. Eventually he got a diploma from University of Alberta and became a detective

“May I help you sir?” a waitress asked him.

“Well, I will order the double decker pancake please.”

“Is that all?”

“Ahh, what the heck make me a second root beer float, it tastes like magic.”

The whole diner was packed. About one hundred ex-soldiers were running into any joint with a jukebox just to dance with their girlfriends. Although Hans was a man with a job he still acted like an irresponsible teenager, so while the music was playing loudly and women were being twisted madly Hans decided to get up and change the song. But as he put in his 5¢ a guy with a navy uniform came and stopped him before he could put in another penny.

“Jukeboxes ain’t for germs like you” the man said

“Germs?”

“Yeah, Jerry's like you are supposed to be killing Jews not playing songs.”

“Hands off, I only want to play a song.”

“Hey Fritz, I will play you like a guitar, and I will break a few strings while I am at it.”

Without a moment’s notice the Navy sailor punched Hans right in the mouth. Soon a huge fight broke out. It ended with Hans in an alleyway with a trash bin on his head. Click! The light switch turned on as a bloody, bruised Hans walked into his apartment.

“More than a million sing and dance in the streets as the biggest celebration the windy city has ever seen. Joy is unconfined” the television screamed.

Hans sat on his couch eating his dinner when the phone rang.

“Hello?” Hans answered it.

“This is Commissioner Harvey. There was a breakout in the Raymond area. A child. 55 inches. Japanese. Black hair. Last seen in the Raymond sugar beet farms,” the man on the line said

“And?”

“We need you to investigate it. The whole area around the farms has been cleared so he must have had legs like Jesse Owens. I would start in Raymond. Ask the people if they had seen them. We have his Missing Poster here. I could give to you or you could just take one off of a lamppost.”

“When should I start?”

“Come to the station and we will get the case file ready.”

Hans entered the Train Station and got tickets to Raymond, Alberta. The train ride was calm. People sat in an orderly fashion reading books. On the seat in front of him were the words *AKIO WAS HERE* which was edged into it. The whole train had a smell of cinnamon and the train smoke was locked outside the train. Hans was reading his favorite new book *A Lion in the Streets*. Then, the train came to a halt. A man in a blue uniform and a striped hat entered the train car.

“Everyone off!” he announced.

Hans walked along the street while trying to get to Raymond. On the way he noticed a young child playing in the fields. Then a guard in a red uniform beat the child. Hans hated what Canada was doing to the Japanese. He thought of this case not as a hunt for a fugitive, but a hunt for an eleven year old boy that ran from a horrible place. Then, he entered Raymond. He asked around the town if anyone had seen the boy. Hans decided to go take a break in Luc’s Diamond Restaurant. He sat down, ordered a root beer float and put a song on the jukebox. The bartender asked him a few questions when he sat down.

“I don’t recognize you. You are new here. It’s a small town. What brings you to this rock on a map?” he asked

“I am a detective for the Calgary Police department. I am trying to find a missing kid.”

“Gotta picture of him?”

“Yeah” Hans says, showing the bartender the picture

“Jesus!!I know dat kid!”

“Have you seen him?”

“About a week ago I was chopping firewood in the forest when I heard something. It was loud. I could hear though I knew it was very far away. It...it...it w-was a gunshot. Then I saw a rustle in the bushes down the hill, away from the camp. I saw a child’s face, tongue out as snowflakes dropped gracefully on his

tongue. I never told the RCMP. I just thought of it as something I had done to protect the kid.”

“The gunshot?”

“It was made by a guard, he apparently shot an internee that was ‘escapin’.”

“What hill?”

“The one overlooking the factory. Pretty cold up there so be careful.”

“God bless.”

Hans ran up the hill that overlooked the factory and saw nothing but a vast forest that went on for miles. But he still decided to take a look around. On the way he found a campfire that was still smoldering. Someone had been here a while ago. On the ground was a tattered comic. It was one of Captain America.

Hans knew that Akio was here. It was just too obvious. Then he continued down the hill. Hans was walking for a long time when he noticed something in a frozen river. He leaned over and saw a shirt. Hans was prepared to pick it up as evidence until he noticed something that came out the collar. Hair. Hans turned the thing over and saw a child. He had black hair, was 55 inches tall and was Japanese. His skin was a pale blue. His eyes were frozen shut, as was his mouth. In his right hand was a bucket. It all made sense. Akio needed water to drink so he got a bucket and went to a river nearby. But he fell in the bucket carried him down. He slowly drowned or died of Hypothermia in the cold water. His hands were in fists. Hans knew how he died. It was of Hypothermia. He closed his fists to warm his hands but died because of the cold.

Hans never closed the case. Never. He always wanted to know the circumstances that lead to his death. Hans grew older and still tried to find out more. One day in February, 1972 he met with a man named Hiroshi Nagasaki. Hans knew that Akio’s last name was Nagasaki. The man walked in. He was Akio’s father. Hans and Hiroshi became best friends. Every day on August 15th the family remembers Akio’s brave escape. He was a bird. A bird in a cage. He flew out one day. But in heaven that bird still flies. That bird is not caged.

The End