

Khuôn Viên Tình Khúc

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Sân trường từng buổi chiều, tôi lang thang kiếm dấu chân người. Vì tình
Sang mùa, trời trở lạnh, ai có ro dưới mái thư viện. Rồi từng
cờ, một buổi học, tôi quen em hiện trước thư viện. Hạt nắng
giờ, lòng trách lòng, em nơi đâu, áo trắng thiênthần? Một tối
ngả trên tóc ngủ say, tròn mắt huyền làm tim băng khuàng.
nào tuyết lấm hàng mi, làm mắt gầy vì mang đau thương.

Trong mắt nai, sâu chưa vấn vương vương sợi buồn;
Đôi mắt nai, người đã đến tô đen muện phiền;

trên nét môi, tình chưa đến mi em một lần. Em
trên cánh môi, tình đã đến gây bao tội tình. Em

qua đây, tóc bay bay trong gió chiều, hôn ngấn ngơ say. Em
ra đi, để nơi đây thu

Tác giả chân thành cảm ơn sự góp ý của anh Trịnh Trọng, anh Mai Ngọc và chị Kiều Hạnh. Nhạc phẩm này đã được anh Mai Ngọc trình bày lần đầu trong đêm lửa trại của trại hè Về Với Non Sông V.

Gm C7 F

qua đây, tóc bay bay trong gió chiều, hồn ngẩn ngơ say.

2. C7 F Gm

chết buồn, triệu lá khô bay. Em ra đi, để nơi đây thu

C7 F B \flat 3 3

chết buồn, triệu lá khô bay. Bao lần đợi chiều tàn, khuôn viên

F B \flat 3 3 3 3

mong tóc xưa trở lại. Rồi từng ngày lạnh lùng dài, anh miên

F B \flat 3 3 Gm 3

mơ áo trắng năm nào. Nhìn nắng vàng le lói đỉnh cây, để thấy

C7 F 3

lòng buồn lan châu thân. Nhìn nắng

B \flat 3 Gm 3 C7 F Fine

vàng le lói đỉnh cây, chợt nhớ người, buồn vang tâm tư.

Một Vầng Trăng



• Tân Xuyên

Đông giật mình, chòang tỉnh: ánh trăng trong vát chiếu xuyên qua màn kính, trái thành một vệt sáng huyền diệu dưới chân. Đêm nay rằm, “Đêm nay rằm yến tiệc sáng trên trời!” Đông lẩm nhẩm đọc một câu thơ cũ; trăng đẹp quá, trăng treo lơ lửng trên một bầu trời tuyệt vời, trời thật đẹp sau những giờ gió mưa rầm rĩ!

Mở cửa phòng bước ra ngoài. Đông nghe như có một giọng điện lạnh lẽo chạy dọc xương sống: hình như có tiếng dương cầm phẳng phất trong các hành lang tối tăm vắng lạnh! Ai mà dạo đàn vào lúc nửa đêm vắng vẻ như thế này?! Đã hai giờ sáng có hơn! Hay là...ma? Nghĩ tới chữ “ma” nó vụt rùng mình. Đông rất ít khi “sợ ma”, nhưng mà trong đêm tối, với một vầng trăng liêu trai treo trên đầu cây

cổ thụ bên ngoài, với những hành lang hẹp, tối tăm, quanh quẽ như dẫn vào vô tận của tòa lâu đài này, với câu chuyện vừa đọc hồi chiều...tất cả cũng làm Đông...hơi ngán.

Là “director” của một cơ quan thiện nguyện, Đông được mời đếm tham dự khoá hội thảo về an ninh xã hội do chính quyền liên bang tổ chức. Trên dưới ba mươi người đến từ khắp nơi trong nước Mỹ được sắp xếp cho ở chung trong một tòa lâu đài cổ. Tòa nhà đã cũ kỹ, mà người ta lại càng làm cho nó có vẻ cũ kỹ hơn để sử dụng như một hotel! — loại hotel dành cho những kẻ có tiền, muốn chạy trốn cái phần hoa đô hội đôi ngày, đôi tuần. Người đến tạm trú mặc quần “jean”, áo thun, được một nhóm nhân viên mặc quần đen, áo đuôi

tôm đen, nơ cổ đen tuyền, rất lễ độ hầu hạ.

Tòa nhà xây năm 1738, chơi vơi trên một ngọn đồi, chung quanh nhà là rừng, rừng thật sự rừng với những đàn nai dạo quanh, cảnh đẹp như trong tranh vẽ. Mấy hôm qua học hành, hội thảo, nghiên cứu,... chẳng có ai có giờ nghỉ ngơi; cho đến hôm nay mới có một buổi “xả hơi”. Có chút thanh thoi, Đông đi dạo vòng quanh nhà, đi theo một lối mòn hẹp ra rừng, rồi đi lạc tới một đồi cỏ dại; những thân cỏ ống cao tới ngang thắt lưng, những đám cỏ mà nó chưa thấy bao giờ trên đất Mỹ, cỏ che một tấm bảng đá... Đông lò mò đọc, rồi hơi ngỡ ngàng khi nhận ra đó là một mộ bia, rồi ngỡ ngàng hơn khi nhận ra nó đang đứng trên một nghĩa trang cũ kỹ. Những tấm bảng bằng đá xanh ghi tên tuổi cùng công nghiệp người đã mất, những dấu tích của các thế hệ chủ nhân ông cái tòa lâu đài mà bọn Đông đang tạm trú ngoài kia!

Tánh hiếu kỳ nổi dậy, Đông lần mò trở về, tìm vào thư viện của tòa nhà. Trên chiếc bàn làm việc cũ kỹ của người chủ nguyên thủy, có một bài viết ngắn, nói về lai lịch ngôi nhà: năm 1738, một nhà quý tộc đi săn chồn, cỡi ngựa chạy lạc tới ngọn đồi này; trong ánh nắng chập choạng của ngày, ông gặp một thiếu nữ trong một ngôi nhà đơn sơ, ông xin một chén canh nóng, xin một mẩu bánh mì khô, để rồi sau đó chiếm luôn trái tim của cô chủ. Ông cưới cô, và xây cho cô, ngay chính trên cái nền nhà cũ, một

toà lâu đài đẹp. Đó là cái lâu đài mà bọn Đông đang ở. Sang thế hệ thứ hai, giòng họ chủ nhân ngôi nhà từ từ sa sút; sang thế hệ thứ ba, những cái chết bí mật của người trong giòng họ từ từ xảy ra. Khi có án mạng xảy ra trong nhà, là khi tiền của như bất tận của giòng họ chột từ từ khô hạn. Một người con của thế hệ thứ tư không còn giữ được nhà, phải bán đấu giá nhà, bán luôn cả rừng cây bao la chung quanh; cái giòng họ quyền quý trong thế hệ đầu tiên của những người Anh đến khai phá xứ sở này cũng tiêu tan.

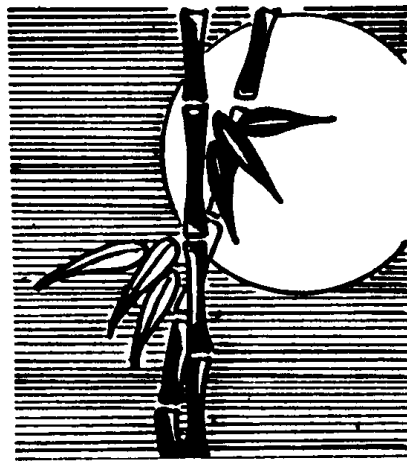
Ngôi nhà thay chủ nhiều lần, cuối cùng không ai dám ở, không ai bảo quản nổi nên người chủ cuối, là một hóa học gia, cho luôn cái hội của mình, “The American Chemical Society”, bảo quản.

Khi đọc tới hàng chữ “Hội Hóa Học Gia Mỹ”, Đông chột rùng mình. Hàng chữ gợi nhớ một câu chuyện cũ, câu chuyện về một ngôi nhà ma ở miền Đông nước Mỹ. Trong lớp văn chương ở San Diego State University, Đông đã nghe một cô giáo kể về ngôi nhà này; ngôi nhà có...ma! Cái toà lâu đài mênh mông tọa lạc trên một đỉnh đồi này khá nổi danh về...ma. Những người chủ không bao giờ ở được nên mới tặng không cho thiên hạ làm...hotel!

Vậy mà đêm nay, trong cái khung cảnh hoang vắng lạ lùng này, trăng hiện về như từ một huyền thoại... Đêm với cái cảm giác nôn nao kỳ lạ vì ánh trăng sao xác ngoài song, đêm thật

liều trai với tiếng đàn khi ẩn khi hiện... Đông tựa người vào cửa phòng, lắng nghe: nhạc như tiếng đệm nhẹ nhàng nhớ người đi, người đi ngoài sương gió xa; nhạc cuộn tròn như thương tiếc, nhạc lên cao như vó ngựa qua đồi trong ánh trăng ngà ngọc; nhạc — một giòng giao hưởng của Mozart!

Khi tiếng đàn chuyển sang réo rắc cung sầu, khóc một chuyện tình — bài Love Story — máu huyết kỳ của Đông chột nổi dậy. Nếu đây là tiếng đàn ma... Nếu có ma thật, thì chắc đây là một con ma...đây tình cảm, Đông cũng muốn gặp cho biết. Nó lẩn nhẹ bước chân theo hành lang đi xuống dưới nhà.



Phòng sinh hoạt của toà lâu đài rộng thênh thang, nhưng không khí trong phòng rất ấm: bây giờ là mùa hè, mùa hè ở Baltimore nóng và ẩm với những trận mưa rào làm xanh cây cỏ. Trong phòng: đèn sáng dịu dịu, khung cảnh trang trí rất xưa cũ, mà rất dễ thương. Ở trong một góc phòng, cây dương cầm vẫn đều đặn phát ra từng âm thanh

kỳ lạ; đằng sau cây đàn thấp thoáng một giòng tóc, tóc xỏa dài che ngang khuôn mặt trắng trẻo của một thiếu nữ trẻ đẹp. Đông cắn răng, bước mạnh tới,... rồi vụt phì cười: người ngồi đàn kia là Ngọc-Anh.

— Bộ hết chuyện chơi rồi sao mà ra đây đàn giờ này? Không biết nhà có...

Đông hỏi, rồi vụt im bật. Chắc chắn là Ngọc-Anh không biết những câu chuyện ma ở trong ngôi nhà cổ-lỗ-xỉ này.

— À, anh Đông! Anh cũng không ngủ được hả?

— Ngủ hết một giấc rồi đó... Trăng sáng quá nên anh dậy để... làm thơ...

— Bao giờ làm xong cho em xin nghe? Nhớ đề tặng Ngọc-Anh...

— OK, anh sẽ đề tặng Ngọc-Anh, người tình vừa mới quen...

— Xí!

Một tiếng “xí” khô khan. Đông cười hi hi.

— Không ngủ được hả?...

— Ngủ gì được, mấy giờ rồi? Hai giờ sáng? Tức là chỉ mới có mười một giờ ở California... Em vẫn ngủ theo giờ California...

— Mà thức theo giờ Baltimore hả?

Ngọc Anh cười hi hi. Quên hết mấy con ma trong chuyện kể, Đông rủ rê:

— Đi ra ngoài chơi đi, trời đẹp lắm.

— OK, đi.

Ngôi nhà nằm trên đỉnh đồi,

xa xa dưới chân đồi thấp thoáng một mặt nước, hình như lẫn khuất đằng sau mấy hàng cây kia là một hồ nhỏ; Đông kéo tay Ngọc-Anh:

— Đến cái hồ đó chơi... Ở chỗ đó... lý tưởng lắm.

— Lý tưởng?

— Lý tưởng cho những người yêu nhau...

— “Why?”

— Ngồi bên bờ hồ nói chuyện tình lắm, lại thuận tiện nữa...

Ngọc-Anh ngược mắt như dò hỏi, Đông tỉnh bơ:

— Thuận tiện cho những kẻ yêu nhau...hỏi nhau những câu quan trọng...

— Câu gì mà quan trọng dữ vậy?

— Thì chuyện tình nào rồi cũng tới câu hỏi đó: “Em có chịu làm vợ anh không?” Này nhé, người con trai hỏi, nếu người con gái nói “yes” thì cả hai dắt nhau về lo làm đám cưới...

— Còn nếu nói “no”?


— Thì đó, cái hồ. Nếu cô ấy nói “no” thì xô cô xuống hồ một cái “ùm” là xong...

Đông bật cười hô hố, trong khi Ngọc-Anh cắn nhằn:

— Mắc dịch anh, đầu óc lúc nào cũng nghĩ tới chuyện xô người ta xuống... hết xuống vực thẳm, bây giờ lại tới hồ nước...

Đêm đẹp tuyệt vời, trăng đẹp tuyệt vời, Ngọc-Anh... tuyệt vời. Nhìn gương mặt trắng trẻo, thanh lịch rạng ngời dưới trăng, Đông thấy lòng cũng dâng ít nhiều xao xuyến.

Đơn Côi



Bởi em tôi mãi ngậm ngùi
Bởi tình yêu lắm ngọt bùi đắng cay
Bởi tôi chưa tỉnh cơn say
Bởi đêm vô tận bởi ngày bao la
Bởi em duyên dáng kiêu sa
Bởi tôi thơ thẩn ta bà thế gian
Bởi nhìn theo dáng em ngoan
Tìm tôi em giữ chẳng hoàn lại tôi
Bởi đâu cuộc sống nổi trôi
Tôi đang đánh mất cuộc đời đó em
Bởi em cô bé lọ lem
Còn tôi hoàng tử mãi xem so gầy
Bởi em hoang phí tháng ngày
Nên tôi bạch diện dáng gầy thư sinh
Bởi em chẳng trả thơ tình
Nên tôi mãi mãi một mình đơn côi

• Trần Đình Ngọc

Một làn gió ấm kéo qua, gió lướt thướt trên rừng cây. Gió mùa hạ Bắc Mỹ thật ấm, thật giống gió Sài-Gòn những khi trời mới dứt mưa... Đi trong bầu không khí thoải mái, ẩm ướt này Đông chợt bồi hồi nhớ Việt Nam, những mùa trăng thời thơ dại ở Việt Nam. Bây giờ là tháng Chín dương lịch, đối với âm lịch thì đã là mùa Trung Thu rồi đó!

— Ê, “you”!

— “What?”

— Có nhớ bài hát Trung Thu, có biết bài hát Trung Thu

nào không?

Chẳng trả lời, Ngọc Anh cất giọng hát: “Anh trắng trắng ngà, có cây đa to, có thằng cuội già, ôm một mối mơ...”

Đông hòa tiếng hát theo: “Cuội ơi! Ta nói cho cuội nghe...”

Lời hát vang vang, tiếng cười vang vang, trong ánh trăng huyền diệu, chùng như Đông và Ngọc-Anh đang sống lại thời thơ ấu ở Việt Nam... Ở Việt Nam... những đêm trăng mùa thu bình yên... Xa Việt Nam vậy mà đã

gần hai mươi năm!

— Ngọc-Anh này...

— “What?”

— Có nhớ Việt Nam không?

— Ủ! nhớ...

— Mà Ngọc-Anh đâu có kỷ niệm gì nhiều ở Việt Nam? Khi rời đất nước, em giỏi lắm là năm sáu tuổi...

— Mười tuổi! Mười tuổi! Nhớ Sài Gòn chứ, nhớ lắm chứ! này nhé, khu chợ Nguyễn Tri Phương mà ba thường hay chở em đi ăn mì tối nè, khu vực đường Pasteur với những gánh quà rong thơm lừng nè, anh có ăn bánh bao Bà Cả Cần không?

— Bánh bao “Ông” Cả Cần chứ?

— “Ông” Cả Cần? Hay “Bà” Cả Cần? “Anyway”, những ngày gần Tết, Sài Gòn có cái không khí gây gây lạnh, buổi sáng trời lạnh mà mẹ mua cho một cái bánh bao Bà Cả Cần là “hết xẩy”...

Cô nuốt nước bọt, đôi má phúng phính như đôi má của một cô bé lên chín, lên tám đang thèm ăn. Nhìn gương mặt cô nàng dưới ánh trăng vắng vặc, Đông chột cười.

— Cười cái gì đó?

— Anh cũng đang thèm bánh bao... mặt em giống cái bánh bao Bà Cả Cần lắm, cho anh cắn một cái nghe...

Ngọc-Anh véo Đông một cái đau điếng.

Qua một khoảng rừng, đêm như chột mở rộng ra, chói lòa ánh sáng. Mặt hồ phản chiếu ánh trăng, trong vắt như một tấm

gương. Hai người ngồi xuống trên một bờ cỏ.

— Anh này...

Đông quay lại.

— Vậy là xong, mình không còn làm gì được nữa hả anh?

— Cái gì xong?

— Ty nạn, về năm mươi sáu ngàn người ty nạn ở Đông Nam Á...

— Ồ! Ủ! Anh nghĩ vậy là xong! Cuộc vận động của mình không mang lại kết quả gì đâu... Họ sẽ bị bắt buộc phải trở về Việt Nam...

— Rồi họ làm sao sống anh?

— Anh không biết. Trong buổi nói chuyện ngày hôm kia với đại diện bộ Ngoại Giao, chắc em cũng nhận ra là chính phủ đã có quyết định từ trước. Họ tiếp mình chỉ vì họ lịch sự mà thôi...

— Ủ! Mà cũng vì họ “ngán” ông dân biểu cùng đi với mình.

— “It’s all politics”, Ngọc-Anh! Mình chỉ phí thời giờ vô ích. Thân phận của năm mươi sáu ngàn người trong các trại ty nạn Đông Nam Á đã được quyết định: họ sẽ phải trở về địa ngục!

— Anh à! Sao anh lại nói Việt Nam là địa ngục?

Ngọc-Anh nhẹ nhàng trách.

— Anh...ơ...

Cả hai chột lặng im. Không! Không! Việt Nam vẫn sống tuyệt vời trong tâm hồn Đông! Đông không hề có ý miệt thị nơi nó đã sinh ra và khôn lớn. Việt Nam vẫn là quê hương, quê hương với ngọn Mía, với hương Sầu Riêng, với cây Khế ngọt,...

Trong đó ta đã thở hương lúa chín, đã uống nước nước dừa thơm, trong đó...những mùa trăng như đêm nay trăng này mình chạy nhảy tung tăng với ánh đèn màu...

Những ngày còn nhỏ, Đông hay bị kích thích bởi ánh đèn cây xuyên qua lớp giấy kiếng của chiếc đèn Trung Thu. Anh sáng kỳ diệu của trăng còn mang theo hương thơm tuyệt vời của bánh mít. Bánh Trung Thu... Bao nhiêu năm rồi không ăn một miếng bánh Trung Thu đúng nghĩa là “Trung Thu”!

— Xin lỗi nghe?

— Ủ! Đừng bao giờ nói xấu về Việt Nam, anh!

— Ủ! Đất nước mình bao giờ cũng đẹp; chỉ có những người đang cầm quyền hôm nay làm cho nước mình nghèo, dân mình đói kém là không đẹp!... Trăng đẹp quá hở Ngọc-Anh? Ước gì mình có một cái lồng đèn... Anh thích loại lồng đèn dán giấy kính màu xanh dương... trong đêm trăng, ánh sáng từ cây đèn cây xuyên qua màn giấy xanh bao giờ cũng gợi lên trong anh những xao động kỳ lạ...

— Về Los Angeles kỳ này em sẽ làm cho anh một cái, đừng lo...

— “Promised?”

— “Promised!”

— Có cả bánh Trung Thu?

— Có cả bánh Trung Thu!

— “Free?”

— “No, you will have to pay.”

— Bao nhiêu?

— Hết cái “pay check”.

— OK, cho Ngọc-Anh giữ hết mấy cái “pay check”, mà “pay check” của những người ăn cơm nhà đi làm chuyện đời nhẹ lắm,... thôi, giữ hết cả cuộc đời còn lại này luôn đi...

— Nữa, lại “thả dê”! Đẹp...

Đông cười, quay nhìn ra xa xa. Xa xa trên đồi cỏ bình yên, gió lướt thướt qua mang theo những làn hơi nước ấm. Lâu thật là lâu rồi mới có dịp ra ngồi chơi ngoài trời, đón hương gió ấm, đón ánh trăng trong! Trăng vẫn nghiêng nghiêng treo trên đầu cây... Trong ánh trăng ngọt ngào như mật của đất trời tự do, Đông chợt thấy buồn khi tưởng tượng đến ánh trăng tẻ nhạt soi đầu “trại cấm” — các trại giam người tỵ nạn Việt Nam ở Đông Nam Á. Câu chuyện với những người dân biểu của California, cuộc vận động trong bộ Ngoại Giao,... tất cả đã là một thất bại. Một trang sử đã lật qua, vấn đề tỵ nạn Việt Nam đã thuộc về dĩ vãng! Bây giờ thế giới có những vùng biến động dữ dội hơn, bây giờ người tỵ nạn đến từ các nước khác mới là quan trọng hơn, bây giờ... trong cuộc tranh đấu dai dẳng để triệt tiêu lý tưởng “tỵ nạn” của người Quốc Gia... Người Cộng Sản đã thắng!

Trên đồi cỏ hoang vu, Đông thấy cô đơn, một nỗi cô đơn vắng vặc như vắng trăng kia... Trong tiếng gió lướt thướt qua rừng cao, hình như có tiếng người kêu... tiếng Việt Nam, người Việt Nam thét gào trên những chuyến tàu đi không bao giờ đến... Trên một

C

ơ

n

M

ê

*Người đã ra đi có trở về
Có nhìn trăng úa trái lê thê
Có còn tường tối câu hò hẹn
Có nhớ ngày xưa đã ước thề?*

*Vì sao người đã bỏ tôi đi
Có phải đời tôi chỉ biệt ly
Ân tình năm tháng người không nhớ
Thì chút tơ duyên có nghĩa chi!*

*Người chẳng cùng tôi trọn cuộc đời
Cuộc đời đen bạc quá đi thôi
Năm xưa người nói lời tha thiết
Tôi để thuyền lòng theo nước trôi!*

*Người biết hồn tôi đau tái tê?
Đêm đêm tôi tỉnh giữa cơn mê
Chúc người hạnh phúc và may mắn
Dù đã cùng tôi lỗi ước thề!*

• Trần Đình Ngọc

trận chiến đã tàn, nó thấy mình như mệt mỏi, mệt mỏi mãi với các ám ảnh cũ!

Ngọc-Anh vẫn ngồi yên. Cũng là “director” của một chương trình an sinh xã hội, cũng xông xáo đi bênh vực cho đồng bào trong các “trại cấm”, cô cảm thông được với những điều ưu tư đang đè nặng tâm hồn Đông. Tuy nhiên, đối với con người đó, còn có quá nhiều điều mà cô chưa hiểu được. Hai mươi năm ngang dọc trong đời, Đông có một dĩ vãng quá lớn để cho một người mới lớn như cô có thể

cảm thông hoàn toàn!

Gió bắt đầu thấy lạnh hơn, sương đã xuống nhiều hơn, ánh trăng từ từ mờ đi trong màn sương buổi sớm. Thả người nằm dài trên cỏ, vòng tay sau gáy, nhìn trời cao Đông thì thầm... “Cám ơn em, Ngọc-Anh. Lâu thật là lâu rồi anh mới có được một đêm trăng bình yên. Cám ơn em! Bao nhiêu năm rồi nổi trôi, anh không hề có được một mùa Trung Thu như ước muốn!”

— Thôi mình về, anh!

— Ủ! thì về... Mà em nhớ

nghe! Nhớ mua bánh Trung Thu, nhớ làm lồng đèn cho anh nghe.

Ngọc-Anh cười. Nhìn gương mặt trắng lấp lánh trong màn sương huyền ảo, Đông khẽ rùng mình, chợt nhớ chuyện “Ẩn-Lan”: Ngọc-Anh có thể là một hồn ma trên trang sách cũ, về chơi trên trần thế đôi giờ, rồi lại sẽ biến đi khi vầng dương đến...

— Ngọc-Anh...

— “What?”

— Ngày sắp lên, sao em còn chưa biến đi?

Ngọc-Anh cười hi hi:

— Em đã vướng mầu tục lụy nhiều rồi, không còn về trên kia được nữa!...

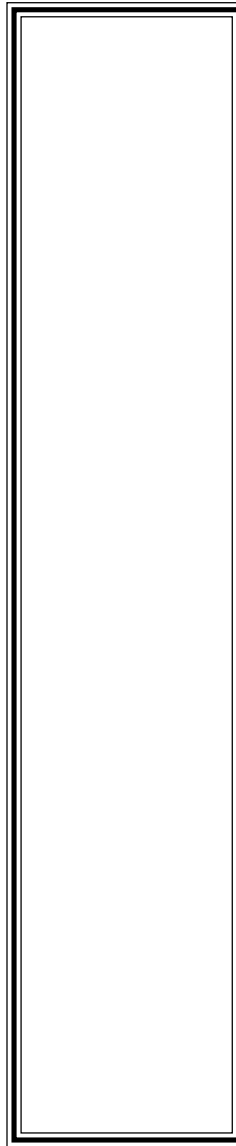
Cô chỉ tay lên vầng trăng, rồi chạy lên đồi. Đông hối hả đuổi theo: “Ngọc-Anh! Ngọc-Anh! Đừng để anh... Đừng để anh... xô em xuống hồ nghe...”

Ngọc-Anh vẫn vừa chạy vừa cười lớn. Tiếng cười tan trong màn sương, tan trên đồi xanh. Một đêm trăng đẹp đã qua...

Đông đuổi theo, đuổi theo. Hình như nó tạm quên được những nhọc nhằn trên đường đời, hình như nó tạm mất đi những ám ảnh về một vầng trăng trên các trại cấm, trăng trên những chuyến tàu tỵ nạn Việt Nam, hình như giữa mùa hè Baltimore gió thu Việt Nam vừa chớm...

Trên đồi xa, Ngọc-Anh cất tiếng hát: “Ánh trăng trắng ngà, có cây đa to, có thằng cuội già ôm một giấc mơ... Cuội ơi! Ta nói cho cuội nghe...”

Nắng Hạnh



Nguyễn Võ Sơn
(UCLA, Gió Đông)

Răng mà buồn rúa?
O nhỏ của anh
Chiều ni mưa đỏ
Làm môi o xanh.

Chiều về vắng anh
Một mình rét mướt
Nên mắt o ướt
Giọt nước trông thành.

Chiều ni xa anh
Trời mưa long loanh
O buồn o lạnh
Trên làn môi xanh.

Chiều mô nắng hạnh?
Chiều mô nắng vàng?
Anh về với nàng
Lòng vang hớn hờ.

Chiều về bến lén
Chân bước rộn ràng
Tim rất rộn ràng
Tìm nàng năm trước

Ngày xưa mưa ướn
Nên mắt o buồn
Ngày xưa mưa lạnh
Nên môi o xanh

Chừ thì nắng hạnh
Trời không còn lạnh
Môi o hết xanh
Lòng o đã tạnh?

O là cơn gió
Nên đổi theo mùa
O là nắng mưa
Nên ưa nóng lạnh

Thôi thì bất hạnh
Anh lỡ đại khờ
Tìm chi o nó
Trời đã sang mùa?

Chiều về bến lén
Ta lại gặp ta
Chón cũ, người xa
Còn ta chiếc bóng.

Two Children



• Thạch Lam

Introduction:

“Hai Chị Em” (Two Children) was published in a collection of short stories *Nắng Trong Vườn* (Sunshine in the Garden), Hà Nội, 1938. The stories in this collection were serialized in magazines during period of 1937-38.

Thạch Lam's real name was Nguyễn Tường Lân. He was born on July 7, 1910, at Thái Hà Hamlet, Cẩm Giang Village, about 25 miles east of Hà Nội. After graduating from Albert Sarrault Lycee, he began working as a newspaperman for *Đông Hóa*, *Ngày Nay*, *Chủ Nhật* weeklies. He also taught at some private high schools. He died on June 28, 1942 in the village of Yên Dụ by Hồ Tây (The West

Lake), Hà Nội of tuberculosis. He was a member of *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn* (Self-Reliant Literary Group) which was founded in 1930 with the purpose of promoting progressive social and literary reform.

With a clear, simple style, the majority of Thạch Lam's stories deal with the poor people of the countryside whom he described with remarkable insight and sympathy.

The translation of *Hai Chị Em* (Two Children) into English is provided by Lê Thọ Giáo, formerly a faculty member of the University of Huế, Việt Nam.

From the watchtower at the tiny district headquarters, a beating drum sounded as if to herald the coming of evening. The western sky was ablaze, and full of rosy clouds like dying embers. The bamboo groves surrounding the village across the way darkened and stood out against the sky.

Evening had come. It was quiet and soothing. The croaking of frogs drifted from the field in the gentle breeze. In the darkening shop, mosquitoes began to buzz. Liên sat silently beside a row of black wooden tobacco boxes. Her eyes grew shadowy as the darkness increased, and sadness crept into her innocent mind. Liên could not yet understand why her heart was moved as the day was dying.

“Shall I light the lamp, sister?” An asked.

On hearing of her brother's query, Lien started up, answering, “In a while! Why don't you come outside and sit with me? There are a lot of mosquitoes inside!” An put the matchbox on the table, then followed his sister to a bamboo couch outside, which creaked under their weight.

“It's going to fall apart, sister!” An said.

“Yes, I will ask mother to buy a new one.”

The two children, brother and sister, sat silently on the couch and looked out into the street. Lamps in the neighboring houses had already been lit. There was a light in Uncle My's house; an American lantern went on in Mr. Cuu's; and in the Chinese shop, a bluish light streaked out. All these lights beamed out into the street, so that the sandy earth shone here and there, making the unevenness of the surface of the road stand out

more sharply as light and darkness shared alternate sides of pebbles.

The daily market usually held on the street had long closed. All the people were gone, and so was all the noise. Only the rubbish remained—grapefruit rinds, logan leaves, pieces of dried-out sugar can. A warm odor arose, the familiar smell of the day's heat and the dust, which Liên and her brother took for granted to be the peculiar perfume of their soil, of their very own native land. A few merchants, late in getting home, were gathering up their wares and loading them into bamboo baskets which, with the help of a pole and a pair of rattan slings, they would soon carry home on their shoulders. In the meantime, though, these stragglers tried to bring their belated conversations to a halt.

A few poor children who lived around the market place were now bending over the ground, searching for refuse. They quickly picked up every piece of bamboo, ratan, or whatever there was left behind by the merchants and their customers. Liên was moved at the sight, though she herself was too poor to spare them even a penny.

It was not until twilight darkened into night that Liên and her brother saw Mrs. Ty's youngest son walking out of a lane, holding an unlit water-pip in his hands and two wooden stools on his back. His mother followed closely after him, balancing a bamboo bench on her head, and lots of things in her hand—all she needed to set up her tea shop.

"Why are you so late in setting up your shop tonight?" Liên asked. Mrs. Ty dropped the bench in the ground and set out her tea bowls on it, before she uttered her an-

swer:

"It wouldn't make any difference, early or late, would it?" To earn her living, during the day, she fished for small crabs and shrimp, at night, she set up her tea shop under the badamia tree, beside the brick steps. But to whom could she sell anything? Perhaps a few rickshawmen or rice porters or, now and then, a few district guards or a handful of servants of the district officials—such were her usual customers. They would stop by, whenever they happened to, for a puff on the water-pipe or for a bowl of hot tea, while fetching players for their masters' card games. Even though her business did not yield much money, still Mrs. Ty would never miss setting up her tea shop every night, from dusk till very late.

As soon as she had arranged the bench and displayed her wares, she reached out for an American oil lamp; and under its light, she spread lime on pieces of betel, to be ready for the first customer who might stop by. Her son was busy making a fire, heating a pot of green tea. It was only then that she looked up and started a conversation with Liên.

"Why haven't you closed your shop?" she asked. Liên started at the question, whispering: "Oh, oh," urging her brother. "Go close the shop, or else mother will scold us, An!"

"Will mother come out tonight, sister?" An asked. "She's still busy husking her rice."

Liên's mother would make a daily visit as daylight waned, and had ordered her daughter to close up at the sound of the drum. And yet, Liên had forgotten all about it, fixing her thoughts on the quiet street in front of her. Then Liên

hastily walked into the dark shop, lit the lamp, and closed the black tobacco boxes as her brother was looking for the bolt to shut the door. The sundry shop they were looking after was indeed a small one, which their parents had set up as soon as the family moved from Hà Nội. It was a small stall, on lease from an old woman, partitioned off by a thin bamboo wall pasted over with newspapers. Liên's mother left it up to Liên's to take care of the shop, since she herself was busy polishing and selling rice. To safeguard the shop, Liên and An had to sleep there at night.

Liên counted the packs of tobacco and carefully put away the cakes of soap, silently calculating her sales. She hadn't sold much even though it had been a market day.

"Did you sell two cakes of soap to Mrs. Lụa this afternoon?" Liên asked her brother.

An thought for a moment, then replied: "Yes, in fact. She bought two cakes, and Mrs. Chi half a cake on credit."

Liên reached for an abacus to add up her sales. But it was warm inside and full of mosquitoes, so that she seemed reluctant to begin; and finally, she put all the money away in a box, without counting it.

"I will do it tomorrow, combining two days' sales together." Liên said.

An was waiting just for that moment. Both children were eager to close the shop, so they could sit out in the open air and watch the activities in the town. Liên hurriedly locked the money box with a key attached to a silver chain fastened to her belt. She really liked the silver chain and the key, even felt proud of them, as they testi-

fied to her cleverness and maturity.

“What are you doing, little girl?”

Hearing this question followed by a laughter, Liên and her brother could already tell who was there, without having to turn around. It was old madam Thi, a slightly crazy woman who usually bought her rice liquor at Liên’s shop.

Thoroughly familiar with the woman’s habit, Liên silently poured a glass of liquor and handed it to her. She didn’t dare look into her face, and wishes that she would go quickly away. The old woman, holding up the tiny glass of alcohol, burst out laughing.

“Oh, you are good girl! You’ve really given me a full glass today!”

She tilted her head backwards to gulp down the contents, then started mumbling as she felt for money in her belt. She placed three pennies into Liên’s hands, patted her on the forehead, and then stumbled outside. Liên and her brother stood in awe, watching her silhouette gradually disappear into the darkness as her sharp laughter died out as she walked towards the village.

Night had fallen. It was truly a summer night, freshened with a gentle breeze and soft as velvet. Darkness shrouded all the streets and narrow paths. The surrounding houses were tightly shut—except for a few shops still open—their doors slightly shut so that straight lines of light streaked out of the cracks. Children group themselves on the verandahs. Their laughing voices tempted An to join in. However, he would not risk disobeying mother’s instructions to look after the shop. So in disappointment, he remained seated where he was on the couch with his

sister, as they both let their eyes follow the late comers who plodded home in the darkness.

In the inverted bowl of the sky overhead, thousands of sparkling stars competed, mixing their light with the duller light of fireflies hovering low and glow worms mingling among the leafy branches. An and Liên looked up at the sky in silence, searching for the Milky Way or the duck-shaped constellation that follows the one of God of Agriculture. The universe seemed boundless, mysterious, and strange; looking up wearied their gentle minds, so after a short while, they both looked down again to the earth, to a familiar, dimly lighted spot on the earth—Mrs. Ty’s tea shop bench.



Towards the district office, a small, glowing yellow light hovered in the darkness, now appearing, now disappearing.

“Here comes Uncle Siêu’s soup cart.” An informed his sister, pointing towards the light.

The creaking pole of his shoulder yoke became gradually more and more audible and the smell of smoke in the breeze reached the children where they were sitting as Uncle Siêu approached the shop

and finally set down his soup cad-die. He bent down to rekindle the fire, blowing into the tiny stove. His form cast an immense shadow reaching far out to the hedges bordering lane. An and Liên could smell the aroma of the delicious soup, yet, in this small village, what Uncle Siêu had to offer was something too expensive, too luxurious for them to afford. Liên recall the days when she was living in Hà Nội; there she had tasted all kinds of delicious things to eat and drink, since her family still well off at that time. More than that, she often had time to join her parents for a stroll along the banks of the Lake of the Restored Sword (Hồ Hoàn Kiếm), sipping tasty and colorful ice-cold soda drinks. Except for those

memories, everything else remained vague in her mind. All she could remember vividly was that Hà Nội was full of sparking light. What a bright place it was, Liên thought. Since the family moved back to their native village, set up this small shop, Liên and her brother would spend the night on the bamboo bed placed at the foot of a badamia tree on a street that was wrapped in darkness. Somehow Liên had become quite accustomed to the darkness already. She no longer

felt scared at night as she had before. Everything was in darkness: the path leading to river bank, the small road that ran home from market, the village gates, all were enveloped in the obscurity of night. There was only the one small lamp on Mrs. Ty’s bench, and the fire in Uncle Siêu’s soup cart. And these tiny lamps could light but the narrow patch of sandy oil; and inside of Liên’s shop, the lamp trimmed low sent but thin streaks of light through the bamboo wall. The dis-

trict town now seemed to collect around Mrs. Ty's shop. Nearby, there was also the family of a blind man, huddling on a small mat. In front of them, there was an aluminum pan. But the blind man had not begin to sing yet, as he did every night for money, for there were too few people there.

Mrs. Ty waved a dried banana branch to chase away a few flies hovering over her wares. Then she said, slowly: "It's got too late, but where are all my customers?" She meant the district guards, servants of district officials, who had been her faithful customers.

Uncle Siêu replied disinterestedly: "There is a card game going on at the teacher's house, so they don't have to go out to look for players."

Blind Uncle Sâm and his wife joined the conversation with a few sharp strokes on his oval-shaped guitar. Their son crawled on the ground, off the mat, playfully picked up trash that had been half-buried under a thin layer of sand along the roadside. All these people, gathered in the darkness, seemed to be waiting for something brighter to happen that might improve their poverty-stricken lives.

An and Liên became sleepy as their eyes grew heavier and heavier. Yet both brother and sister tried to stay awake, even for a little while longer, before they would finally move into the shop, ready to turn in. But their mother had frequently instructed them to wait until the train that ran along the street had arrived, on the chance that they might be able to sell something to the late travelers. But recently, just like many other nights, Liên no longer expected to have any late customers. Even if

A candid love song

I think of you
In midst of Gross Primary Productivity
I think of starless nights
and moonlit sky ...
While memorizing zoo plaktons, phytoplanktons,
and planktivores
Shuffled in my heart
is when we're holding hands in the dark
and how the sharks can survive at
the apotic zone.
Dancing in my mind
Is your quiet smile
with humus incorporation zone, litter, and
bedrock revolving around and round
If I can wish,
Star light star bright
If I may dream,
You'll be here tonight.
But tomorrow, when the sun shows
And I grasp hurriedly the pens, pencils,
and calculators to school
Please exit quietly
out of my memory
so I can have
my A's ... in biology.

● Rose Nguyen (Gió Đông, UCLA)

there were some, the most she could sell was merely a box of matches, or a pack or two of cigarettes. Tonight there was another reason, though, that kept Liên and An awake. They just wanted to watch the train come in, since it brought with it the town's last activities of the day.

An lay down, his head rested on his sister's legs. Just before falling asleep, he did not forget to remind her:

"You'll wake me up when the

train comes, won't you!"

"All right, just go to sleep."

Liên gently waved a fan and straightened out the soft hair on An's forehead. The child's head gradually grew heavy on Liên's thigh but she did not move, afraid that any abrupt movement would wake An up. Through the leafy branches of the trees, thousands of stars were still twinkling. A glow worm crawling on the under side of a leaf, gave forth a weak and bluish light. A fresh breeze silently

dropped a few petals on Liên's shoulders. Her mood had grown serene, and vague emotions invaded her heart.

The curfew drum struck a harsh, prolonged yet echoless note that sank immediately into the darkness. The street had become deserted. There were but two or three rickshawmen pausing for a smoke or a bowl of tea at Mrs. Ty's shop. A moment later, from the direction of the district headquarters, two or three persons emerged into view, moving through the night, holding lamps in their hands. They were workers at the Chinese shop, who went to the station to meet the lady owner, on her way home from the province. Uncle Siêu craned his neck towards the station, and inform his friends: "The track light is on."

Liên herself had also noticed the ghostly green light, low to the ground. Then came the train whistle from God-knows-how-far-away, along with a rustling of the wind in the dead of light. Liên woke her brother up: "Come on, An. The train is arriving."

An sprang up, rubbed his eyes to wake himself up. The two children, brother and sister, listened to the quickening pace and the creaking of approaching train wheels riding on the steel tracks. A cloud of white smoke glowed from afar, followed by a roar of the cars and the commotion of the travelers. In recent years, as business began to slack off, travelers also dropped off. There came a time when they met no one getting off at the station at night. Behind the station, some time ago, there used to be a few restaurants that stayed open till late into the night. Their lights kept burning till midnight. But now, they were

all closed and the area had again joined the darkness of the rest of the district.

The children did not have to wait long. The whistle resounded sharply and the train came grunting into town. Liên took hold of her brother's hand, and both of them stood up to watch the train passing by to the station. The cars were brightly lit, lighting up a wide moving area alongside the tracks. Liên could see that only the first-class coaches were crowded with people, their chrome-plated trim and glass windows reflected the glaring light. Then the train moved on by into the night, leaving behind bits of burning coals scattered on the tracks. The brother and sister, both kept on watching the tiny dot of greenlight on the caboose, which gradually faded into the night, finally disappearing behind the edge of the bamboo groves.

"The train isn't crowded tonight, sister," said An. Liên took hold of her brother's hand ignoring his observation. To be sure, the train was not as crowded as usual, probably less crowded and fashionable. Yet these people were on their way home from Hà Nội! Liên became silent, lost in thought. Her mind turn to Hà Nội, a far-off, yet brightly lit, and animated place. It seem as if the train had brought with it another world, a world completely different from the one illuminated by Mrs. Ty's lamp and the glow in Uncle Siêu's stove. The dark night continued to surround Liên's world, and the immense and silent rice fields of her village.

"Let's go to sleep, sister!"

Liên fondly patted her brother on the shoulder, then sat down on the couch. Her brother's body again weighed heavy on her dress, then

his head dropped on to her shoulder. The noise of the train continued to diminish, growing completely inaudible in the dark night. Stars were still sparkling in the sky. It was not until then that the district became completely quiet. Then there was nothing but the dark of the night, the sounds of the drum, and the barking of dogs. From the station, a shadow with a lantern was moving home. Mrs. Ty was preparing to put away her wares; Uncle Siêu had carries his soup off towards the village; and Uncle Sâm—the blind man—and his family, on their mat, had dozed off some time ago.

Liên turned aside and looked at her brother, who was sleeping soundly. His hands held fast to the sister's shirt, his head on her shoulder. Liên looked around at the dark night. A cool breeze flowed by, and she felt a little cold. All the glow worms had gone out. She bent over to pick up her brother and carried him into the shop. Her own eyes began to grow heavy. She carefully bolted the door and trimmed the wick on the oil lamp sitting on its black tobacco box. Then she lay down next to her brother, resting her head on her arms, and closed her eyes.

All that she had felt during the day, all her vague thoughts, had now at last filtered through her mind; the world around her had solidified into an opaque image in her heart. Liên knew she was living in a world where her mind could conceive of nothing beyond, nothing larger than the dim circle around Mrs. Ty's lamp. But she did not ponder long, her eyes closed and she passed into sleep that was as serene as the dark night itself throughout a remote district town. ■

My Garden

• Đinh Quốc Vũ (Houston, TX)

There were times I found me alone. I closed my eyes slowly. I saw me. I saw people. I saw a place, a place in the past, a place from where most of my memories of childhood came, a place I was never alone.

It was a big L-shaped garden surrounded by four houses. One was mine. Its ground was black and soft. I felt like I was massaged when I walked on bare feet on it. It was very cool, so cool that sometimes I wanted to roll my body around to collect every single atom of fresh air it got.

At a corner of the garden were two guavas trees. They were tall and old. I didn't know when they came into being. The important thing was they still gave me good fruits. they gave me trouble, too. My neighbors would hear my mother's maximum voice and see me run like Bugs Bunny trying not be caught when she found me on a brand of those trees chewing some sweet guavas. She was afraid of me falling down from the trees like those old guavas which sometimes replaced my damaged soccer ball for a short time. There were also two breadfruit trees. The nice softly smell from the ripe breadfruits made the garden become an attractive place to spend an afternoon lying on a hammock reading some books, then falling asleep after some wind blowing slightly went through.

The trees made up the soccer goals for I, my brother and our friends. Every time the ball went through the guavas goal, we hit the wooden house of a Chinese family. The aluminum vases hung all over the house to prevent thieves cried painfully like the drums sounded when some band played a heavy metal song. Otherwise, every time the ball went through the

breadfruits goal, it knocked the back of my house. This time people saw a lot of Bugs Bunny at the same time.

Two days a week, electric power was cut. Those nights we swept the leaves into a big pile and burnt them at the center of the garden. We sat around the fire listening to some ghost stories. Someone would scream and we all ran. But then we gather again and the stories continued.

I felt superior when I was in the garden. When we went play soccer in another garden, we always lost. Other kids joked at us. Once we invited them to our garden. We beat them. the garden never saw us win again. The kids didn't come back. □

A hot night in Bristol

On a late-night bus I smile
At an old lady next to me
who tightens her grip on her purse.
A black man examines the window
searching for his cool reflection.
Today is Thursday and the weatherman said
it's going to be a hot night
in Bristol.

It's been seven years since I took
my last breath in Vietnam
The laughing of my grandfather
lingers like a note found
in a suicide's bedroom.
I still see those eyes
of glowing fire and surprises.

The bus is taking its last turn
as the light on my watch
begins to flash.

• Võ Quốc Định (Gió Đông, UCLA)

Narcissus

• Hoàng Đạo

Vân sat quietly so the calmness could seep through his body. The half smoked cigarette on the china plate emitted its blue, delicate smoke which slowly ascended and surrounded the lamp's glass bulb.

In front of him, candle and incense smoke permeated and clouded up the beautifully decorated altar. The gold lettering on the pair of matching verses stood out against the black painted background. Through the pink chiffon screen, Vân glanced at the black copper incense burner, the crimson red throne, the antique candle holders, and two vases holding branches full of peach blossoms as red as young girls' lips.

Then his eyes fondly looked at a bowl holding the narcissus bulbs with their snow white roots and bright green leaves covering the tender bulbs. Vân had carefully peeled and pruned those narcissus bulbs himself for almost a month. Today is the day he finally was going to enjoy the result of his hard work. Those budding flowers seemed to wait for the hands of an intimate friend to come and open. Vân longed for the minutes the flowers blossom, hopefully at the moment when New Year's crackers began to crackle.

Vân loved the narcissus flowers deeply. Every year, at the end of January, he bought numerous narcissus bulbs and displayed them all over his bedroom. Then he devoted his time tending these bulbs. He peeled the large bulbs that had several sprouts. Each day he woke up early, pruned, and cleaned these bulbs despite the cold water which sometimes numbed his fingers.

On New Year's day, Vân counted each buds, and when all of them bloomed into beautiful flowers, he certainly was the happiest person.

Vân's friends often said he loved the narcissus flowers as much as he loved girls. He simply smiled every time he thought of this. He fondly glanced at the buds as if he wanted to tell them, "Please smile at me, my friends."

He felt in his heart an airy and sweet love. He softly blew a kiss on one of the buds in the porcelain bowl and felt an infinite affection for the delicate flowers and an admiration for the pleasant fragrance. The soon-to-bloom flowers, Vân thought, once a year came into his life, bringing a strange, eternal aroma, a lovable, essential beauty in life.

Vân quietly awaited for time to pass, second by second, and thought that the approaching moment, the instance

that would bring the world as well as the flowers a New Year. However, Vân still felt his whole soul and spirit as well as the objects around him, in the quietness of the night, were all waiting for that wonderful moment, when his narcissus flowers bloomed, and some magical things would happen and disappear in an instance.

Vân glanced at the flower bowl and suddenly felt tired. He sat back on a chair, and immediately a peaceful and easy feeling came to him.

Suddenly outside the dogs barked. Vân remembered that Dung, his friend, had asked him to be the first person to set foot in her house on New Year's day. He put on his trench coat and walked out of the house.

The cold wind made Vân shudder. He buttoned up his coat and walked along the empty streets to Dung's house. Passing through the unlocked gate, Vân did not see the two pots of yellow orchids that he usually stopped to enjoy. Feeling a little strange he took a closer look at the surrounding and said, "May be I made a mistake. This is not Dung's house."

But studying the cobblestone walk, Vân realized that he had been here several times before. Through the small-leaved rose bushes, he peered at the big white house which reflected the half moon, turning the normal surrounding into a surreal setting. Vân recalled his frequent rose pickings, the dives into the refreshing pool, to the creaking steps on the porch. Walking pass the brick verandah, he was about to knock on the door but it opened by itself. Somehow Vân was not surprised, he walked into the room, sat down on a chair, put down the cigarette case and pulled one out, lit it and started smoking as if he were used to do this for a long time. In the room, things are simply decorated in a blue shade. There was nobody, only a fresh scent faintly lingering in the air. Vân felt his mind floating like a trail of smoke. He tried to recall where he was but could not. He only vaguely remembered that he had seen this room once. Vân looked at a painting on the wall depicting a beautiful girl who was playing a flute; there were two fawns next to her. The more he looked at the painting the more it reminded him that he had seen it before. He could not understand why. He turned around and suddenly recognized his own bowl of narcissus buds next to the painting. Just by glancing at the bowl, Vân knew on the porcelain there was a painting of a girl standing next to her lover. The scene came out of a clas-

sical love story. He also knew all the narcissus flowers would bloom when the clock struck midnight. It was like he was in a dream, his mind seemed to wander into a different world, a world he had lived in the past but could not recall anymore. Suddenly from the quietness of the night a clock struck twelve times. The curtain gradually rolled up. Vân tried to calm his mind, telling himself that this could not happen. When the chiming stopped, Vân startled. The curtain was up, and ... from the door, Vân was overwhelmed, he stood up, bewildered,... stared at a beautiful girl who was smiling at him. Vân felt he had walked into a fairyland. But the girl's oval face, her bright red lips were very familiar to Vân. Especially her clear, assured eyes indicated that she had known him for a long time. Vân hesitated, wanting to greet the girl but thinking he was in a dream when the girl stepped into the room. She wore a light green dress, the color of young rice plants, showing her alabaster white arms. Wrapped around her neck was a yellow scarf with its two ends hanging down from her shoulders. She smiled, "Why did you come so late? We've been waiting for some time."

The sentence ended, yet Vân still heard echoing in his heart a musical melody. He was still amazed when the girl continued, "Please sit down and have a drink."

At that time the door opened. A maid in a green dress stepped in and handed the girl a tea tray. She took a cup and slowly raised it with both hands toward Vân. Vân held the cup and noticed a pleasant aroma. He took a sip and felt quite comfortable.

A while later, the girl said, "There are 12 of us, but some were not quite ready when you came in. If you don't mind, we would all like to greet you now."

She had not yet finished her sentence when the screen rolled up, a sweet scent filled the room. Vân saw 11 girls wearing green dresses with striking yellow scarfs around their necks. He was thrilled by the beautiful sight. He stayed and talked for a long time, although he could not recall what they had conversed but he knew it was a nice and exciting discourse. Suddenly one of the girls said, "It's already late!"

Then each of the girls cut out a piece of her yellow scarf, gave it to Vân and bade farewell. Vân said good-bye but he certainly felt an attachment to the beauties.

A cold wind passed by. Within a blink of an eye, all the girls disappeared. Vân realized that he was still at home, leaning against a window. Only the sweet fragrance remained in the air. He looked at the narcissus bowl; the picture of the Chinese girl on the porcelain stood out in the night. Inside the bowl amid the green leaves appeared some white flowers. As he got closer he found exactly 12 full bloom flowers with their fresh yellow stamens and a small bud still in its green sheath. □

Translated and edited by Phạm Hoàng Liên (UCLA) from the short story "Thủy Tiên" in the collection *Tiếng Đàn*.

In Memoriam R. T. U.

A maple leaf descends
Gently on a breeze
Landing between your rake and my feet.
You say that you follow
The teaching of Chang Tzu:
You are indifferent to death.
I watch how diligent you are
As you reach for the fallen leaf
Without noticing my staring
Throughout its descent.
You tie the neck of the trash bag
Tossing the bundle to my right side:
It is a monument to Tao.
I don't understand the peace that you say
You feel as you trim the bush
With your worn-out clippers.
I can only see the bundle of leaves
Contained in a black bag
That mocks my disbelief in Tao.
I cannot be indifferent to death
When I am already indifferent of life
I look up at the cloud slowly crawling
Across the skyway in the blue immensity
And stare at the ground which holds up my feet:
It is difficult to admire the beauty of a maple leaf
When we fall endlessly to the ground
Not knowing that the ground rises
To cradle our fall.

Vũ Ngọc Lâm (UCI)

Around The Corner

Dhan Vĩ (Harvey Mudd College)

The red faced, stocky guy from next door, hand holding a Budweiser can, asked “What are you doing?”

“Proofreading. Come over, pull up a chair,” I was sitting in front of our warehouse looking out to the small parking lot shared by eight or nine shops in the same business building.

“Go over there to do what, heh heh heh?”

“Well, just come over, sit around.”

The dark man walked over, opened up a metal folding chair, and sat down next to me. He didn’t say much.

“Do you know anyone over there?” asked I.

“Yeah, anh Xuân. We used to station at the same Marines base, Can Cứ Sóng Thần.”

I couldn’t tell through his sunglasses what his eyes were like when he said those words, whether he was telling the truth or the lie. However, his disposition said he could be a soldier once in the past.

“What’s your name?”

“Giang.”

I was intrigued with Giang. He was in the high thirties, seemed to have weathered some rough times, laughing most of the time to soothe the pain of living in a foreign land. He was a Marine Sergeant before 1975, fled Việt Nam in 1986, currently working as a dockworker. He read poetry and books from time to time, but I wasn’t sure whether he enjoyed them or not. He just didn’t seem like the literary type. He showed up here almost everyday before noon in his beat up Tercel, hung around with a beer can or two, then went to work at around 2:30 in the afternoon.

“So, is there anything new?”

“Nothing new, just sit around, drink beer, then go to work.”

A teenage girl, cute looking, pulled into a parking space in a shiny white Honda Prelude. I trailed my eyes after her, “A rich little girl.”

“She’s the daughter of the shop owner,” Giang provided an insight. “There’s another one.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed. She also has a white car, a Toyota Celica.”

“Yes, she’s the daughter of the other owner.”

Next to our warehouse were two “sewing” shops always busy with Vietnamese and Mexican workers. Their main products were clothes, mostly women’s clothes. They would go to the clothing districts of Los Angeles to pick up orders and materials, come back here to sew dresses and blouses, and deliver them to the garments’ outlets. The two shops seemed to do pretty well.

“A neighbor’s daughter,” the words slipped out of my mouth. I thought the idea was romantic. If some kind of relationships were developed between those girls and the guys from our warehouse, it would have been made in Heaven. I would say that fate had brought our warehouse and the shops together in this building.

What about Giang? Did he have a girlfriend or a wife? I wondered whether he had a family? Looking at him and knowing that much about him, I didn’t think he would have a girlfriend, let alone a wife.

I was in my twenties, graduated from college, got a job, and was comfortably living in Southern California without much difficulty with the language or the land. I thought if I wanted a girlfriend, I could probably get one. But him, what kind of girls would consider him. His chance was bleak, and I could even say that most likely he would live alone the rest of his days. He was a human Just like myself with feelings and wants. I felt a note of sympathy for Giang.

God had dealt him a bad hand.

“What do you do during the weekends?” asked I.

“Drink coffee, hang around here. Life’s boring. I don’t know when it would end, don’t know when I would die,” he surprised me with that statement about death and all.

“Oh that, you don’t have to worry about that. It’ll come for sure, sooner or later,” I philosophized as if death didn’t bother me.

He opened up a book and began reading. I continued with my proofreading.

Our get-together occurred more often with small talks about current events around our building, our little corner of the world.

The other guys had noticed my getting close to him. Ngọc even joked that Giang was my life buddy. In reality, Giang and I hardly talked about anything serious or deep, just tip-of-the-tongue talks. But our feeling grew not from conversations, instead from something invisible, from the silence between talks. Giang sometime offered me a beer first thing in the morning. He would go to the trunk of his Tercel and pull out a can from a Budweiser twelve-pack.

“Beer in the morning? No thanks, anh Giang.”

“Okay, heh heh heh,” anh Giang had an unforgettable laugh.

It was strange that somehow I was glad seeing anh Giang cheerful with a new set of friends. If he couldn’t have a girlfriend, having friends was probably good enough. At least, it was the next best offer from the guy upstairs.

“Do you know anh Hà? He was also a soldier before 1975. Is he your friend?” queried I.

“Him, yeah, heh heh heh,” he laughed, his red face lowered. “I know him.”

That was good. He got somebody who had gone through the same experience as he had, someone who could share stories from the past, someone who could easily sympathize with him because their situations were alike.

Anh Hà came into our lives later, but a little more artistically. He knew how to play the guitar, sing, and talk like a know-all person. He would come by on his bicycle, guitar on his back, dressed like a

boy scout, sit down to play rock-and-roll for us, both in English and Vietnamese. It was easy for him to win our friendships. But sometime, I wasn’t sure whether he was sane or insane.

“Do you know what this is?” anh Hà lined up a tube, a plastic tube.

It had holes in it, looking like a flute, a toy flute.

“It looked so funny. How can a flute be made out of plastic?”

“You don’t know anything. This is the best flute in the world. Yeah, I made it with my own hands. That’s why it’s the best. Yeah. You students don’t know anything.”

He had had a can or two already.

“Play it for us,” I suggested to anh Hà.

“Okay, but you have to cite a poem,” he demanded.

“But I don’t know how to cite.”

“Then why do you ask me to play the flute?”

“So?”

“If I play, you have to cite. You can’t play a flute without citing poetry.”

I was dumbfounded, “Just a little bit for us.”

“Alright, listen.”

He could actually play that plastic flute. Not bad for the first few tunes.

“Okay, that’s enough. When you cite, I’ll play more.”

“Come out here, I’ll show you something,” he walked outside. It was almost ten o’clock at night.

It was cold and windy. The parking lot was wet from the afternoon rain with water puddles here and there.

“What?”

Anh Hà moved the flute over his head, dropped down in a martial arts stance with his left leg stretched forward, right knee bent.

“This is called Dragon Flute,” announced he.

I was amazed. He also knew some kung fu.

He moved left and right, back and forth with the same stance.

This is a great stance. You can use it against anyone. If your opponent is taller than you, lower yourself. If he is smaller than you, stand up.”

“Why is that? Why do you have to stand up when the opponent is smaller than you and lower when he is taller than yourself?” I was confused.

“You don’t know? How could you be so stupid? Look!”

“You stand up when he is smaller, and lower when he is bigger,” he continued to move up and down with that one stance.

“But why?”

“So stupid! How could a student be so dumb? Why do you keep asking?”

I kept my mouth shut, grinning, thinking to myself that he surely had more than one or two beers.

He called himself a “coureur,” French for a bicyclist. I didn’t know any better. A dark and wiry man, he seemed to have his share of unhappiness and pain. He didn’t seem to have a family either. He biked from Pomona to Westminster each day to work on car bodies. He said he had more than 5,000 miles under his legs. Next year he would enter the Across America bicycle race and bring back the first place trophy. We found out that he was a Ranger Sergeant before 1975, working as an interpreter. Now he thought of himself as a psychologist, studying under the psychologist master Trần Bình Long. He didn’t have any license, but he said there was no need for a license to practice in this field. He had cured many people, including famous ones. He was currently looking for students to pass on his arts.

“Heh, do you know anh Giang?” I asked anh Hà after the martial arts lesson.

“Yeah, but we fight all the time.”

Fighting all the time? What did he mean? I thought they were in the same boat. They were supposed to be buddies.

They didn’t get along, anh Giang and anh Hà. One day after some beers and over some petty things such as the use of words in poetry, they had a fight. The break out was probably due to some other thing that had been taken in over time by both of them.

“Why don’t you guys try to love each other?” people asked.

“I’ve tried, but he’s so stubborn,” anh Hà explained his position.

“One day in the coffee shop,” continued anh Hà, “he stood up and cursed me in broad daylight, in front of everyone. How could I take that? Everything has its limit. I’m an artist, and he’s a nobody. He did that so that everyone would think he’s my friend, at my level.”

The story was obviously one-sided. We couldn’t say anything because anh Giang had stopped coming after anh Hà showed up at our place. Probably he felt out of place and not up to par because anh Hà was much more talented than he. Anh Giang couldn’t play the guitar, the flute, or even sing.

“He’s jealous because I am so talented. They’ve just got a secretary over there, and she fell in love with me. Do you understand? Do you know what I’m talking about? Fell in love,” anh Hà continued to clarify, waving his flute in the air.

I knew the secretary he was talking about. I would love to go out with her also.

“Why don’t you show him your love? You’re much luckier than he. Why don’t you show the students you love each other? You can sit down and talk with each other.”

“Okay, I’ll try because you guys say so,” anh Hà promised.

I met anh Giang from time to time, asking how he was.

“Alright, nothing new.”

“How are things with anh Hà?”

“There’s nothing, heh heh heh.”

Although he acted as if there were nothing to worry about, I could sense he felt left out.

“Anh Giang, could you go over there to help the guys paint our festival gate?”

“Where?”

“Behind this wall.”

He came back a minute later, “They’re done already, heh heh heh.”

I knew that but had to ask him anyway to show him that we needed his help, that he was not left out. However, I also knew he wanted to help because he liked us.

We finished the chicken curry an hour ago. It had, stopped raining. I was about to read an

article on Vietnamese last names Nhật had given to me a while back. Suddenly the warehouse door was lifted up. Cold air blew in, chilling the room.

Anh Hà, with his usual red beret, stepped in, “So tired, so tired, the car stalled.”

Anh Giang with his baseball cap was right behind anh Hà with a sports bag on his shoulder, laughing, “The car stalled, heh heh heh. Can one of you guys give us a jump? That’s all I need, Just a jump, then the car would start right away.”

The car is in front of Bolsa Mini Mall. We couldn’t push anymore,” anh Hà pitched in. “We had to stop there to get some tea.”

I was not surprise to see them together because the other night, I had seen them driving back here in the Tercel with anh Hà’s bike in the trunk. They had been together almost two or three weeks now. The unbelievable thing was that they could be so close after such a short time.

I stood up, grabbed my coat, and walked out with anh Giang.

“Where did you guys go?” asked I.

“Drinking.”

“Is it Sugar’s?”

Anh Giang lowered his head, a broad smile on his face, “Heh heh heh, yeah.”

“How was it?”

“I told him to go, but he kept silting there, staring, heh heh heh.”

“Hà ha ha,” I laughed with anh Giang. They were very human, like anyone else.

“There do you see it, on this side of Bolsa?” anh Giang pointed at a small car next to curb about three hundred yards in front.

I pulled up next to the yellow Tercel.

“We could only push it to here. Hà was so funny. He was bellowing ‘We’re gonna die. We’re gonna die. We’re gonna get hit.’ while pushing the car. We were so tired after getting it to here, so we went across the street to drink tea.”

I had to push the Tercel with my bus three times to get it started and out of the gutter filled with rain water.

Back on the wet parking lot, we had to jump the car two more times because during the push, the

Tercel carburetor got messed up. He raised the idle a little to keep the car from stalling.

“Let me see, I don’t know if Hà’d done anything to the car,” anh Giang questioned. He looked around the engine compartment for a while, then got back inside to restart the car.

“Where is Hà?” anh Giang asked, picking up an orange plastic flute from the dashboard. “I still have his thing.”

“I think he’s inside,” I answered. “Why don’t you go in and see if he’s in?”

“Can you go in to look for me?”

I felt a twinge of sadness. Anh Giang didn’t feel comfortable going in our warehouse himself But he went in after me looking for anh Hà. Anh Hà was not there.

“I was supposed to stay overnight with him tonight. I returned the room this afternoon already. May be he’s over there.”

“Where?”

“Next to 99 Market.”

“Where can you sleep over there?”

“They’re building some new offices. The doors are open so we go in to sleep. Nobody minds. I’ve got my blanket already. He said I couldn’t use their blankets. They would beat me up.”

“How many people sleep over there?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never slept in the streets before. I could go back to my place tonight, but because I want to honor my promise, I couldn’t do that.”

“So where are you going to sleep tomorrow?”

He didn’t need to. Tomorrow he would be going back to the east coast. A father, his sponsor, had got him a job back there.

“I had quit already. They said I was going back to Việt Nam. I said no and had to show them my address back east as proof.”

A Catholic priest had taken care of the paperwork trying to get anh Giang’s two kids over from Việt Nam. I was stunned. Anh Giang had kids. How could it be while I thought he couldn’t even get a girlfriend. Obviously I didn’t know how to judge a person from his look.

“A boy and a girl. When I left, one was one

year old, and the other was still inside her mother. Now, their mother had remarried and had another kid already. My kids kept writing me letters saying they don't know who their father is."

He told his story, not following any order at all.

"At first, my family hid it from me. But after my friends went back to Việt Nam, they came back to the State and told me so. She's got another son about four or five years old. It's God's wish. What can I do? Life ... heh heh heh."

"So what are you going to do?"

"The father had a job guaranteed for me. And my kids will attend Catholic school back east. Everything will be paid for, room and board."

"You're going to drive the car back tomorrow?"

"I'm gonna give the car to my nephew. The father told me to get there by bus. My nephew is poor. He's hung around with a girl, now they're married. I couldn't believe it.... Life is ... heh heh heh."

"They only have one car, and his wife has no permanent job. What can he do, after getting home, he has to go and pick her up? She has been working odd jobs now and then. About 40, 50 bucks a week."

"Hà is probably waiting for me over there. I've got to go now."

"If you can't find him and need a place for tonight, come back and sleep here. Just knock on the door or tell Dung."

"Alright, if I can't find Hà, I'll be back."

Anh Giang got in the car and backed out of the parking lot.

I went inside to tell Dũng about anh Giang's needing a place tonight. It was three nights before New Year.

I backed the Volkswagen bus into the space next to the yellow Toyota Tercel. Anh Hà and anh Giang were sitting in the Tercel, carrying on a parting conversation probably for an hour or two already. It was a farewell get-together. Today, two days before New Year, anh Giang would go to the Greyhound station to buy a one-way bus ticket to Huntington, West Virginia.

"Tâm, come here!" anh Hà motioned at me.

I pointed at my watch, "I have an appointment

with Thu at 12 o'clock. I need to talk to her. Can we talk later?"

"Tâm à, do you want to paint your bus?" anh Hà asked me as I opened the door, his face glowing.

"Huh? What did you say?"

"Do you want to paint your bus?" anh Hà repeated. "Your bus would look real good with a new paint coat."

I grinned at anh Hà, searching for something diplomatic to say because I neither wish to paint my bus nor want to hurt his feeling.

"Why don't you save up some money? I'll do it for you."

"He doesn't have any money to save up," anh Giang interrupted.

"He's a teacher. How could he not have any money? A real teacher," anh Hà turned over to anh Giang, who had his blue cap and sunglasses on looking a little tired, sitting behind the wheel, laughing.

Anh Hà opened the Tercel door and stepped out.

"Listen to me. Your bus would look real good. You can take your girlfriend out. She would like it. You only need \$100. I'll do it for you. Do you understand? Only \$100."

I grinned at anh Hà, "I don't think I want to paint it. It has dents and scratches everywhere. I just use it to 8; place, here and there. Besides it's safer if it looks like this. If it looked nice and pretty, people might steal it. Then I have to worry about it all the time. Furthermore, I don't have any girlfriend to take out."

Anh Hà's face stopped glowing.

"Thanks anyway, anh Hà."

"Can I borrow your screwdriver, heh heh heh?" asked anh Giang. "The idle is now too high." The broad smile seemed to be a part of his face all the time.

"It's too high," I laughed, padding anh Hà on the shoulder, staring inside the Tercel's engine compartment.

"Yeah, last night it was low, but this morning it's real high, heh heh heh," anh Giang confirmed.

I came back after talking to Thu about the festi-

val insurance. We didn't have the checks with us; thus we couldn't meet with the agent. It would have to be this weekend when the Committee Treasurer could come by the office and sign a check.

"I put the screwdriver back in the back of your bus and closed the door already," anh Hà said.

"You'd better check to make sure it's back," anh Giang stressed.

"That's alright," I waved.

"Yeah, you'd better listen to him. Open up your bus and check to make sure the screwdriver is there."

"So Tâm, do you want your bus painted?" anh Hà asked again.

I shook my head, "No, thanks."

"Your bus has too many dents. You'd have to redo the body before it could be repainted. Do you know I was a master of that kind of cars in the last decade anh Hà pointed at my bus. "I was the first to redesign the car to be the best in the world. I didn't want to submit my patent to the government because it would invert the whole economy. They would kill me."

I grinned at anh Hà.

"I redesigned it such that if we went back to Việt Nam, driving by a pass and falling off the edge, we could pop out two wings on the side of the bus

and fly away like an airplane. How do you like that?" anh Hà stuck out his arms and moved from side to side as if he were a Volkswagen bus flying down the side of a mountain.

"Give me a break. That's enough," I said jokingly, stopping his train of thoughts.

He smirked at me.

"I'll be back. I have to go and say good-bye to Giang," anh Hà got back inside the Tercel.

"Good luck anh Giang. Hope to see you again," I bid farewell.

"Heh heh heh, okay."

It was the best New Year anh Giang had for the past seven years. He had found an old friend, and now he had something to look forward to. He would not be lonesome anymore. Next year he would have his hands busy with two kids calling him "ba".

For anh Hà, well, I didn't know whether or not he would keep up the renewed friendship by writing letters to anh Giang. Actually they both didn't look like the letterwriting type. How funny it was the way friendship came and went. But anh Hà wouldn't be by himself either, he would probably stay here, continue to bike to Westminster from Pomona, getting ready for the Across America bike race, and play rock-and-roll for us while we prepared for the festival. □

Hello ... Help!

Non Sông is a bilingual magazine published by The Union of Vietnamese Student Associations of Southern California. It is published once a month from March through December, and a Spring Edition is published for January and February. In order to preserve and promote Vietnamese culture, it is mailed to the Vietnamese Student Associations at American and Canadian college and universalize free of charge. In addition, it serves as a forum through which Vietnamese students and alumni can share feelings and thoughts with their peers. If your VSA has not received Non Sông, please send us your association mailing address; and the name, address and phone number of the External Vice

President. To defer mailing cost, there's an annual charge (\$18 - US, \$30 - overseas) to send Non Sông directly to other readers' residential or business addresses.

Readers' input is vital to Non Sông's success. It needs your feedback. What subjects or issues would you like to see covered in Non Sông? Please send us your suggestions, recommendations, or literary submissions on anything you deem appropriate. We are open to all ideas.

Non Sông currently needs voluntary staff writers, translators, proofreaders, and artists. If you're interested, we would like to get in touch with you. Please contact us at the following address:

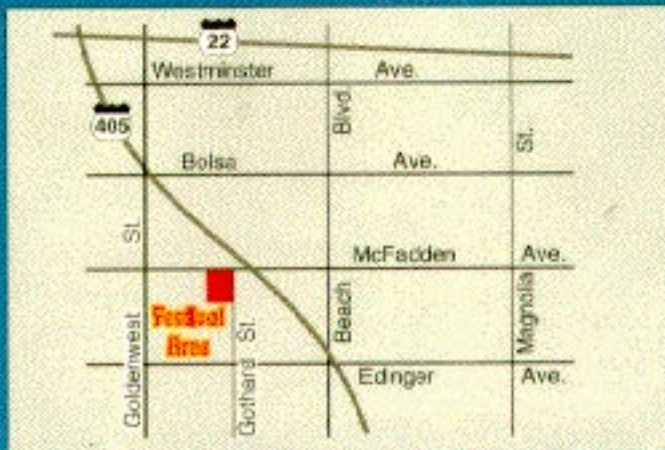
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Sunday, January 29, 1995 • 10:00AM – 8:00PM

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