

## Introducing the SRPR Illinois Poet: David Cho

David Cho was born in Chicago of immigrant Korean parents. He is an Assistant Professor of English at North Park University in Chicago, where he resides with his wife and newborn son. He holds an M.F.A. from Purdue, and his baccalaureate degree from The University of Illinois. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The American Scholar*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Many Mountains Moving*, *Permafrost*, *Sycamore Review*, and *Amerasia*.

### Making a Song of Two Songs— A Discussion with David Cho

**SRPR:** You make a reference in one of your poems to traveling to America in utero. Why did your parents leave Korea and come to Chicago?

**David:** They left Korea because, although there is not a strict caste system as there is in India, there really is a social caste that has to do with the kind of labor one does. One's career, and caste, is determined forever around junior high age—whether one will be a professional, like a doctor, or something that is considered lesser in Korea. My dad was an architect, and after the war his career was booming, and my mom was an art teacher, yet they foresaw that the chances for their children to make it into the professional class were slim. They wanted to come to America because that was the place of opportunity for their children, the place where all of them could become doctors or join the professional class. So they gave up their own professions in Korea to come here.

**SRPR:** So this was one generation after the war, in the seventies?

**David:** Yes. At first it was them, then my cousins, all to be able to become doctors, particularly, or professionals generally, which was certainly more difficult in Korea where it was prized above almost all things. Many children fall through the cracks, even if their parents are professionals. The determination is made at a very early age. It is seen as disastrous if your parents are professionals and you don't make it, a disgrace to the whole lineage.

**SRPR:** It can be that way in the United States as well. People bring their ways with them, as did your parents.

**David:** Yes, I am not a doctor.

**SRPR:** You write about these things.

**David:** I do, and that is why I don't have a world to share with my family.

**SRPR:** Have they read your poems?

**David:** They came to my M.F.A. thesis reading. They said they were terribly embarrassed. They felt like I was trading family secrets. I wasn't, I was just kind of recording.

**SRPR:** You do have to use your own material, the source of your conflicts, the form behind the eye that observes, and where else does that come from but family, childhood, culture and culture clash? Do you think when your first book comes out that they will read it?

**David:** Yes, that will be their redeeming book prize. That will validate me/them, like a doctorate in English will validate me/them.

**SRPR:** Like a visible, tangible *objet d'art*—or rather *objet de success*. The book is like a diploma, your readership like a patient clientele.

**David:** Yes, exactly.

**SRPR:** I tell you, David, it is much easier to do what second and third generation American kids do—just rebel. They would probably discover your book somewhere down the road, but you wouldn't have to put up with the pressure. So your mother was pregnant with you when they arrived in Chicago. What part of Chicago?

**David:** North of what is now known as Korea Town, which is Lawrence Avenue. And then to the suburbs when I was in preschool—Elmhurst. And that was for the sole purpose of learning English, away from the influence of other immigrant families. So I think a lot of my love of literature came from that time. My dad had me sit down and read a book a day—children's books.

**SRPR:** Oh, little did he know that the method of achieving his dream for you would foster an opposing dream. His means to an end became for you the end, not a means. You write about the Americanization process in "Song of Our Songs." There's a very poignant moment when you say you would give anything to write a poem in the language of your father. Would it matter to your father if you wrote a poem in Korean?

**David:** Hm. Yes, I think so, now. He knows that I have mastered English and he is proud of that, yet he would be happy for me to show such respect for my roots in Korea. My wife speaks Korean very well, and he is pleased because of that. Still, there is an expression in Korean that means you are a nice person but what the language under the idiom means is that you are nice because you speak English well.

**SRPR:** You don't write poems in Korean?

**David:** No, but I use Korean-American phrasing quite a bit. There are words and phrases that only make sense in Korean.

**SRPR:** Yes, a way of being and thinking exists in any language. Take away the language, and the thought and way of being cease to exist.

You grow a second language-self when you learn another language and operate in the culture that language, in some measure, constructed. You use the Korean phrase in "Song of Our Songs" that means, "how will you make us proud" because it is part of Korean culture and not so much the contemporary American one? How does this blend of languages work in your poetic process?

**David:** I think I just write the way the language in my head works. I admire so much African-American poetry, because there is such a strong sense of culture in it, in its very cadences and rhythms. I can't think of that sense of culture as a "goal." That would falsify the culture that the ethnic traces of language carry.

**SRPR:** Yes, although it is more difficult, I think, for Korean Americans than for African Americans or Chicano poets, because the Korean American culture is not so well articulated, well formulated, in the English language. There hasn't been the time, or the critical mass. You don't yet have a ready English phrasing that is recognized as "Korean" either by those outside the culture group or inside. When a Korean-American poet wishes to write a poem around an issue that is not recognizably an ethnic issue, there is no language-blend home that would speak the non-ethnic issue from a distinctively recognizable Korean-American mode of expression. You have to build the language platform while you are standing on it and speaking. A question: Who is Harry in your Harry poems? He is on that language platform.

**David:** I think I modeled Harry to some extent on Berryman's Henry, who seems to me to be a very American kind of character. I wanted Harry to be a very American Korean, not me and not a stereotype buying in to all the cultural values of Korea or the United States.

**SRPR:** Harry is definitely not you and not a stereotype. He is tough, an observer, sees with what Zarina Plath and Derek Walcott call a stereoscopic vision: the vision from two perspectives, in this case the Korean immigrant who is trying to fit in and understand strange cultural norms in America so different from what is acceptable and valued in Korea and the wiser, almost ironic, distanced persona who has grown an American self, who has been acculturated, and who always exists in the strange space between the new sight and new language and the remembered old.