*Bosun*, by New Juche rev. by Cheyenne Avila

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Cities are living histories whose architectures hold fascinating potential for seeing and understanding the past. In his seventh book, *Bosun*, the elusive writer New Juche chronicles his experiences in Rangoon, Burma, compares them to his childhood in Britain, and examines British colonial influence over the architecture in Rangoon. The book echoes similar themes and further elaborates on experiences published in Juche’s fourth book, *Mountainhead*, a sexually-charged travelogue about prostitution, identity, place, and the physical self. *Bosun* follows this travelogue style of writing, lingering in moment-to-moment descriptions of how Juche passed his time wandering through the streets and squalor of Rangoon. However, in *Bosun*, Juche’s sexually-charged prose is exchanged for a candid and detailed prose that creates a hushed and critical, though arguably ambivalent, view of violence and the nature of relationships between oppressors and the oppressed.

*Bosun*, a 136-page book, devotes 84 pages to a somewhat languid but painstakingly detailed stream-of-consciousness-esque-travelogue-prose. There are no structural breaks or chapters, rather, the narrative is anchored by highly detailed, moment-to-moment reflections.

Juche chooses to make full use of the 84 pages of narrative as one languid recollection of both Rangoon and his childhood boarding school on Mersea Island in England. The shifts in place and time can be sudden, but are never jarring, because Juche’s slow-paced, meticulously descriptive prose carries the reader directly from image-to-image. For instance, the following excerpt describes a basement bar Juche stumbles upon after a long day of wandering through the streets of Rangoon:

*The beer has done me remarkable good and has been a wonderful tonic, although my discomforts are still legion. I take up the tobacco pouch again and carefully roll a fuller cigarette, which is more effort to smoke than the first although I have better control of it this time in both my fingers and my mouth, and in any case, I have the presence of mind to acknowledge the slight difference in function between the first cigarette and the one that I’m smoking now, which I am drawing from deeply and heartily, doing little ejections of thick, pure, uninhaled smoke from my nose, before taking down long, tight lungfuls and breathing them out all over myself.* (49)

The full paragraph, which stretches five pages, details Juche’s twenty or so minutes in the basement bar in extreme, moment-to-moment detail. Juche ends the paragraph making eye contact with one of the martials in the bar. This final, defiant look Juche gives to the martial man then transitions to him recalling how he first looked at the Secretariat building in Rangoon, which he calls the “seat and centre of Britannic rule” (50) in Burma. Although his descriptions can be somewhat verbose and almost frustratingly detailed, Juche’s writing achieves a brilliant sleight-of-hand effect on the reader. The present-tense, detail-oriented scenes mute the tensions in the book, in the process, making them more impactful. The reader understands that Juche includes the details of his final, defiant look at the martial man in the basement bar to allude to the same way that the people of Rangoon view the colonialist Secretariat building.

Throughout the book, the elaborate, lengthy, and thorough descriptions contribute to a verbose narration that restricts and quiets the tone of the story. Scenes are left to pensive reflection rather than understanding Juche’s emotional responses. For instance, Juche’s retelling of how he and his friends at his boarding school nearly beat another student to death is a peculiarly tonally vacant scene: “straight away we all began laughing. I laughed so hard I could hardly clench a fist. I couldn’t see Philip’s body because of the hands all over him, there was just this lump of fleshy dough that I couldn’t stop hitting” (61). The scene follows Juche’s characteristically detailed and bare-knuckled writing style. He doesn’t reflect on the incident from the present, doesn’t offer his condolences to Philip, doesn’t even insinuate a feeling of remorse; rather, he simply tells the reader what happened and how. Juche’s decision to withhold tone, especially considering how this narrative encompasses colonial occupation and childhood abuse, is a poignant and purposeful craft of his writing. What matters most is not how the images make him feel, but what the images themselves are, and how the reader understands them and makes sense of them in the course of the narrative. Juche sacrifices tonal impact in his writing in order to contribute to his quiet, almost ambivalent perspective on violence.

Juche’s candid, tonally vacant accounts of abuse in his childhood boarding school, along with his vivid detail of Rangoon’s preserved British colonial architecture reveal how accustomed the oppressed become to the presence and actions of their oppressors, how the most insidious acts of violence are often muted and hidden in everyday interactions, and how violence and oppression create a connection, and perhaps even an affinity, between the oppressed and their oppressors.