

Cooking With Koon

THE TRUTH IN RENTED ROOMS
BY KOON WOON
KAYA PRESS, NY, 1998

REVIEW BY STEVE POTTER

Koon Woon told the audience at Open Books bookstore in Wallingford on a recent night that poetry was the only thing that held him together after mental illness ended his hopes of a career in science or mathematics. Woon was there to read in celebration of his first book of poems, *The Truth in Rented Rooms*, published this month by New York City's Kaya Press.

Woon's writing displays none of the solipsism, complaints, and self-pity sometimes associated with poetry as self-help. On the contrary, the book is full of sharp-eyed observations of the human condition, great compassion, and moments of sly humor, as in the poem "How to Cook Rice," which includes the advice:

*... Now place lid on top
and reduce heat to medium, go read your
newspaper until you get to the comics, then
come back and turn it down
to low.
The heat has been gradually traveling from the
outside to the inside of the rice, giving it
texture;
a similar thing happens with people, I suppose.
Go back to your newspaper, finish the comics
and read the financial page. Now the rice is
done ...*

Woon never lets the humor overshadow the compassion, though. Before wrapping up the poem with a final (and generous) comic turn, he reminds us:

*before you eat, consider the peasant who arcs
in leech-infested paddies and who carefully
plants the rice seedlings one by one, and this
night, you are eating better than he.*

Then the last lines:

*If you still don't know how to cook rice, buy a
Japanese automatic rice cooker; it makes
perfect rice every time!*

The book is divided into three sections: "7th Avenue South (1985 - 1992)," "The Morrison (1993 - 1996)" and "International Terrace (1996 - 1998)," according to Woon's place of residence at the time of composition. The terrain covered within the work is still broader than these three Seattle locations, with poems set in Aberdeen, where Woon grew up, and a number of poems that deal with life in the small village near Canton, in China, where he was born and lived until the age of eleven.

One of these, "In Water Buffalo Time," is possibly the most moving poem in the collection. Two thirds of the way into it, in a passage reminiscent of Whitman, the narrator takes on the persona of a water buffalo and considers the differences between men and beasts:

*Yet a man, with all his
skill on an abacus, is
afraid
Of things he cannot see.
The man and his family
Are afraid of dark, gloomy
gods handed down to them
And buy copious amounts
of incense and charms.
My mother, whose teats I
suckled for only a brief
while,
Gave me no such gods of
thunder to fear.
I don't even fear tigers. A
man is cursed with worry:
Thieves because he has too
much, fires because he is*

*careless,
And ghosts because he offends others.
But I, with the gold-pleated sky for a blanket,
Sweet-smelling rice straw for a bed, a breeze
from the river,
I have recompense for my toil, with the village
symphony
Of crickets, cicadas, and bullfrogs,
I shall say beasthood is as good as Buddha-
hood.*

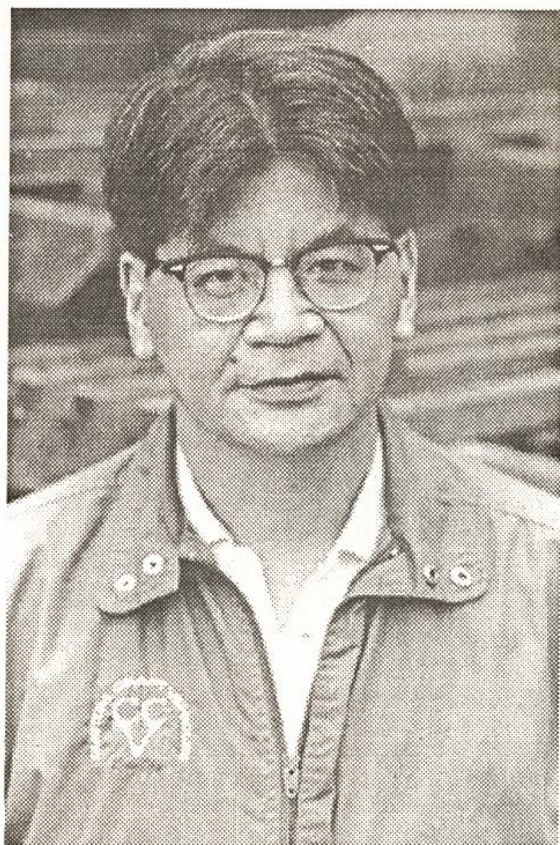
A subtle eroticism runs through many of the poems, such as "You Naughty Woman Smiling Coily at Me" and "At the Bus Stop," which begins:

*A young woman peels herself like a banana,
soft, sweet, and fragile...*

and ends with the narrator, who's been eating fried chicken while observing the woman, reporting:

*she mounts the bus while I wonder
what to do with my greasy fingers.*

We also gain insight into the lives of



lonely men in cheap rented rooms, shelters and mental institutions in poems such as "It's All I've Got, He Said...", "An Old Hotel Dweller," and "A Moment in My Rented Room." The third stanza of "Goldfish" begins:

I have been unpopular with myself, pacing in my small, square room, but my uncle said, "Even in a palace, you can but sleep in one room. With this I become humble as a simple preacher, saying, 'I have no powers; they emanate from God."

It is this humility, as well as compassion and humor, that make Koon Woon's aptly titled first book of poems, *The Truth in Rented Rooms*, well worth your attention. ☞

Koon Woon was a student of the late poet and University of Washington professor Nelson Bentley in the mid-eighties. His poetry has appeared in Bellowing Ark, Seattle Review, Crab Creek Review, Real Change, and numerous other publications.

Steve Potter is a local poet and writing instructor. His poetry has appeared in Point No Point and King County's Poetry Bus project, among others. He also serves on the board of Red Sky Poetry Theatre.

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