

Tribute to Lawson Inada  
by Rick Barot

The following is a selection from remarks made by Rick Barot at the SOU Poetry Festival honoring former Oregon Laureate Lawson Inada, April 15, 2011.

Months ago, when I received the invitation to speak about Lawson Inada and his contribution to literature, I immediately said yes. Soon afterwards, the responsibility of having to say something about Lawson and his work began to take a paradoxical nature in my mind. On the one hand, I felt the delight of being given the opportunity to say how much his work matters to me and many other writers. On the other hand, I felt the gravity of having to describe the consequence of his work in our culture, in our aesthetic and literary history, and, greater still, in our collective memory. Many writers have an immediate impact on other writers, but it's the rare writer whose impact goes beyond academic and literary circles. Lawson is one of those writers.

Every other year, at the university where I teach in Tacoma, Washington, I teach a course in Asian-American Literature. During the week that we study the writings that emerged from the Japanese- American internment camps of World War II, I take the students on a field trip. We drive about 10 minutes down Highway 512 to Puyallup and the Puyallup Fairgrounds, which was the site of an assembly center where Japanese Americans from Washington and Alaska were held before they were transferred to more permanent camps. From April to September of 1942, more than seven thousand evacuees were held in Puyallup. You will probably enjoy this piece of irony: the Puyallup Assembly Center was named Camp Harmony. When the students and I go on our field trip, the students are always excited: they get to leave campus for a while, and they get to see something real. We arrive in Puyallup and go to the fairgrounds, which are still actively used for events today.

One weekend there's a cattle show, another weekend there's a spring fair. When we visit the fairgrounds on a week-day, however, there's usually nothing going on. The place is like a ghost town or a seaside town at the end of the summer. There's material evidence of life, but no life itself. And there is no evidence of the seven thousand people who had to live in that place for four months. The students and I walk around for a while, and after fifteen or so minutes of wandering around and making small talk, I begin to feel the students' boredom. I can imagine what they're asking themselves: what are we doing here? What does this place have to do with the literature we're reading? The students had believed they were going to see something—some kind of proof. Instead, they have taken a field trip to a place that contains absolutely nothing. The lesson here, of course, is a basic but crucial one: the past disappears. And when we read literature, we read literature in the context of that disappearance. In two of his books, *Legends from Camp* and *Drawing the Line*, Lawson Inada does something that no field trip to Puyallup could ever generate in the students' minds: he restores the past; he proves that the past existed, that it was as bright and true as the reality that each of us faces today.

Let me give you an example of what I mean by Lawson's ability to restore the past. Here are some lines from his great poem, "Camp". Keep in mind that when Lawson and his family were in the Amache camp in Colorado, Lawson was a boy of six or seven: It got so hot in Colorado we would go crazy. This included, of course, soldiers in uniform, on patrol. So, once a week, just for relief, they went out for target practice. We could hear them shooting hundreds of rounds, shouting like crazy. It sounded like a New Year's celebration. Such fun is not to be missed. So someone cut a deal, just for the kids, and we went out past the fence. The soldiers shot, and between rounds, we dug in the dunes for bullets. It was great fun. They would aim at us, go "Pow!" and we'd shout "Missed!"

What's remarkable about these lines is the way we are brought into the jubilation of the kids, even as we are also made to understand the dynamics of war between a country and its own people. The kids and the soldiers are just playing, but they are also playing out the larger conflict, and the tragedy and the absurdity of that larger conflict. What this passage should also remind us is that the experience of the camps was far more complicated and layered than any one person can imagine. As we get farther and farther away from a historical moment, that moment often gets reduced to the equivalent of a historical sound-byte, an entry on the Wikipedia website. But when you read Lawson's books, and when you read his important anthology of writings about the camps, only what we could carry, you are reminded of how specific each person's experience is, and how important it is that that specificity is carried forward and remembered. Like other writers who have written about dramatic periods in history, Lawson's contribution to literature is this one: his writings are like a time capsule, in which kids and soldiers in a Colorado camp are always at play, always enacting the real farce of historical and political forces. Lawson's poetry speaks to the particularity of lives that were lived, as much as it testifies to the often ugly circumstances that informed the way those lives got lived.

The Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who knows a few things about historical and political forces, believes that one of the things that poetry can do is the work of redress. The dictionary definition of redress is the act of setting something right. Heaney's definition of the word, in relation to poetry, is deeper. He says: "In the activity of poetry there is the tendency to place a counter-reality that can hold its own against the historical situation. This redressing effect of poetry comes from its being a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances." Heaney goes on to say that in the strong poet, moral commitment and artistic discipline add up to "an exercise of the virtue of hope." I very much believe in Heaney's definition of poetry as "an exercise of the virtue of hope," and I believe in that definition even more when I read Lawson Inada's work. Let me recite some more lines of Lawson's poetry, to illustrate how hope can arise from poetry. This is a passage from the poem "Children of Camp":

There was no poetry in camp  
Unless you can say  
mud is poetry,  
unless you can say

dust is poetry,  
unless you can say  
blood is poetry,  
unless you can say  
cruelty is poetry,  
unless you can say  
injustice is poetry,  
unless you can say  
imprisonment is poetry.

There was no poetry in camp.  
Unless you can say  
families are poetry,  
unless you can say  
people are poetry.

And the people  
made poetry  
from camp.

I said earlier that one of Lawson's contributions to literature is that his poems are engaged in the act of remembering, of safekeeping the past. Another contribution that Lawson makes is that he brings back to poetry its communal dimension. These days, poetry is often thought of as a mode of self-expression; the subject for a lot of poets is their own self-absorption. Poems are thought of as acts of individualism. What we have forgotten, however, is that the roots of poetry are deeply social. The earliest poems were songs of ritual that celebrated the resources of the world around us; the earliest poems were also a means of recording tribal histories. Those of you who have read Lawson's work will understand what I mean, when I say that his poems are tribal in the best sense of that word: his poems celebrate and create community. They celebrate all the communities that Lawson has been a part of: the Japanese American communities of the internment camps, the diverse communities of his native Fresno, the musical communities of jazz and performance, and the communities of Oregon, where he has lived for over 40 years. Many of you in this room have been beneficiaries of the communal generosity that is at the heart of Lawson's work. Once again, let me recite words by the poet himself. This is a passage from his poem "Ring the Bell":

what I am is a product of my community—nothing more, nothing less. My father was born in back of a noodle factory; my mother was born in back of a fish store; those facts are at the forefront of my being. And I was born to a time, and in a place, in which great gifts were bestowed upon me. How privileged could I be? It was the people who made me, who granted me what I can only acknowledge, never repay. And in my own modest way, I attempt to strike the right words, the right words, to convey what there is to say...

Because I'm a poet, there is one more contribution by Lawson that I feel is especially important.

Lawson's work is justly important for the stories and histories that it preserves. But I also want to point out that the craftsmanship in his work is superb—in fact, it's so good that his readers may sometimes take for granted how difficult it is to write a powerful poem. I like to tell my students that poetry is a place where memory, melody, and words gather together. This is certainly true of Lawson's poems, where the weight of memory is always being supported by the lightness of music. To quote Seamus Heaney once again, Heaney says that a poet writes poems in order "to disobey the force of gravity." Lawson's poems are especially good at this disobedience, because their music is so strong. His poems remind us that we don't experience poetry only in our minds; we also experience it in our whole bodies. Through repetition and rhyming, Lawson's poems remind us of the pulse of our blood and the cadence of our hearts. Through clear and evocative imagery, Lawson's poems remind us of the acuity of our eyes and our imaginations. Through the sensory details of his work, Lawson reminds us of that we have senses at all. And this is something that I admire so much in Lawson's work: his ability to create communal energy, even though his poems are also intimate, down-to-earth, scaled to the size of my own self.

Let me close these remarks by once again quoting from Lawson's work. It has been a great honor to pay tribute to Lawson, and I thank you for listening. The passages I'm going to read are from the poem "Memory", which is my favorite of Lawson's work:

Memory:

Memory is an old Mexican woman  
sweeping her yard with a broom.  
She has grown even smaller now,  
residing at that vanishing point  
decades after one dies,  
but at some times, given  
the right conditions—  
an ordinary dream, or practically  
anything in particular—  
she absolutely looms,  
assuming the stature  
she had in the neighborhood.....

Memory had been there forever.  
We settled in around her;  
we brought the electricity  
of blues and baptized gospel,  
ancient adaptations of icons,  
spices, teas, fireworks, trestles,  
newly acquired techniques  
of conflict and healing, common  
concepts of collective survival...