

PETER HARRIS

*Santa Cruz, CA: Bay Street,
House with Bush, 2002*

Digital pigment print on polyester substrate, 6 x 8 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

KAREN TEI YAMASHITA

Letters to Memory

The Internment of Japanese Americans

Dear Homer:
I am remembering when I first met you. You are sitting at a table in Kelly's Bakery Café with coffee and a stack of blue books, reading and scribbling comments. I have not seen a blue book in decades, but it makes sense that you would utilize this classic pedagogical format, despite penmanship's decided wane. Of course we've met before, but those meetings were encounters of a mostly bureaucratic substance, allowing me however to wave a hello and to ask the obvious question: What are you doing?

You answer that your class is on the history of sin and, you add—*by ricochet*—on sacrifice and grace. I ponder the guilty rebound of sacrifice and grace and my wonder that sin has a history. But you are a historian of ancient Palestine. Of course, I think, if you say so, sin must have a history. In any case, most immediately, I am perhaps like your students, for whom sin is possibly both passé and nasty. In Brazil, they say there is no sin below the equator. But without sin, is there no sacrifice or grace? Whatever the nature of the perhaps feverish condensation of thinking in those blue books, I am moved to add my own. Similarly, seeing your stack of blue books, I am reminded of my own guilty responsibility to my own stack of my father's sermons and seminary papers. Also likely full of sin and sacrifice and grace. How should I read to understand them? You ask to what denomination did my father belong? Methodist. Ah, you consider. Forgiveness, you suggest. It is a very powerful idea.

So these conversing letters began.

Continental Divide

Homer, today, April 30, happens to be the day on which, over seventy years ago in 1942, my father and his family lost their freedom upon entry to Tanforan Racetrack, a designated Assembly Center in San Bruno, California, for the wartime removal of Japanese. Arriving by bus, heavily encumbered with what they could carry, they were housed in a series of empty horse stalls named Barrack 14. This was just the first stop; from Tanforan they would be transported by train into the Utah desert to live in a concentration camp named Topaz. That year my father turned thirty, the fourth of seven siblings, the three elder married with children.