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Knife Song Korea: A Novel
Richard Selzer
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"There's no duty like it. There's nothing in this world like it," the protagonist of *Knife Song Korea* hears of his assignment—a surgeon in an Army artillery unit during the Korean War. There's nothing quite like this book too, an expressive portrayal of Sloane—an erudite and responsive doctor. Told mostly in third-person point-of-view with occasional first-person missives from Sloane to his U.S. wife, the book recreates the Korean War with its afflicted patients of multiple nationalities and allegiances.

To say there's nothing like this book is not to place it in a sphere of its own. Certainly this book joins such canon fixtures as *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* in its discerning study of war. Several aspects of this book are familiar—its plot, for instance. But Selzer does offer the exceptional in this compressed—though not dense—account of a relatively underrepresented war. *Knife Song Korea* is a slim novella that holds unseen worlds of knowledge—the stained-glass beauty of cellular gonorrhea, for instance. Selzer has served as a professor at the Yale School of Medicine, but he has not isolated himself to one field. Rather, Selzer seems to knowingly lend the text to postcolonial theory and animality studies.

Something must be said, too, of this book's style. The lyrical work is free to reach for the far-flung point of interest or simile, such as in the description of the Yellow Sea: "A misnomer, he thought, it's the Gray Sea, gray as a timberwolf and rabid, lying on its side, flanks heaving with forced respiration and the spume of the waves like spittle bubbling from its jaws." After reading such passages, one is not surprised to learn that this book was originally written during Selzer's own tour of duty in Korea. That Selzer touched and breathed in Korea is evident. The Korea he renders in these pages feels surreal, yet exact.

With such accolades as the Pushcart Prize and the American Medical Writers Award and over thirteen books to his name, Selzer has again composed a must-read. *Knife Song Korea*won the *California Literary Review*'s Critics' Picks for Best Books of 2009. Each word, each metaphor of this book revives a Korean War that is still pulsating, still bursting with shouts,

grinding gears, and rampant illness. For a lasting time, a lasting work.

Janelle Adsit