

Internment Camp and Identity—Selected Passages from *When the Emperor Was Divine*

Otsuka, Julie. *When the Emperor Was Divine*. New York: Anchor Books. 2002.

The girl sat down and the woman gave her a glass of cold barley water and a long silver spoon. The girl licked the spoon and stared at her reflection. Her head was upside down. She dipped the spoon into the sugar bowl.

“Is there anything wrong with my face?” she asked.

“Why?” said the woman.

“People were staring.” (15)

Three times a day the clanging of bells. Endless lines. The smell of liver drifting out across the black barrack roofs. The smell of catfish. From time to time, the smell of horse meat. On meatless days, the smell of beans. Inside the mess hall, the clatter of forks and spoons, and knives. No chopsticks. An endless sea of bobbing black heads. Hundreds of mouths chewing. Slurping. Sucking. Swallowing. (50)

The rules about the fence were simple: You could not go over it, you could not go under it, you could not go around it, you could not go through it.

And if your kite got stuck on it?

That was an easy one. You let the kite go.

There were rules about language, too: *Here we say Dining Hall and not Mess Hall; Safety Council, not Internal Police; Residents, not Evacuees; and last but not least Mental Climate, not Morale.*

There were rules about food: No second helpings except for milk and bread.

And books: No books in Japanese.

There were rules about religion: No Emperor-worshipping Shintos allowed. (61)

The school was opened in mid-October. Classes were held in an unheated barrack at the far end of Block 8 and in the morning it was sometimes so cold the boy could not feel his fingers or toes and his breath came out in small white puffs. Textbooks had to be shared, and paper and pencils were often in short supply.

Every morning, at Mountain View Elementary, he placed his hand over his heart and recited the pledge of allegiance. He sang “Oh, beautiful for spacious skies” and “My country, ‘tis of thee” and he shouted out “Here!” at the sound of his name. His teacher was Mrs. Delaney. She had short brown hair and smooth creamy skin and a husband named Hank who was a sergeant in the Marines. Every week he sent her a letter from the front lines in the Pacific. Once, he even sent her a grass skirt. “Now when am I ever going to wear a grass skirt?” she asked the class.

“How about tomorrow?”

“Or after recess.”

“Put it on right now!”

The first week of school they learned all about the *Nina* and the *Pinta* and the *Santa Maria*, and Squanto and the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. They wrote down the names of the

states in neat cursive letters across lined sheets of paper. They played hangman and twenty questions. In the afternoon, during current events, they listened to Mrs. Delaney read out loud to them from the newspaper. *The First Lady is visiting the Queen in London. The Russians are still holding in Stalingrad. The Japs are massing on Guadalcanal.*

“What about Burma?” the boy asked.

The situation in Burma, she told the class, was bleak. (71–72)

He was there, above his mother’s cot. Jesus. In color. Four inches by six. A picture postcard someone had once sent to her from the Louvre. Jesus had bright blue eyes and a kind but mysterious smile.

“Just like the *Mona Lisa*’s,” said the girl.

The boy thought He looked more like Mrs. Delaney, only with longer hair and a halo.

Jesus’ eyes were filled with a secret and flickering joy. With rapture. He’d died once – “for you,” said his mother, “for your sins” – and then he’d risen.

The girl said, “Mmm.” She said, “That’s divine.”

Late at night, in the darkness, he could hear his mother praying. “Our Father, who art in heaven...”

And in the morning, at sunrise, coming from the other side of the wall, the sound of the man next door chanting. “*Kokyo ni taishite keirei.*”

Salute to the Imperial Palace. (82–83)