The Fiction of Limbo

Novelist Paul Yoon explores Laos’s forgotten war.
by BAILEY TRELAL

“MY FICTION IS constantly in transit,” says novelist and Briggs-Copeland Lecturer Paul Yoon. “If I were to self-analyze it, my guess is that it probably comes from the fact that my history is one of transit, of being in limbo.”

For Yoon—whose most recent novel, Run Me to Earth, came out in January—the earliest awareness of family history is indelibly tied to his grandfather, who fled North Korea for the south during the Korean War. “When I think back and ask myself what I remember about my family, it all begins with stories about my grandfather sneaking across the border as a refugee.”

Yoon’s grandfather never immigrated to the United States, although he visited a few times when Yoon was young. The author’s parents met after both had moved to the States in the late 1970s, but impermanence remained the norm. He remembers his parents and their friends sharing their experiences of immigrating and the way, once arrived, they continued to drift, moving from California to New York or vice versa. Growing up, Yoon himself shuttled around within New York state, rarely staying anywhere longer than five years as his father, a doctor, moved from one hospital to another. “There was always this constant movement to find happiness, and a place to settle and make a life,” he explains. “I think that motion is just embedded in my sense of life and story.”

Those early experiences have helped shape a body of fiction remarkably attuned to the exigencies of flight and the perpetual searching that often typify immigrant narratives. In 2009, Yoon published Once the Shore, eight interlinked short stories set on a fictional island off the coast of South Korea. His 2013 novel, Snow Hunters, traces the life of a Korean refugee who escapes to Brazil by cargo ship at the end of the Korean War. And in 2017’s short-story collection, The Mountain, a series of characters, times, and places—New York, Spain, South Korea—are also obliquely tied to the war as a way of investigating the psychological aftermath and physical displacement it engendered.

The experience of diaspora is reflected in the warp and weft of Yoon’s fiction—in the ruptured movement of his plots and in the sparse, minimalist prose that seeks to capture, impressionistically, the flashing-by of lived reality and the peculiar play of memory that accompany physical displacement. A sense of place permeates Yoon’s writings, which tend to fracture along geographical lines.

For Run Me to Earth, he chose to address a different anchoring event: what he calls the “shadow history” of the bombing the United States conducted in Laos beginning in 1964, a nearly decade-long assault that devastated the country with more than two million tons of ordnance. During research for The Mountain, Yoon learned about the campaign in Laos, a conflict frequently overshadowed by the Vietnam War that lent itself to his interest in indirect thematic explorations. The new book’s plot follows a small cast of characters as they leap across continents and decades, from the 1960s to the present day, and from Laos to Perpignan in southern France, Sa Tuna in Spain, and upstate New York. What’s remarkable, given the bombs that open the book and the successive tragedies that send its characters wandering through the world, is how the novel remains so grounded, in a very literal sense.

Yoon’s fictions crystallize around mountains, islands, fields, and landscapes. Partly, he says, this stems from a deep respect for nature, though it’s also in some ways a metaphor for the act of writing and storytelling itself. “When I think about the natural world, and the landscape and environment, I think of tremendous layers—whether that’s layers of sky, layers of earth; what’s on the land, or what’s under it,” he explains. “It’s a very three-dimensional, layered world, and for me that evokes, or represents, the way I want readers to experience a story and its characters, as well.”

In Run Me to Earth, the landscape serves in part as a symbol for memory. The book’s first section follows Alisak, Prany, and Noi, three teenagers orphaned by war who are serving as couriers for a makeshift hospital thrown up by international aid workers in an abandoned mansion. At the behest of Vang, the head physician, they swerve through the countryside on dilapidated motorcycles in search of medicine, passing through the endless rain of bombs and carefully negotiating fields pitted with unexploded ordnance. At one point, Alisak and Prany look on as Noi makes her way through a minefield:

They watched Noi move across upturned earth and broken bits of stone, the soles of her feet searching for patches that appeared untouched. She would be avoiding the feel of a hard, curved surface under the dirt as much as she could. Every time she stepped forward, she dug her heel in, leaving a solid footprint she could follow back.

Noi’s passage through the field is delicate and calculated, leaving traces in the landscape that are tied, like breadcrumbs, directly to survival. Years later, when Prany returns to the mansion, Yoon again emphasizes the physicality of memory: “Always to his surprise, it was this house his mind had often leaped to these past years. The way he roamed the halls. Entered the rooms and opened drawers as if he were looking for something that had been put away. The way they were all together.”

The web of connections in Run Me to Earth is vast and fine. Instead of fleeing the country himself with the help of a smuggler, Prany
Setting the Stage
Joshua McTaggart leads London's Chelsea Theatre into a new era.

by Olivia Munk

London's Chelsea Theatre can be found off a main road in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, a neighborhood where household incomes are typically three times the national average. By contrast, the theater itself is tucked into the World's End Estate, a public-housing complex built in the 1970s that also includes a school and a church. The irony of affordable housing hidden away in an area rife with cafés bearing names like "Juice Baby" and antique shops selling £35,000 chandeliers is lost on no one; this is "the face of inequality caused by the British government's austerity program.

The 30-year-old theater has just completed an 18-month, £2.5-million capital campaign refurbishment and now faces a new challenge. It seeks to repose itself as a venue presenting work comparable to that of the prestigious Royal Court Theatre (just down the road in townhouse-lined Sloane Square), while remaining affordable and welcoming to the more than 2,500 residents in its backyard.

In 2018, Joshua McTaggart ’13 was recruited to lead the Chelsea into its second life as its joint artistic director and CEO. At the time, McTaggart was the founding artistic director of another London theater, The Bunker, which he and a business partner had converted from an abandoned parking garage into a thriving off-West End locale. (Ironically, The Bunker lost its lease in 2019, a victim of the ever-shifting ecologies of London's arts and real-estate industries, and is set to close this spring, just as the Chelsea prepares for its eventual opening.)

McTaggart discovered a love of theater, and directing in particular, at Harvard. Thanks to campus extracurriculars. (He graduated before Theater, Dance, and Media became a concentration.) His most memorable shows included a 25-person production of Stephen Sondheim's Sweeney Todd in Farkas Hall, and British writer Mark Ravenhill's Pool (no Water), performed, fittingly, in the Adams Pool Theatre, a repurposed swimming pool with no water. These undergraduate productions represented a valuable time and environment in which artistic risks were not only possible but encouraged, he says, with support from the Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club and the Office of the Arts.

After graduating from Harvard with a concentration in history and a secondary field in English, McTaggart plunged into London's "fringe" theater scene, directing plays on shoestring budgets in rooms above pubs and managing theater festivals. Then came The Bunker. There, he says, "being an artistic director meant making sure the toilets got cleaned as well as picking plays." He cares just as much about the lavatories at the Chelsea, but also has the additional role of CEO, providing financial guidance and strategy for what he deems a "civic space" rather than either a community center or theater. In the redesigned Chelsea—a modern, open building with high ceilings and natural light—studios are used for community projects like film clubs for women over 50 and pop-up offices for local housing associations. Programming for the fully flexible, 135-seat theater was set to start this fall, but will be delayed several months because of the coronavirus pandemic.

McTaggart intends for the Chelsea to en-