

“A Plot to Which There Isn’t More Than Meets the Eye, But Then There Is”

A dialogue with *Seven Samurai Swept Away in a River*
by Jung Young Moon

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Jung Young Moon, *Seven Samurai Swept Away in a River*. Trans. Yewon Jung. Deep Vellum Publishing, 168pp., \$15 paper.

I lobby for a new category: speculative nonfiction.

—David Searcy

...We'll keep fighting useless fights or getting swept away in a river, so you should keep writing useless fiction in which we do or do not make an appearance...¹

When I lived in Korea, sixteen years ago, I lived by a series of aphorisms. I said to myself “Korea will provide” and “That just set Korean-American relations back thirty seconds” and “It is possible Korea is hearsay.” That first often concerned meals and hunger but might also apply to buses, the second covered all manner of friction and misunderstanding and misstep, and the last was existential, coinciding as it happens with those same months when I discovered

¹ In this dialogue, excerpts from *Seven Samurai* are in **this typeface**.

how necessary the essay would be to how I moved in the world. It crossed my mind every time I tried to confirm some new fact or saying or artifact or ritual, it returned as I came back to the same place to the same person the very next day, repeated to them what I had understood them to say, and heard “Where did you get that?” again. It felt like nothing was fixed. There was nothing to be sure of. And that was fine. It opened a door for me.

...you could say that what I'm writing now too is something akin to finding a frozen waterfall instead of a prehistoric site while following a sign indicating a prehistoric site...

The writer D and the artist N are characters in Jung Young Moon's book *Seven Samurai Swept Away In a River* and possibly not characters at all, or at least characters and not characters at all, or maybe each but not both, which is to say characters as in an element of a fiction and characters as in people of distinct and charming personalities, and I want to be respectful of them all—of the author and the writer and the artist and the characters on the page and the actual people I know, whom I am so tempted to mistake for these characters. Which is to say I know a writer, D, who may or may not be *Seven Samurai's* D, who likes to tell a story about a day Moon borrowed a bicycle. D says Moon borrowed a bicycle and set out with the mission to come across something interesting. It was late when Moon returned. “Did you find anything interesting?” the writer D enquired. Moon shook his head from the bicycle. Not a single thing.

D and N, who knew I had begun working on a new novel, asked me what the novel was about and I told them it was a novel written by someone who didn't know much about Texas because he didn't know about Texas, a novel that didn't really have much to say, a halfhearted attempt to come up with of a series of groundless hypotheses, a mixture of the stream of consciousness technique, the paralysis of consciousness technique, and the derangement of consciousness technique, a novel that even a passing dog would laugh at, and after I said these things they rang true and my friends seemed perplexed, and I said the novel was going to be a disastrous failure to be mocked by everyone to which we toasted.

In October I arrived late—I'd been teaching—to the artist N's birthday party, one of those perfect dinner parties of people who do and don't know each other, enough to fill out the perimeter of the dining table and no chair in the house left over yet no one crowded, and a tall white cake we didn't do justice to, and the light so warm and welcoming (but maybe it's just the company that makes it seem so). And Ben Fountain read aloud, for five and a half pages, a list of plots that “still might as

well exist.” It was already a favorite passage of mine from *Seven Samurai Swept Away in a River*. I had already resolved to give the book to my father because it was his copy of *Catch 22* and his *Confederacy of Dunces* I had read long before. It was a thing I’d been finding excuses to read aloud myself—at home, in my classes, on the phone, to my brother because in the spring I’d read him a set of instructions by Julio Cortázar and we’d never recovered from the delight—and surely this reading was the best kind of gift, for the artist N, for anyone, but what I remember is how the writer B read and we all kept laughing—the quality of the laughter: as joyous and clear as anything I can call to mind, and this, too: communal, a thing run together—laughing not just because it was so glorious and absurd, but because it was so beautiful and so surprising, so audacious and true. It was the laughter of recognition, of fraternity, of writers who cannot see each other for the tears in their eyes.

...a plot that digs a grave for fictions, then buries them...

In college I took a literature course on Albert Camus, and every once in a while our Professor of French, Jean-Luc Garneau (the man who first taught me the phrase, “All translators are traitors”) would punctuate a passage of Camus as if in conspiracy, in his Québécois cadence, say to us and to the text, “I wish I’d written that.”

But since I’m writing something like this—which is no different from digging a ditch or a pit for no reason or purpose—I didn’t have to dig things like ditches and pits. But I could also keep on writing things like this while at the same time digging ditches or pits as well.

More recently, in a classroom of my own, a semester after a translator has hired me mostly to teach fiction, Jung Young Moon is visiting, escorted by a writer D and an artist N. They are talking about how in a previous draft the translator of the English version used the word *bison* when what they had gone to see was a *Texas longhorn*. My students, one of whom quite beautifully explains why it is we prize horns that curve and bow like a lyre, are prepared to excuse this confusion as close enough—they note the history and the symbolism of the bison, so much to be leveraged, such excusable poetic license—but Moon has brought pictures, grayscale print outs, one of a bison and one of a long-horned steer, and the visual aid convinces them: iconic American megafauna are not at all interchangeable. We must defer to the author’s intent.

...and what I wanted to say was things that kept going off on a tangent forever, if only that were possible.

Lately I have been talking a lot to the novelist and book artist and former scientific illustrator Fowzia Karimi—because there is a maker of

jewelry and furniture and pot boilers she really ought to meet, and a local paper store with a guillotine we really should visit, and because her first book comes out in April and because the first time we met, three years ago now, she was reading from that fiction while her paintings and family photographs and what she calls not illustrations but illuminations were projected above and behind her, glowing on the wall of a private home filled to standing room only by thirty or forty people, all jaws agape. Which I mention because one of the first things I ever said to the writer F, a thing I felt I had to say because it felt so urgent and obvious, said straight away that night was “I think you should know, that whatever you call this, we are going to claim it for the essay. Not to correct you or take it away from you. I don’t think you’re mistaken about what you’re doing. But the way you write about memory, about knowing, about being, about not knowing—how you attend, how you make the mind move—well, it makes me cry out to you as one recognizes a countryman.” I want to say the same thing to Moon.

...but perhaps I could keep a diary that was mostly about the absurd way in which I spent the day, which would make me click my tongue rather than grind my teeth and which would boggle my mind, both as I wrote it and as I read it afterward.

In honor of our guest I had asked my students that week to write about place, to write about Texas, and some of them have asked in multiple iterations if they really have to? They would rather die? It is not a thing they want to dwell on. They want to know, though they do not ask, why anyone would. I tell them they can leave Texas as soon as they want, in the writing, but they need to deal with it, in the writing, if only to say there’s no dealing with it. In our classroom Moon is saying it’s really important for you to decide what kind of writing to pursue; there are entertainers and there are writers of literature.

Moon says the Korean market is very commercialized. Moon is amused that the press for the English translation of *Seven Samurai* calls him a “cult” writer. Moon explains that means no one reads him. Moon is saying translation is the best way to practice writing: “Do one really good book and you’re very close to being a writer.” Moon says he tried a lot of things first.

...and then I could do nothing but stare at the door floating in the water which looked like an entrance to another world but in fact certainly wasn’t an entrance to another world, a door that you could say led nowhere rather than a door that led everywhere, and I could wonder if perhaps I could escape from such vagueness and arrive at a world of even more intense vagueness, which too would be as vague as could be but different—if only I could open that door and enter.

I have never borrowed a bicycle in the town of C, where I lived for a month, the same town or not the same town of C where *Seven Samurai* is based, the same or not the same bronze statues, the same or not the same monument to Wolf brand chili. Though bicycles were on offer. And they would have made it easier to get to the museum, to its collection of Civil War letters, the stain of Abraham Lincoln's blood in a scrap book, the thousands of points and arrowheads churned out again from the land because of local geology and collected by one family for generations and composed on mats of colored felts pieced together in patterns no one talks about. I was too delighted to be in a place where one might walk, walk from the old fraternal lodge where I was staying to the post office or the grocery store. And so if it wasn't raining I walked, to get spinach or cheese or to take a phone call or to idly count the stray cats after a resident remarked on how few there were. Sometimes the artist N would pick me up in her truck, take me to get ice cream or visit an estate sale or beat filter paper against the gravestone of an unknown tightrope walker buried in the Jewish cemetery. Mornings I'd run, working the grid of downtown, headed in any direction until it yielded, to cul de sacs, to countryside, to roads crossing train tracks and bridges with no shoulder when a car came up—but always I finished the run by letting myself back into the old fraternal lodge, climbing the flight of stairs in peeling paint and the flight of stairs that sloped to the left and the winding spindle spiral of stairs to the attic and the short flight of old boards to pop the latch and emerge to the rooftop. I'd go up again each evening to watch the sun set, level with the statue of justice in the court house dome a few blocks away, marveled every time at this world so different three stories up, how inaccessible to most people most of the time for most of human history, how very windy, how many birds, the temperature different, the night hawks marked on their wings like old fighter planes.

...but he could have thought, too, about how because of him people would now be talking about someone who'd taken dogs with him on his way to kill someone, and say a lot of things about how they should interpret the behavior, and, in fact, one of the things people had the most difficulty understanding regarding his murder of Oswald was the fact that he took his dogs with him; and authors who thought they could not help but talk about something like that, including Norman Mailer, wrote about it.

Moon says there are conventional fictions, works of characters and conflicts and plot; and then there are unconventional fictions, with no conflict, no solution. Moon says theme becomes important in unconventional fictions. There is no message to the reader. Life itself is pointless. And, fundamentally, writing is very sad, empty. I have sometimes thought that the writing is empty, but like a vessel, like a

screen, the writing waiting for its reader to do the other half of the work. Empty because the reader must pour into it, project onto it, complete it in some way. Which perhaps is why the reading does not feel empty. The reading may skirt melancholy and meandering, and yet be anything but sad. A student whose attendance in my office hours is better than his attendance in my class points out to me in office hours what perfect shoes Moon was wearing in our class, how exactly right the fit of his black leather jacket. My student draws my attention to how hard it is to look as if you don't care, aren't trying, to be impeccable at that. But my student came to office hours to discuss an intellectual crisis. My student is concerned that there is no meaning in anything. "Yes," I say. "Exciting, isn't it?"

There was no way to confirm that the rumor about the woman skating by herself at her roller skating rink was true, and although there were only rumors that couldn't be confirmed surrounding the woman I thought, without any grounds, that perhaps she was a ballerina from the former Soviet Union.

Once, in the town of C, a couple of years after Moon was there visiting ranches and second hand stores and reading Bob Trammell's *Jack Ruby and the Origins of the Avant-Garde in Dallas*, I went for a walk and it was too hot to continue, but such a nice summer evening I lay down on the courthouse lawn. The lawn angled steeply up so I lay propped up some, extended like a starfish, not unlike a person against a snow drift about to swipe out the wings and gown of an angel, and listened to the sirens of an emergency vehicle criss-crossing the neighborhood until it stopped to ask if I'd seen anyone collapsed and unconscious. I hadn't. But it occurred to me that laying on the courthouse lawn was eccentric, did not fit a standard script, had no plot, might look exactly like someone collapsed and unconscious if you didn't stop to ask. I thought of the woman seven years before, in Iceland, who joined her own search party, never knowing she'd been lost.

(Anyone may write a poem or a piece of fiction with these plots, but if you do, please let me know.) ♪