

ONCE THE SHORE, STORIES BY PAUL YOON '98 | A review by Dana Pilson '85

Once the Shore, a collection of short stories by Paul Yoon '98, is like a bowl of fresh grapes. Pick one, enjoy its texture and zest, turn it around in your mouth, chew, and slowly swallow. Close your eyes for a moment, take a deep breath, and pick another. The stories in this collection are equally succulent and flavorful, and should be relished unhurriedly. Start at the beginning, or work your way backward. You will be rewarded, whichever path you take.

Eight elegant and eloquent short stories take place on Solla, an imaginary island off the coast of South Korea. Solitary characters inhabit Solla: only children, widows and widowers, orphans wrapped up in their private worlds. Their relationships are few, but deep and often complex. They grapple with love, separation and death. There may be constant loss, but there is also comfort. Yoon explains, "Two wars—the Second World War and the Korean War—hover over these stories. All the characters in these stories are connected to someone who was taken away by those wars, and I wanted that unity within the island, that connection among all the characters and their stories." Yoon says that initially he imagined the island as a diptych painting, with foreign military occupation on one side and tourism on the other. In the collection, the island emerges as a polyptych—the military and tourism are joined by the regular lives that are shaped, changed and damaged in this landscape.

Each of the eight stories contains a potent afterimage, a picture that continues to resonate long after the last word is read—a moment that seems to cry out for cinematography. In the first story, "Once the Shore," an American widow has come to the island seeking the initials her deceased husband carved into a cave while on furlough from his Army post. She befriends a young waiter (his own brother lost at sea after a collision with an American submarine), and he agrees to bring her to the cave. She sits at a table set up on the beach, blindfolded by the waiter. The reader cannot help but suspect the worst. But then she is handed a thermos of coffee, and her blindfold is removed so that she may view a stunning mass of penguins emerging from the sea.

In "Among the Wreckage," a desperate mother, floating on a large, door-sized piece of wood, searches the sea for her only son. "Faces to the Fire" culminates with a deeply disappointing dis-

covery about an old friend. A girl explains to her ailing father, "He traveled great distances. He started fires. And I thought it beautiful. And loved him." In "So That They Do Not Hear

Us," an abused, one-armed boy submerged in a bathtub speaks in bubbles to his friend, a 66-year-old sea diver. In "The Woodcarver's Daughter," loosely derived from a Korean folk tale, a lame girl brings a young American soldier to a cave filled with offerings, including a group of her own walking sticks—one for each year of her life. The story "Look for Me in the Camphor Tree" focuses on a bereaved girl who believes she sees a woman wearing her deceased mother's dress. In a frenzy of grief, she runs off during a snowstorm, and her father finds her the next morning tucked into the warm safety of her beloved pony. In "And We Will Be Here," an exhausted nurse encounters a blind boy riding a bicycle in the hospital garden. "The Hanging Lanterns of Ido" begins with a Thai waitress believing a man is actually a deceased friend, hav-

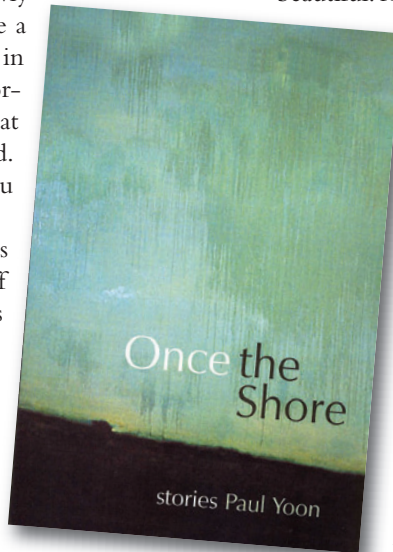
ing somehow returned to life. This shattering case of mistaken identity revolves around a single moment and the simplest of lines: "It's you."

Paul Yoon's first book has received critical acclaim since its release.

The island of Solla, with its dark caves, misty mountains, small fishing villages and deep woods, is mystical, yet strangely familiar. This imagined place with roots in

reality may remind readers of the South American landscapes created by Gabriel García Márquez. Yoon is enamored with magic realism, and he paraphrases author Edward P. Jones: "There's really nothing odd about, say, the devil visiting someone at a supermarket or a woman walking on water." This could be entirely believable. A girl not quite sure how to cope with the loss of her mother sees a ghostly figure in the woods. A woman traumatized by loss and war conjures up someone to keep her company. These things make sense to Yoon, and to the reader as well. Novelist John Berger also writes of the dead and the disappeared living close beside the living. Yoon says, "Every time I finish one of his books, I look up, truly believing and expecting someone I have lost to be sitting in front of me."

Yoon visited Korea three or four times as a young boy. He explains, "The Korea then, in the 1980s, was much different than it is now, so my memories of the country are probably inaccurate." Yoon's stories are not intended to provide exact portraits of Korea, and he did very little research beyond reading some books to ground him in the place and certain time periods. He couldn't afford to travel, and he didn't want facts to hinder his own imagination and his own vision of the book. "Korea was a way in for me, because my parents were born there," Yoon says, but none



of the stories are autobiographical; perhaps they are more emotionally autobiographical.

The stories inhabit various microcosms and vague time periods. Like shifting planes, they slightly overlap, caves are revisited, and characters reappear ever so subtly that the reader might not even notice. *Once the Shore* bears comparison with *Olive Kitteridge*, by Elizabeth Strout. These stories are bound by a single character who appears throughout, sometimes as a main character, sometimes peripherally. Olive's myriad facets are slowly revealed over the course of the book. In *Once the Shore*, the island is the constant character, and it too is mapped out from every side. Upon reaching the end of the final story, the reader knows Solla as a deeply nuanced, beloved character.

Yoon is a gifted writer who writes what he knows, and his vivid imagination shines in his works. His firsthand experience with horses translates into believable ponies traipsing through many of the stories. He convincingly writes of companionship and loneliness, of love and loss, of kindness and violence. The voices of older women, older men, young girls, and men and women in their 30s are equally authentic. In each story, tragedy is intertwined with simple acts of kindness. Misfortune often sets the stage, but goodness—though it may not always prevail—is present. There are no fairy tale endings, but the reader is left with the sensation of having witnessed something universal. After finishing each story, I needed to close my eyes, to hold the afterimage of each narrative in my mind as I slowly returned to the present. Yoon recalls the first time he read a Richard Ford story: “[It] ends with a question directed at the reader, and my heart stopped and I gasped.” Lyrical and magical, *Once the Shore* has a similar effect. ●

Dana Pilson '85 is an art historian and writer. She has contributed essays on American art to various museum catalogues, and she is currently working on a collection of short stories.

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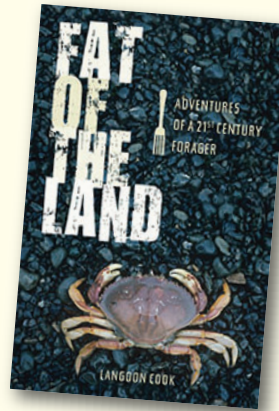
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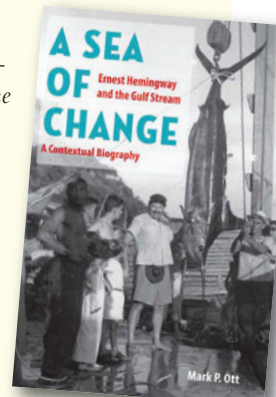
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