GFBNEC is dedicated to providing educational opportunities on the World War II Japanese American veteran story. Our annual student essay and poetry contest gives students around the world the chance not only to learn more about that story, but to connect with it on a personal level. By engaging students with this history, we ensure the next generation remembers the courage and sacrifice of the World War II American veterans of Japanese ancestry.

This year’s prompts included:

• This year marks the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II, yet the Japanese American WWII veteran experience is still relevant to our society today. Explore one of the ways this is true.

• Research one Japanese American WWII soldier, and highlight elements of their experience that are most meaningful to you.

CONTEST JUDGES

The 2020 High School and College Essay and Poetry Contest would not be successful without the generous support from our contest judges. We thank each judge for their time and expertise!

Karen Ageno  Philip Hirose  Jo Ann Takemoto  
Hiromi Aoyama  Audrey Ishimoto  Staci Toji  
Mary Jane Fujimura  Alyssa Ishimoto  Linton Yee  
Alan Hino  Elizabeth Kato

CONTEST SPONSORS

Ken and June Shimabukuro

Anonymous donor in memory of WWII veteran Masao “Mas” Takahashi
Congratulations to all 2020 Student Contest Winners!

ESSAY

HIGH SCHOOL
First Place: Nicole Tanaka
A Reflection of a Hero
Second Place: Katie Ikemoto
Gaman
Third Place: Kiley Murakami
I Am Home

COLLEGE
First Place: Trisha Sakamoto
Opting for Optimism
Second Place: Michelle Ota
We Are Americans
Third Place: Valerie Wu
Consider the American

POETRY

HIGH SCHOOL
First Place: Michael Ichida Eberlein
The Fight for Freedom
Second Place: Katie Murakoshi
The Fight Continues
Third Place: Krystal Lin
Recollecting Truth

COLLEGE
First Place: A.J. Takata
Dear Teruko, Dear Gunji, Dear Hajime
Second Place: Carolyn Ikeda
Tell Me Grandfather
Third Place: Tomoko Irie
Enter Nagasaki
A Reflection of a Hero

It is 8pm and I am looking at the mirror. I stand up straight, steady myself, and envision a strong, confident, woman I want to become. Perhaps I will be like the Disney princess Moana, who loves her people and follows what she believes in. Maybe I am like Marvel’s Black Widow, who exhibits intelligence, confidence, and strength. But tonight, I am not thinking of a movie character or disney princess—I am thinking of a real person, an inspiration and role model: Terry Toyome Nakanishi, a Japanese American woman who served in the Women’s Army Corps Military Intelligence service during World War II.

Nakanishi was born in 1921, growing up in Ucon, Idaho. As a 2nd generation Japanese American, she lived in a bilingual household but did not enjoy going to Japanese Language School. When Pearl Harbor struck, her family faced heavy discrimination, being forced out of their homes. Despite her mother’s disapproval and the racism she faced, she longed to do more for her country by joining the Women’s Army Corps (WAC). After all, her two brothers had joined the forces as well. At first, WAC denied her entry because she was Japanese. However, nothing could hold her back—right when WAC opened entry to Japanese Women, she enlisted. Her never ending determination resonates in me, as I seek to have the same energy in myself. She defied the odds and never let anyone stop her from joining the WAC by always being willing to serve her country. Nakanishi’s willpower and headstrong attitude is the reflection of who I strive to become one day.

As one of the few Japanese American women in WAC, Nakanishi continued to display her courage throughout the war. She was sent to the Military intelligence language school and she trained with pride. Despite the occupation of Japan, General Douglas MacArthur was not supportive of women in the military, so the WAC were occupied with civil service jobs in the US Army. Nakanishi and others chose to stay in Japan and translated war criminal trials. I admire Nakanishi, as well as the other Japanese American Women in WAC, for being able to defy gender roles and break the stereotypes against Japanese Americans and women. For this, they are truly role models for all young girls in the world. Their service in the military not only helped their country, but also made a statement about who they are and their loyalty. They were the face for Japanese Americans, taking a stand against discrimination in the midst of a cold and hostile World War 2 America.

Terry Toyome Nakanishi’s legacy will live on forever. In this rapidly changing world, her story is significant; it is a tale of willpower, going against the grain, and fighting for what one believes in. Her unique military path represents the strength of women and minorities alike. Nakanishi’s experience will forever hold a special place in my heart; she is a role model, inspiration, and a hero.
Gaman. A Japanese term to describe enduring what seems to be unbearable with dignity and pride.

I always figured that the Japanese-American experience in internment camps was something that no one should ever have to go through again. My grandparents told their stories of camp and it made 7-year-old me upset. Why would their rights be taken away because of their race? 12-year-old me took pride in the stories that were told and the unique heritage Japanese-Americans have, taking extreme interest in untold history. 14-year-old me volunteered to clean the veteran’s memorial in Little Tokyo and learned about the honor Japanese-Americans had through their service. Their personal stories of facing adversity and creating the JA community we now have has inspired me to enter this contest in hopes of keeping their stories and legacies alive for future generations.

Veterans of the 442nd were not much older than I was when they served. Some were forced into internment camps with opportunities lost while others were fortunate to live outside. When both groups came together, they unified to fight for the reputation of Japanese-Americans and changed the tide for World War II. Some families were able to see their sons again while other families received letters of their deaths. When returning to normal life, veterans created organizations and programs for Japanese-Americans, forming the community we now have.

17-year-old me is now experiencing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the present day war and our world has been turned upside down. Confined to our homes, I feel like it’s 1942 and we are forced to quarantine to protect our loved ones. Saying goodbye to my father as he unknowingly went to fight COVID felt like saying goodbye to a soldier. Receiving the phone call felt like receiving a letter, my heart sank with a feeling of disbelief. Living did not feel like an option because our family had lost so much. There seemed to be no hope left until we reflected upon our ancestors to help us through this time. We find strength in their strength and hope in their hope to fight on.

Gaman became the word for me to understand how families survived the camps. Gaman became the word for me to understand the courage of the WWII veterans. Gaman became the word for me to see how our community rebuilt. Gaman has become a word for me to live on for my ancestors and their battles. Gaman has become a word for me to appreciate life and honor those before me through my aspirations. During these hard times that are seemingly unbearable, the stories and actions of our past help us to persevere in the future. No matter how difficult, we must gaman on.
Third Place: **KILEY MURAKAMI**  
**Oxford Academy, Cypress, CA**  
**Grade 11 (2019-2020 academic year)**

As a Junior at Oxford Academy, I have pursued the biomedical pathway due to my fondness for the sciences. Although this past school year was cut short due to the Coronavirus pandemic, I give thanks to my incredible teachers for maintaining our classes via online lessons and look forward to seeing my friends again in-person. As an avid Los Angeles Lakers fan, I enjoy going to games with my family and watching the highlights on television.

As a member of the Yonsei Basketball Association’s Y24 team, I have participated in events for the Go For Broke National Education Center. My interest in the GFBNEC was spearheaded by my interactions with the WWII veterans. They never spoke of their hardships, but only spoke of the courageous friends that they had lost. Their humble and honorable way of living has laid the groundwork for the life I have today.

**I Am Home**

“Go home!” “Go back to where you came from!” screamed an elderly man as he drove by. It was a month into the stay-at-home order and I finally decided to venture outside of my house to walk the dog with my mom. I had not been outside since my school shut down due to the coronavirus and I needed to get some exercise. We put on our face masks and walked Mochi over to the next block, when all of a sudden someone shouted, “Go home!” We stopped and saw this man pointing at us from his car window. As he passed by he screamed, “Go back to where you came from!” and sped away. I was very puzzled. Was he talking to us? Did he want me to go back home because of the virus? Why was he so mad? Go back to where I came from? I came from the next block over. What was he talking about? As we continued our walk, my mom explained that there had been some backlash against people of Asian descent because the coronavirus originated in China. I have read about and heard stories of prejudice, but this was the first time I had ever experienced it. That man was yelling at me just because of the way that I looked? He knew nothing about me. I just looked Asian. I felt so scared because I thought he would come back and hurt me. I felt sad that someone could be so ignorant, and frustrated that I did not get to voice my thoughts. I felt so wronged.

It has been 75 years since the end of World War II and the prejudice that the Japanese American veterans endured is still prevalent in our society today. There are still people out there that make biased assumptions based on someone’s looks and ancestral background. Back then, Japanese American families were subjected to just this kind of prejudice and wrongfully forced into internment camps. Japanese American soldiers lost their lives while fighting for a country that had imprisoned their entire families solely because of their ethnicity. The Japanese American veterans fought courageously to preserve the freedom of all Americans, only to return home and be called a “Jap.” Through all of this adversity, the Japanese American veterans and their families persevered. They struggled, but became educated, hardworking, contributing members of American society. They are our physicians, politicians, teachers, soldiers, grandparents and so much more.

Yes, prejudice is still present 75 years after the end of World War II, but, like my Japanese American predecessors, I will not be intimidated. They took all of their hardships, sadness and frustrations and turned them into something all of us can be proud of. I appreciate the freedom that the Japanese American veterans fought so hard to preserve and will strive to follow in their footsteps and become a meaningful contributor to this country that I love so much.

“Go home!” he said. I am home.
"Don't stress about anything you can't control and make the most of what you are given." That is my neighbor Mr. Edward Nakamura’s secret to living a healthy life. At 95 years old, he still golfs every Tuesday, cares for his ailing wife, and walks with the speed and agility of someone half his age. His philosophy, that has underscored his entire life, allowed him to unbelievably seek the positives in his experience as a Japanese American soldier in World War II.

In 1944, Mr. Nakamura was drafted during his senior year in high school. Accepting and understanding, he completed basic training and volunteered to be an interpreter for the Military Intelligence Service (MIS). Although he knew Japanese from speaking with his parents and attending Japanese school as a child, Mr. Nakamura was surprised to find himself placed in a high-level language class. It was intimidating to be around so many native speakers and hard to keep up with the advanced material. However, this pushed him to excel at memorizing kanji, understanding geography, and learning how to translate. Soon, he was ready to join the occupational troops in post-war Japan. Challenge transcended discouragement.

His assignment in the MIS began in Manila. In between his duties as an interpreter, he had one favorite pastime: fraternizing with the prisoners of war. The time he spent listening to their stories, laughing at their jokes, and wholeheartedly perceiving them as friends, allowed him to see the humanity within the people considered “the enemy”. Rather than focusing on their backgrounds, Mr. Nakamura approached them with the intention of fellowship. Camaraderie overcame judgment.

Finally, his military experience took him to Tokyo. There, he patrolled the streets, supervised projects, and translated for Japanese workers as a Staff Sergeant. However, Mr. Nakamura did more: he volunteered to become a paratrooper. Despite the risk of facing discrimination, as there were few Japanese in the field, he put his fear on hold and trained for three weeks at a pseudo-camp in Sendai. After skillfully learning how to jump from planes, his determination and courage was rewarded with his wings, a symbol of his expertise as a military parachutist. Mr. Nakamura created his own experiences by finding the positives of his circumstances instead of performing his required duties alone. Initiative diminished fear.

“Don't stress about anything you can’t control and make the most of what you are given.” This ideology has guided Mr. Nakamura through the hardships narrated by the Nisei story. By confronting challenges, valuing camaraderie, and taking initiative, he prevailed through seemingly difficult situations, and transformed them into enjoyable, unforgettable memories. Struggles became strength, foes became friends, and duty became opportunity. Although he did not directly fight on the battlefield, these virtues were key to his role in successfully serving our country in the MIS. Today, Mr. Nakamura continues to view his life through this perspective, teaching that adversity, no matter what it is rooted in, can be overcome if one strives to find its hidden positives.

First Place: TRISHA SAKAMOTO
Chapman University, Orange, CA
Freshman (2019-2020 academic year)

Trisha Sakamoto is a student at Chapman University, majoring in International Business and minoring in Japanese Studies. She is interested in working with companies and organizations with a global emphasis, and hopes to study abroad in Japan in the Spring 2021 semester to increase her knowledge in and understanding of Asian culture. Trisha is grateful for this opportunity to research Japanese American history and to honor the Nisei story.

Trisha entered this contest to recognize the courageous effort of the Japanese American veterans who served the United States in WWII. She was specifically inspired to write about the experiences of her neighbor and family friend, Mr. Edward Nakamura, after learning about his unique perspectives that allowed him to confront the challenges presented by the war. Trisha hopes her entry will aid in the preservation of the Nisei narrative, so important stories like Mr. Nakamura’s will not be forgotten.

Opting for Optimism

“Don't stress about anything you can’t control and make the most of what you are given.” That is my neighbor Mr. Edward Nakamura’s secret to living a healthy life. At 95 years old, he still golfs every Tuesday, cares for his ailing wife, and walks with the speed and agility of someone half his age. His philosophy, that has underscored his entire life, allowed him to unbelievably seek the positives in his experience as a Japanese American soldier in World War II.

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We Are Americans

“I’m American.” I said these words for the first time at the age of 23. I also saw doubt in the eyes of children about my nationality for the first time at the age of 23. Until today, I had never realized what a privilege it was to have lived my whole life not experiencing that.

It was all a big joke at the time. During self-introductions to my students in Japan, I asked where they thought I was from. China, Brazil, and Indonesia were the top guesses. The real answer shocked some of them because I didn’t fit their image of a typical American. I already knew they wouldn’t get the answer on the first try. I never thought I looked like a “typical American” either, but I never doubted that I was one. I had never had to convince someone I was an American before.

After New York suffered from a devastating act of terror in 2001, Arab and Muslim-Americans were treated like enemies and looked at with suspicion by many. They continued enduring racial prejudice for many years and had to convince their own neighbors that they were loyal American citizens. The scenario sounded hauntingly familiar to Japanese-Americans who were familiar with the history of discrimination after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. So, in 2016, talks of beginning a registry of Muslims in America was not received well by Japanese-Americans. They would not allow another group of people to suffer through such blatant injustices based solely on race. How could this ignorance still be present in our modern society? Many protested and made themselves heard. Hearing about this made me very proud. I’m sure it would’ve made our Nisei predecessors proud, too. After all, it’s because of them that we have this level of influence in our country today, this empathy for mistreated minority groups, and this fighting spirit within us.

For my final lesson to my students in Japan, I told them the story of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and their rescue of the Lost Battalion during WWII. Most teachers would have a special activity or game for their final class, but I wanted my students to understand what being Japanese-American meant and that as much as I loved my Japanese heritage, I was also proud to be an American. Those Nisei soldiers gave their lives for a country that didn’t believe in them and thousands more suffered in silence living in internment camps, so that we could be respected in this country rather than being treated like outsiders. They risked it all for what they believed in. Today Japanese-Americans honor this legacy by standing up for what they believe is right. We carry on the stories and the spirit of the 442nd. I taught my students that people can achieve great things if they “Go For Broke.” That is what it means to be an American.

Second Place: MICHELLE OTA
University of Hawai‘i at Manoa, Honolulu, HI
Graduate Student (2019-2020 academic year)

During my free time I enjoy jogging, making arts & crafts, taking taiko lessons, and volunteering at the Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii. It was actually JCCH’s Facebook post that led me to this contest. Having been recently furloughed from my travel industry job, I was looking for alternate ways to fund my graduate school tuition.

Throughout the years, I’ve learned more and more about Japanese-Americans and living up to my heritage has become a large part of my identity. The first time I heard about the rescue of the Lost Battalion on a Japanese TV series called “99 Nen no Ai,” the story really stuck with me because it exemplified how hard the Nisei soldiers fought to give us the lives we have today. I found this essay contest to be a unique opportunity to express my pride in and gratitude for the Nisei veterans and their generation. I also thought it was a wonderful way to show that Japanese-American history still resonates within our generation today.
Consider the American. Consider Don Seki, Japanese American WWII veteran who chose to serve because he wanted to protect his country after Pearl Harbor. Consider how for Don Seki, going to war represented the “togetherness” of a united American identity. Consider Grant Hirabayashi, Japanese American WWII veteran who felt pride in serving his country as an American. Consider Senator Daniel Inouye, Japanese American WWII veteran who lost his arm for his country, a country that interrogated his patriotism and failed to recognize his identity as an American. Consider how these individual narratives are linked with the political.

The Japanese American WWII experience is so often discussed in terms of its paradoxical nature. Japanese American WWII soldiers fought abroad for their country as Americans while at home, Japanese Americans were placed in internment camps because they were not seen as American. Yet it is necessary to not speak of these experiences as isolated, but instead examine each as magnified in the other.

In a recent op-ed in the Washington Post, politician Andrew Yang wrote that in light of racism against Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Asian American population would have to prove our American identity more than ever. He called for us to “prove” our patriotism by engaging in civic issues. In that op-ed, he referenced Japanese American war veterans who served and demonstrated that they were American, using them as an example to justify that Asian Americans needed to actively show their patriotism to be validated.

It is necessary to recognize that the Japanese American WWII veteran experience is relevant today because it demonstrates the resilience of the American patriotic spirit. The stories of Japanese American WWII veterans demonstrate courage, sacrifice, and a willingness to interrogate the qualities that determine who makes an American. But in light of the importance of these experiences, new questions also arise. Why is going to war for one’s country the only way to prove that we are Americans? What is patriotism? What makes an American?

We must continue to honor and preserve the legacy of Japanese American WWII veterans while keeping these questions in mind. In a nation where Japanese Americans were being denied civil liberties, Japanese American WWII veterans fought not only for themselves to be recognized as true Americans, but for all Japanese Americans, in the past and present, to be recognized as true Americans. As such, it is important to acknowledge the relevance of the Japanese American WWII veteran experience. Japanese American WWII veterans fought for a nation as Americans. Their experiences as soldiers did not determine their American identity; they were reflections of it. In a society that continues to discriminate against Asian Americans, we must consider how the Japanese Americans who fought during World War II matter not only as displays of patriotism, but how together, they represent an endeavor to claim a national identity. The question of what makes an American remains. Now it’s up to us to answer.
A single day was all it took
For Japanese-American lives to change forever.
For friends, for neighbors, for brothers-in-arms
To be labeled “enemy aliens”.
For good people, loyal to their country,
To be treated as traitors,
At no fault of their own.

Even though their country had turned on them,
The patriotism of Japanese-Americans did not waver.
Especially in those men who chose to fight
For their nation and for freedom.
The 442nd fought like no other,
The bravest of the brave.
Feared by their enemies,
Renowned by their peers,
They put it all on the line:
“Go For Broke”
And became the most decorated in history.

But still today, injustice remains,
Discrimination and hatred seen daily.
Families put in cages
For seeking freedom.
People wrongly jailed or killed
Solely for their race.

But like the Nisei Soldiers,
We can choose to fight,
Not just for ourselves,
But for others too.
We can channel their bravery, their tenacity, and selflessness,
And remind our nation
That being American is not reserved for any one race,
But for anyone who calls this country home.

Men who selflessly risked and gave their lives
To save the lost battalion,
To destroy oppression,
And liberate those without freedom.
All the while, combating the prejudice they faced
With their unmatched loyalty and dedication.
I stand amongst my classmates
Pledging to the flag
Sad to think some years ago
I would be branded with an enemy tag
In 1942, executive order 9066 took place
Stripping people of their innocence
For their skin, and for their race

Deemed as a traitor of the states
Thoughts gone array
Their color determined their fates
And the places that they could stay
Sent away to Manzanar, Topaz, and many more
They carried their lives in one bag
They were a casualty of war

Though seen as a foe
And an ally of the axis powers
Through their courage they would show
That they are fighters, and not cowards
The 442nd regiment, the most decorated group by far
With loyalty they fought
Earning medals of honor, and a bronze star

Their lives were a battlefield
Both at home and abroad
Their hearts being the only shield
From prejudice, and society’s flaws
Through their story we learn
That we are one in the same
We must reflect and yearn, for the soldiers who saved the day

Second Place: **KATIE MURAKOSHI**
Claremont High School, Claremont, CA
Grade 11 (2019-2020 academic year)

I play the piano and am on the swim team. Outside school I am also involved in a Japanese American Youth group called NYO (Nikkei Youth Organization) to learn more about my culture and be involved in the community.

In my history classes I have taken so far, I have not learned much about what the Nisei soldiers had experienced during WW2. Because of this I wanted to learn more about their hardships by entering this contest. After doing some research, I was shocked and proud to see how much our veterans accomplished while they served.

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Pledging to the flag
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We must reflect and yearn, for the soldiers who saved the day

*The Fight Continues*

Today, a series of events
Happen over and over again
Brewing great discontent
We protest on the streets for the madness to end
By fighting for what’s right
With thoughts of peace and love
Together we can thrive and have compassion for all

Inspired by the courage of our veterans,
And the struggles they faced in the past,
With great reverence,
Ask yourself aloud,

What can we do to make our veterans proud?
Third Place: **KRYSTAL LIN**  
Gretchen Whitney High School, Cerritos, CA  
Grade 9 (2019-2020 academic year)

Krystal participated in mock trial and her school's Model United Nations team to pursue her passions in debate and law. She was inspired to enter the Go For Broke Poetry Contest because it gave her a chance to speak of the immense respect, honor, and courage that Japanese American World War II veterans deserve for their bravery, and also to celebrate the powerful and inspirational legacy they left behind. The Nisei soldier story has taught Krystal the important lesson of faith for the future and remembrance of the past so that all voices can be heard loudly and clearly.

**Recollecting Truth**

The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.  
All Japanese are at fault.  
No one wants you here.  
“Go back to your country.”

Condemned as spies, traitors, unworthy...  
the world forgot about the rest of the story.

All remembrance of endless cruelty  
*washed away*  
with a single, one-sided recount from  
victors of this cold, cold war.

Historians jotted down the words of  
*one perspective*,  
deaf to all the other voices demanding  
validity.

Why is no one speaking of the discriminatory atrocities that  
were committed?

Why?

Do you not remember that our ancestors were scarred by the  
ignorance and hate of their own community?  

Drafted in 1940 to the 298th Regiment,  
Trust is but a mockery to Raymond Nosaka.

Surrounded by rumors of death threats,  
faced with uncertainty from the haole soldiers.  
In constant fear of being shot for any insignificant, fleeting  
action.

His culture is denied, his name altered;  
“Noska” became his new identity.  

Then came “Jap”.

Scattered ignorantly to undermine and to discriminate.

But armed with vigilance,  
Mr. Ray Nosaka stuck true to his beliefs.  
Love for personal identity,  
Love for his family,  
Love for the Japanese community.

Within all the haziness of enemies and racial discrimination, an  
omamori dangles brightly.

Holding luck and protection.  
Promises and well wishes.  
Withstanding a life chaotic and precarious  
for smiles back at home.

Amidst the experiences of war,  
The most meaningful lesson has always been  
faith.

Faith our fellow brothers will survive.  
Faith in the world for shedding light on our honorable soldiers who  
gave their all.

Faith in the people for a new history...  
... that recounts the untold stories of World War 2 Nisei soldiers.
When I visit you, there is so much that separates us,
Time, an era of prejudice, fighting for a nation that does not care about you,
Wire, miles of star studded steel encircling you, trapping you,
Soil, six feet of Rose Hill earth, so that I may never again listen to the wisdom
of your words.

There is so much I never asked you:
Rohwer, Military Intelligence, Occupation,
precious memories now lost.

You taught me so much, except how to bear the present.
You fought so I may be free, and I in turn never appreciated where that
freedom came from,
or what it cost.

When they called you spies,
you did not submit to even “fear itself.”
When they called you saboteurs,
you resisted with courage I cannot replicate.

So often I regret what could have been that I neglect
what does connect us.

A time where prejudice may no longer target me, but does for my countrymen.
Guns and guard towers are replaced
with tear gas and batons, with
people indifferent to struggles that do not concern themselves.

That barbed wire is hereditary;
it courses through my veins
and lacerates my Yonsei tongue.
My Ojii-san, my Oba-san, foreign phrases I never spoke.
You did not teach Mom and Dad our language because you wanted them to be
“more American,”
as if your deeds as Japanese Americans
of bravery in battle and silence in the desert meant
nothing.

Andrew “A.J.” Takata is a yonsei history major and writing minor who used to not be
heavily involved in learning about and educating others of his Japanese heritage.
However, since the passing of his grandparents Teruko Asawa, Gunji Takata, and
Hajime Ikeda, he realized he lost an invaluable link to the past and entered this
contest in honor of them. Since then, he volunteers at his university’s Lunar New
Year Festival charity show by performing martial arts, shares his Japanese American
experience through the Nemerov Creative Writing Scholars Program, and is a 2019
Kakehashi alumnus. He hopes that other young Japanese Americans learn from their
relatives and WWII veterans before it is too late.

First Place: **A.J. TAKATA**
Washington University at St. Louis, St. Louis, MO
Sophomore (2019-2020 academic year)

Dear Teruko, Dear Gunji, Dear Hajime

That the land I call home once didn’t welcome us,
that it required your sacrifice and your valor
so that I would not have to endure the same fate.

And yet,
it shows me how much I have left to learn,
wire restrained me as much as it made me resilient.

Remind me of empathy.

Remind me the words “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”
Border imprisonment,
Pandemic persecution,
Police murder,
remind me why those words are timeless and universal.

I missed the opportunity to speak with you,
but I will not be a bystander to the same hatred you suffered.
That wanting history to not repeat itself is not enough,
it requires action and understanding of our neighbors.
Go for broke! until all can live the life you fought for to entrust to me.

Grandma, Grandpa, Grandpa,
Thank you, for inspiring me to be better than I was yesterday,
to honor your love I can feel through the grass,
and to carry your legacy with me.
Always.
Tell me Grandfather. Tell me your war story.

I know you were born in California. I know that you were abandoned by your country as a young man, cast out by fear and hatred. I know that you fled to a land that was your ancestor’s home. I know you were a forsaken American.

My father tells me you were conscripted into an enemy army. He says that you were beaten and beaten and beaten by your comrades for being tall, awkward, an American spy. I know you hid your English. I imagine you feared death on all sides, by every country and every man. I know I could never convey this kind of fear through my words.

Father says you left the army and volunteered for the Imperial Navy, that you commanded a PT boat along Japan’s shore.

Grandfather, did you know that my other great-grandfathers fought against you? Yes, my mother’s grandfathers were in the American Navy. You were in the Pacific at the same time, in opposing navies narrowly avoiding death.

I’m sure you know that my uncles, your cousins, decided to stay. They were put into camps, Grandfather. They were imprisoned in wastelands. Why, Grandfather, did they see the enemy in us?

Did you know that your wife was in Japan? You were protecting her miles away, but she was broken by the war too. She watched Tokyo burn.

They told me that you ran into Nagasaki after the bomb dropped, that you faced the radiation without hesitation. Uncle says that’s why Grandmother’s first child was a still born and that’s why your heart was so weakened.

I know you returned home years after the war. Your American-ness restored for you and your family.

Grandfather, do you know that I am here in California? I am writing your story. But I know only pieces.

So tell me everything Grandfather. I am listening.
As he walked, the ground seemed to burn, to writhe, and the heat rose up, scorching the soles of his feet, through the military regulation boots.

The air smelled of things burning and lives lost. He had no words to describe what was before his eyes.

Perhaps he saw the crumbling spire of the Urakami Cathedral, its bells weighing heavily in the silence.

Perhaps he saw how the land simply stretched out in all directions, buildings reduced to rubble, exposed and crowded with death.

As he walked, and walked, and walked, trying to clear away the devastation, his feet ached and ached, but his heart ached even more.

This destruction that rolled out before his eyes, the cries of the wounded and dying, the smell of disaster in the air; this was caused by his country.

In a Japanese naval uniform, he felt sick to the stomach.

If not for a faulty engine, he and his crew would have been resting at the bottom of the sea, beside an American naval ship.

The land he had come to when he was sixteen, to get an education his parents wished for, had become the enemy to his homeland, and he had been drafted into their army, a Japanese American out of place.

Far away, on the opposite shore of the ocean, away from the fields of Alhambra where he grew up, his family was behind barbed wire, while his feet were planted on foreign soil.

A week later, the soles of his feet peeled away, exposing raw and painful flesh. Yet, he kept walking and walking.

When the Americans came ashore, he served as their interpreter at their headquarters, in the land that had isolated him.

And, he kept walking and walking, until he was finally home again.

Dedicated to my grandfather, Paul Tamotsu Ikeda (1920-1991)