

Oftentimes, my grandmother tells me stories about her father. Stripped of everything he had, allowed to bring only what he could carry, he waved to the strangers on the side of the road as the bus slipped from Washington to Idaho, from the heart of Seattle to the middle of absolute nowhere. 125,000 Japanese Americans experienced the same after the issuing of Executive Order 9066 in 1942, when FDR declared them all to be possible foreign spies and sent them to concentration camps across the nation. For years, they were imprisoned in the deserts and when the government decided that these hundreds of thousands of people (of which one-third were children and two-thirds were American citizens) were not, in fact, enemy spies dealing secrets to the Japanese government, they gave them a generous \$25 and a one-way train ticket back to where they came from.

Oftentimes, I tell my grandmother stories about my present. My team, Kyodo Taiko, was founded in 1990 by Mark Honda, becoming the first and oldest collegiate taiko team in the nation. "Kyodo" holds two meanings: "family" and "loud children," and through our spirited performances, we promote the traditional art of taiko drumming throughout Southern California and beyond. Before, traditional drums were used as the backbeat for Obon festivals honoring the dead; now, in our ensemble-type drumming, we are the main event. We perform at UCLA's Cultural Night in collaboration with the Nikkei Student Union every February, at the historical Manzanar Pilgrimage every April, and at our own self-produced Spring Concert every May. Kyodo is a tight-knit community consisting of about 30 members in any given year, decades of passion imbued into the team in the form of dozens of original songs written by hundreds of alumni. The team serves as more than just a performance group; it is something bigger, something that instills a sense of purpose and fulfillment in each and every member who passes through.

My grandparents were born in Minidoka, an incarceration camp in the cold and dry town of Hunt, Idaho. Neither of them remember very much, as they were forced to leave camp when they were two or three years old. Still, they pass on the stories that they've heard, echoing remnants from the past. My great-grandfather kept a diary during the war from the day Pearl Harbor was bombed to the day the Japanese Prime Minister, Hideki Tojo, resigned from office. Although his works are considered an important primary source in regards to the literature of Japanese American incarceration, so much of this family history has been lost to assimilation and time.

The summer before college, I discovered Kyodo at the same time that I discovered taiko, never having previously heard of either. I probably should have known about taiko before, being half Japanese and all, but the loss of language and culture throughout the decades is a long-winded story that always ends in shame. It became funny, then, how I could want something so badly that I'd known about for such a short amount of time. Still, I knew that this was the one thing that I was certain I wanted to do and when I made the team a month later, I called my grandmother, and she cried.

I learn that my grandmother used to play taiko too, but she never told me because she "never thought I would ever be interested". I wonder how many other things she's kept from me that I'd

want to know about. She didn't play like me, though, where our drums are the main focus — she was always in the backline with her own grandmother to keep the beat for odori (traditional dance) in the front. Still, when she pulls out her drums to show me during winter break, I notice the ropes connecting the drum heads are almost ridiculously loose, but I suppose they're decades and decades old, so I'll cut them some slack (not that they need any more of that). She gives me her kane, a dish-shaped bell, and the mallet that goes along with it — and while it's traditionally made of bone, she's fashioned a makeshift one out of an ear pick and dice. Any modern taiko player would be repulsed by the state of her old instruments, but I pick them up and play them lovingly, and imagine her gentle hands doing the same.

Despite it all, my grandmother has a baby book, lined with her father's careful, precise handwriting filling in questions that the original creators probably intended to be answered outside barbed wire. There are two "Baby's First Trips" — one from the camp hospital to 36-7-D, and one from 36-7-D to the camp hospital. She laughs and wishes that she had gone on more exciting trips. I resent that she still remembers the barrack number. If not for the context, this book would be a heartwarming family artifact, pink pages lined with ribbons and bears. Through her laughter, I can see the image eighty years into the past of a loving father doing everything he could for his daughter who was born into confinement and didn't even know it.

I throw myself into taiko as hard as I possibly can. Thirty-five years of history lie in the closet in the back of the university gymnasium: four shime-daiko (small high-pitched backline drums), two okedo-daiko (longer deeper-pitched backline drums), eight chu-daiko (sonorous mid-sized drums), two o-daiko (extremely large and resonant drums), three buckets of bachi (wooden drumsticks), four gomi-daiko (literally "trash drums," made of cardboard and packing tape and signed by the alumni who built them), one suitcase of happi (traditional performance coats), one cardboard box of auxiliary percussion (tambourines and handheld bells), and one me, standing where so many greats stood before.

Amidst it all, I wonder where I stand against the test of time. My grandfather is nisei, or second-generation, and my grandmother is sansei, third. That puts my father somewhere in between sansei, third, and yonsei, fourth, and puts me somewhere in between yonsei, four, and gosei, five. But it's even more complicated by the fact that my mother is first-generation Chinese, meaning I'm somewhere in between two, four, and five, but 3.25 is quite the odd generation to claim. So, I settle for fourth. In an effort to bridge the gaps between these numbers, I ask my grandparents if they've ever returned to Minidoka to visit the place where they were born. I know the camp committee organizes a pilgrimage on occasion, where former incarcerated and their descendants can share this cultural connection. All the photos I've seen of this journey show the honor roll for Japanese American veterans that was painted by my great-grandfather, a monument that I imagine would be quite moving to view. But they laugh and say no: "Why would I want to go back there?"

Traditionally, Kyodo starts every performance with our signature song "Yonsei," written in 2005 by Jason Osajima. With four distinct motifs, Yonsei is a song about the many generations of

Japanese Americans and their struggle to find their respective places within the larger community. Blending traditional rhythms with a more contemporary style that emphasizes individual creativity and showmanship, the result is a beautiful harmony of old and new. Members are forbidden from learning Yonsei until the end of their second year on the team, serving as a rite of passage as they navigate what it means to play taiko and to be a part of Kyodo. The second years then open Spring Concert with their Yonsei, a mark of their progress and perseverance.

Kyodo attends the annual Manzanar Pilgrimage in the spring, now a historical site of remembrance at the former incarceration camp some 200 miles north of Los Angeles. We perform on the very same ground where our ancestors were held captive, but the first thing I notice is just how strikingly beautiful it is there: snow-dusted mountains lining the crisp blue sky, the rolling green hills adorned with signs that read "No Japs Allowed". Back then, barbed wire lined the fences, and guard towers aimed their guns inward. Now, all that aims at us is the sun beating down on the burning desert as we lay flowers on the monolith lined with thousands of paper cranes. I burn my incense and lay my rose on the monument and trip over my tabi (toed performance shoes) in the dust. I've never felt anything like this before. Later, at the local high school gymnasium during the educational Manzanar at Dusk program, a former incarcerated recalls the taste of sand in her mouth during storms that would plague the barracks. She says that this is the last time she will be able to attend the pilgrimage. I promise myself that moving forward, I will go in her stead.

When I play taiko, I don't just hear it: I feel it. I feel the vibrations run through my arm as I strike the drumhead, the effect rippling through my skin and bones right to my soul, magnified intensely by the seven other drums that play along with me. And I don't just hear and feel the drum, but I hear and feel the audience, filling up all 350 seats in Northwest and kiaiing — literally "spirit yelling" — as loud as they possibly can. My grandmother sits among them, who loudly loves me, and my grandfather, who quietly loves me, and my parents, who fly so far to see why this makes me so happy, and dozens of Kyodo alumni, witnessing the same traditions in which they took part years and years and years ago. And I feel it, the energy and excitement and resilience abound. I feel it all so deeply inside of me.

My grandmother texts me, and I read it over again to be sure it's right: she's signed up for the Minidoka Pilgrimage. She says her friend thought she should see the place where she was born, and that she'll go once and never again. And so I attend the annual Minidoka Pilgrimage with my grandmother, another historical site of remembrance at the former incarceration camp some 600 miles east of Seattle. I don't perform, but I walk with my grandmother through the dirt paths under the beating sun, and when we have lunch in the exact spot where the mess hall used to be, she looks up at me with tears in her eyes and says, "Bachan stood in a barrack today." And as the long grass grazes against our legs and brushes against the decaying wood, she creates her first memories of camp, 80 years later. She holds me and thanks me for coming with her, and I can only hope she knows I came only for her. Now, she says she wants to go every year, and bring my grandfather with her too. I promise myself that moving forward, I will go with them.

There is a comment under the YouTube video of Yonsei at Kyodo's 2007 Spring Concert from fourteen years ago that says, "Try to find your heartbeat in your neck artery, it's like the same speed. I think that's why it gives such a rush." I can feel that very rush come over me as I sneak a peek at my grandmother from the wings of the Northwest Auditorium. This is not something she could have even dreamed of witnessing in her long and winded past. And so I play for my grandmother and I play for myself, and I play for everyone whose playing was cut short by confinement. I play to keep the art alive, and I play to keep myself alive. To me, my grandmother is everything, this is everything.

Let it be something we can keep.