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Chiwan Choi: The Fire This Time

Jack Grapes · Wednesday, February 1st, 2017

When Chiwan Choi first walked into my class over 25 years ago, he was a 17-year old teenager, quiet and introspective. The writers in my Method Writing class were all adults, well into their 30s, and many even older. Some had already written books, novels, poems, plays, screenplays even (what a concept in Hollywood!), and were all excellent writers. Chiwan snuggled into a nondescript spot on the couch, scrunched between a guy who planned to win the Nobel Prize and a gray-haired woman who had already won one. I don't think either one planned to learn new tricks, despite Method Writing's array of linguistic tricks and literary constructs. Everyone in the room, I'm sure, were thinking to themselves, should I read my story about incest or abuse or sexual escapades in front of this 17-year old boy who seemed so innocent and naive.

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Then after the first week of introductions and discussion of process, everyone went home to write based on the first concept of Method Writing. I didn't want to call on Chiwan right away; I wanted to give him time to acclimate, have a chance to hear the others. About halfway through the class, after the break for coffee and cookies, I called on Chiwan. He pulled out a piece of paper from his back pocket and unfolded it several times until it bloomed in a creased sheet of 8 ½ by 11 loose leaf paper. And he began to read. And it was one of those experiences you have when all your assumptions fall away and you're left in awe. Chiwan was a writer – even more so, a poet. Not one line was stale or forced. It was as if the words came out of necessity. There was wisdom that startled the gray haired lady to his right and intellectual configurations that humbled the guy who planned on the Nobel Prize.

Where did he get this? I'm not even sure Chiwan could have told us if we'd asked him. His family had left Korea when he was five. But he was pretty much an American teenager. This American teenager wrote like a master. A master who didn't need to pretty anything up, didn't need to show off his intellect, a master who could draw a straight line without a ruler, a master who could hit the high note without straining.

Chiwan continued to study with me for many years. I pretended to teach him for many years. He went through the many levels of Method Writing, and then we freelanced. I assigned him poets and writers to study from Bukowski to Dante, from Frank O'Hara to Marcel Proust. I pretended I was the one making his writing even better. I didn't want to give myself away, so I kept things simple. Chiwan was always up to the task, and always brought in work that humbled every one of us in

class. When it was his turn to read, he pulled a folded-up piece of paper out of his back pocket, unfolded it, then read without any hint of performance. But it was a performance nevertheless. As Robert Frost said, feats of performance and association. The mind and heart clicking, revealing the soul of a story, the truth of an image, the grief of a loss.

Picasso said that when he was a child he could paint like a master, and that he'd spent the rest of his life trying to paint again like a child. I think the same could be said for Chiwan. I'd like to say each book he wrote got better and better, but that would be a simplification. Chiwan wrote like a master as a 17-year old teenager, and he still writes like a master. What has evolved has been more challenges to himself, more discoveries of the heart. His first two chapbooks were a delight, then his first full-length book of poems *The Flood* in 2010, then *Abductions* in 2012, and now *The Yellow House*, a book of such breadth and depth it's hard to hold it in one's hand and not have it catch fire.

As Chiwan's teacher back in those days when we all huddled in my apartment on Orange Street, I'd like to say I'm responsible for Chiwan's wonderful writing. But as I said, I just pretended to teach him. In many ways, Chiwan taught me. Get his books. See what I mean.

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