

Notes for a Poem on Being Asian American

By Dwight Okita

As a child, I was a fussy eater
and I would separate the yolk from the egg white
as I now try to sort out what is Asian
in me from what is American –
the east from the west, the dreamer from the dream.
But countries are not
like eggs – except in the fragileness
of their shells – and eggs resemble countries
only in that when you crack one open and look inside,
you know even less than when you started.

And so I crack open the egg,
and this is what I see:
two moments from my past that strike me
as being uniquely Asian American.

In the first, I'm walking down Michigan Avenue
one day – a man comes up to me out of the blue and says:
"I just wanted to tell you...I was on the plane that

bombed Hiroshima. And I just wanted you to know that what we did was for the good of everyone." And it seems as if he's asking for my forgiveness. It's 1983, there's a sale on Marimekko sheets at the Crate & Barrel, it's a beautiful summer day and I'm talking to a man I've never seen before and will probably never see again. His statement has no connection to me – and has every connection in the world. But it's not for me to forgive him. He must forgive himself.

"It must have been a very difficult decision to do what you did," I say and I mention the sale on Marimekko sheets across the street, comforters, and how the pillowcases have the pattern of wheat printed on them, and how some nights if you hold them before an open window to the breeze, they might seem like flags – like someone surrendering after a great while, or celebrating, or simply cooling themselves in the summer breeze as best they can.

In the second moment – I'm in a taxi and the Iranian cabdriver looking into the rearview mirror notices my Asian eyes, those almond shapes, reflected in the glass and says, "Can you really tell the difference between a Chinese and a Japanese?"

And I look at his 3rd World face, his photo I.D. pinned to the dashboard like a medal, and I think of the eggs we try to separate, the miles from home he is and the minutes from home I am, and I want to say: "I think it's more important to find the similarities between people than the differences." But instead I simply look into the mirror, into his beautiful 3rd World eyes, and say, "Mr. Cabdriver, I can barely tell the difference between you and me."

From *Crossing with the Light* by Dwight Okita, Tia Chucha Press, Chicago, c. 1992.

Note: Okita added the last stanza of this poem after the original publication. Which ending do you prefer and why?

Dwight Holden Okita (born August 26, 1958) is a Japanese-American novelist, poet, and playwright. His work reflects his experiences as a third-generation Japanese-American (sansei), a gay man, and a Nichiren Buddhist. He studied English literature at the University of Illinois, Chicago. His first book of poems, *Crossing with the Light*, was published in 1992, and nominated for Best Asian Literature Book of 1993. His plays include *Salad Bowl Dance*, commissioned in 1993 by the Chicago Historical Society; *Richard Speck*, commissioned in 1991 by the American Blues Theater; and *The Rainy Season*, produced in 1993. His novels include *The Hope Store* (2017) and *THE PROSPECT OF MY ARRIVAL* (2011) which was a finalist in the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Awards. He won a Joseph Jefferson Award in 1996 for the collaborative play *The Radiance of a Thousand Suns*, which he wrote with Anne McGravie, Nicholas Patricca, and David Zak. (Source: Wikipedia)