

On Foreign Shores

In Paul Yoon's novel, a Korean refugee arrives in Brazil seeking a fresh start.

BY TATJANA SOLI

A NUMBER of remarkable short novels have emerged in the recent past: "Tinkers," by Paul Harding; "Train Dreams," by Denis Johnson; "The Sojourn," by Andrew Krivak; "The Buddha in the Attic," by Julie Otsuka. Far from slight, they all deal with large themes and subjects that could easily fill 500-page

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books, yet have been compressed into poemlike works. Page count is one of the most prosaic ways to categorize a book, but it points to the fact that one approaches these works differently — the experience more akin to reading poetry or short fiction, where what is left out is at least as important as what remains. With "Snow Hunters," Paul Yoon proves himself well suited to the short form.

Yoon (singled out by the National Book Foundation as a young writer to watch) is the author of an acclaimed story collection, "Once the Shore," and he returns here to some of that book's themes: the aftermath of war and the search for connection by those who are for one reason or another left outside society.

"Snow Hunters" opens at the end of the Korean War as a refugee, Yohan, makes his way by cargo ship to Brazil to start a new life. One of the many mysteries of the book is why, after being released from two years in a prison camp, Yohan chooses not to repatriate to North Korea but instead accepts a United Nations offer to emigrate. The decision is a telling one; through the course of the story, we find that Yohan has no ties left to return to; he is going to a country where his only connection is a letter of employment with a Japanese tailor, Kiyoshi, who will become the first friend of his new life. The novel alternates between Yohan's time in Brazil and his time in the prison camp with his blinded childhood friend, Peng. War is presented here in small, exquisite slivers: "A girl sitting in an empty window frame in a destroyed town they were passing through. How she wiped the dirt off a pear wedge, showing the dark spaces where her teeth had been." Dislocation is not only a physical but an existential condition in Yoon's world — as inescapable for Yohan in Brazil as it was for the residents of the fictional South Korean island in the author's story collection.

Despite the bleak circumstances, the pleasures of "Snow Hunters" are many, and they begin with Yoon's prose, at once

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lyrical and precise, as in this description of Yohan standing in front of his new home in the early morning: "The rain continued to fall. It fell on the rooftops on the slopes of the hill and in the narrow streets and the alleyways and on the windows of the tailor's shop, blurring the image of his body. The morning was gray and the color of rust. All the sounds of the waking city seemed to rise toward the sky, dissipating as the rain fell."

Although the characters are almost uniformly scarred by life and exist in restrained circumstances, they all find joy either in the natural world or in acts of kindness to others. The strongest parts of the book delineate the tenuous bonds of friendship between characters, especially between adults and children. Yohan's relationship with a couple of vagrant children is among the most affecting in the novel, growing and changing over the course of a decade — but acts of kindness abound.

A stranger gives Yohan a blue umbrella on his first rainy morning. The unforthcoming Kiyoshi, upon meeting his new employee, notes the ill-fitting donated suit he has arrived in, and Yohan wakes to find the jacket altered to fit him better (just as his new Brazilian life is fated to do).

After Kiyoshi dies years later, Yohan takes over the tailor shop and forms another friendship with Peixe, the local church groundskeeper, who suffers from a limp caused by childhood polio. Yoon's characters bear their burdens lightly, whether emotional or physical. Peixe laughs easily, and forces Yohan out of his reclusive ways, incongruously taking him to a nightclub one evening. The beggar children make their irregular visits, like comets following orbits known only to them.

One of the gratifications of literature is to know a character in a book more completely than we can know people in real life. But from the prison camp to the iso-

lation of Yohan's existence in the tailor shop in the Japanese section of the hill town, which itself is bounded by the ocean and seemingly cut off from the rest of the world, Yoon's characters find others, even beloved ones, essentially mysterious. At the market as a boy with his father, Yohan observes the townspeople: "These lives that all seemed unknowable and closed as though oceans surrounded each of them."

Only years after the tailor's death, through a picture Peixe shows him, does Yohan discover that Kiyoshi was formerly a doctor, that the ascetic life he had chosen both was and was not his real one. Although we root for Yohan, wanting him to salvage a life that has been derailed by the larger forces of history, he remains an enigma. We feel about him as he feels about Kiyoshi, whom he loved but did not know: "He wondered . . . what the man had fled from, if he had fled at all. What

Dislocation is not only a physical but an existential condition for Yoon's damaged characters.

the man had let go of and whether it was possible to regain anything, to search and find it once more."

Time passes in the hill town. "There were days when he believed there was nothing more to come," Yoon writes of Yohan. "That there was nothing else. He had arrived and he had stayed. He had made a life. He had entered the future." Yohan is curiously without desire — which creates a challenge, since fiction is, as Faulkner put it, about "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself." While this reticence might seem logical in the context of Yohan's postwar trauma, it is mirrored to some extent in all the characters. Inaction, like happiness, is a form of narrative stasis that is difficult to write about. No matter how strikingly rendered, a series of moments and images ultimately needs causation rather than mere accumulation to move the story forward.

When his characters do have this drive, "Snow Hunters" hits on all cylinders and roars to life. In the prison camp, Yohan is all desire, trying to survive and to protect his childhood friend: "There were times when he fed Peng, who, in his exhaustion, was unable to leave the prisoner cabin, growing confused in his blindness as to where he was." Yohan also becomes more than an observer when he has a romantic interest, as in a brief relationship that reminds us, however fleetingly, that connection with others is the only real measure of a life well lived. "He luxuriated in the newness of being touched," Yoon writes. "Of touching someone." The scene, like the novel as a whole, is all the more powerful for its brevity. □