

VAN CAM HAI

A story, and a selection of poems

A YOUNG CHINESE GIRL ON THE EUROLINES

It was nearly 10:00 p.m. on October 22, 2002. I was like a thin clock hand in the sleepy Amstel Terminal where passengers were waiting for Euroline night trains going to various places in Europe. Looking at passengers of all colors lying and sitting on benches and all over the dirty floor, I couldn't take my eyes off an Oriental girl who was pillowing her sleep with a tangled hair on a duffel bag, paying no attention to soles and heels passing by and bad smell from the nearby shabby toilet. Before I got familiar with the carefree way she slept, she sat up, put a rumpled red shirt over her shoulders, got a toothbrush, put some toothpaste on it and started cleaning her teeth without water. It seemed the water was so cold that she didn't want it. Foam formed around her lips, her hand moved incessantly as if trying to make her gum bleed. She made the hall more suffocating, which forced me to go outside and face strong winds from the North Sea.

They announced from the Amstel Terminal in the dead of night that the Paris train was about to depart. I went to the toilet against my will before traveling across several borders. It's hard to imagine there was such a shabby and dirty railway station in a country that was as beautiful as paradise. Covering my nose with one hand, I opened the rusty door and got startled: In the small room cluttered with wet paper and filled with the smell of urine, a couple embraced each other moaning. Standing with his soaking shoes and his back to the speckled wall full of obscene words and drawings, the boy held the girl in a horizontal position as if playing a guitar. The guitar with a red shirt was nobody else other than the teeth-cleaning-without-water Oriental girl! Before the boy opened his eyes to see me, I rushed outside and send my sickness to the chilly winds. I didn't return to the hall and sat under trees bending in the wind instead and waited for the departure time. The image of the girl from Sôn Taây was broken in the darkness. After a waterless rape in the space was a guitar intercourse on earth, in a place Christ would never set foot on if he ever came back! And I couldn't imagine the passenger next to me was a girl with her clothes whose stench still hung in the air and the hem of her dress was still sweeping my legs. The rumpled dress was pulled up to her groin some minutes ago!

"Are you from Japan or Thailand?" she made my acquaintance without any hesitation.

"Vietnam!" I said curtly and avoided looking at her teeth that were moving to and fro in rhythm with her bad English.

"*Haéo lé!* ['Very good' in Chinese] And me, China!" she introduced herself. "It's hard to meet an acquaintance in the West, but to meet you here means seeing an old friend. We are neighbors at least, aren't we? Tao Zhi is my name. And you?"

I looked out of the window lazily, wishing her to vanish into thin air. To hell with her! To be haunted by such a girl at departure time is certainly unlucky. The train left the Amstel Terminal for La Haye, and went to Rotterdam. It was raining cats and dogs. The face of Muhammad Khan like a crumpled page from a prayer- book reflected in the train window soaked with rainwater. I wondered whether he had stayed in Rotterdam or left it for Palestine. The young Chinese girl had slept. The rain poured down the train but it failed to erase the memory of the strange love making in the shabby toilet. On the border between

the Netherlands and Belgium, the train stopped by a night restaurant. The girl woke up but still half asleep, she made me almost jumped out of the car.

“Do you want to make love? It costs only some tenners.” She suddenly solicited openly.

“...!” I was stupefied.

“There must be a flusher somewhere, or we can find a secluded spot.”

“I have no money. Can’t do anything however I want.” I replied curtly. She turned out to be a prostitute. And the hasty love making in the Amstel Terminal appeared before me again.

To calm myself, I said, “I will get you something to drink, OK?”

“*Xieo xieo! Xieo xieo!*” She thanked me in her mother tongue.

I felt at ease again after knowing she was a whore. Wandering around red-lighted streets filled with the smell of opium in Amsterdam at nights, I had got accustomed to whores of all colors whose customers were from all over the world. Although I had never spent a night with them, I somehow felt as if a mysterious dance had made its way to my mind whenever I saw a whore. In a heavily rainy night, I sat with a whore who was the lover of a friend of mine in a pub on Lyù Thông Kieät Street on the southern bank of the Hồng River. I watched her hand with purple fingernails bringing the glass to her mouth when she sipped her wine and wondered how many times her hand had stroked crumpled bills from her customers and if she felt happier at each stroke than at love making.

Who was the first woman engaging in this trade? I was told that the whore wasn’t human being and she was born of sea-foam, some kind of sponge, and Hindu people called them *apsarases* – *ap* means water and *sarase* means essence. Apsarases became a symbol of invisible power like heavenly water, and a sexual tool for males. Apsarases were identified with *houris* in the Muslim Paradise. As messengers of Kali, apsarases persuaded human being to worship gods, therefore they act as messengers in the Buddha retinue. What a beautiful myth they have and how tolerant and wonderful the Indian ancient philosophy is!

In Amsterdam, besides old churches, castles, kindergartens, schools opposite the Amsterdam Central Station, there were thousands windows displaying lassies of all colors from all over the world who worked all night along the canal crowded with all-nighters in festive mood. Amsterdam was no exception. On the day I visited the Vain Hainh Pagoda at Nederhost den Berg Village, on my way home by Utrecht, I saw on the Fetch River hundreds of dimly lit boats where whores were doing their business. After lying in cradle during the babyhood, no girl thought she would grow up to lie behind window glittered in the neon lights.

Wandering through Amsterdam one night, I met a whore from Ukraina. After the Soviet Union was erased from the world map, the life of a daughter of a secretary of the Communist party cell in a Kiev suburb experienced a sea change. Natalia, the pride of her secretary-father, became a dropout and strayed to Amsterdam, hired a window to place herself on sale night and day. The room two meters square behind the window housing only a single bed cost her some hundred euros a month. It was the place where she rested, entertained such a rare customer as me, and her customers could take a nap! I gave her some money after chatting with her for nearly an hour. She turned me down.

“Fifty euros allow you a hug, not a kiss. Love making will cost you more and an overnight business much more.” Natalia shook her head and led me to the door. “I know you pay for the time I spent with you. Don’t make me sad by doing so. After several years engaging in this trade, I had no guest in the correct sense of the word. You are the first and may be the only person who considers me as a Ukrainian girl in this place of pleasures.”

Natalia took off her coat. The Ukrainian girl displayed her body again to wait for a passer-by to stop. Each time I went to the red-light district, I never forgot to pass the Natalia window. Sometimes she closed the curtain to entertain her customer, sometimes she was baring her

body for potential customers. No playboy knew that on her dressing table at the bedhead, there was one of her father's medals. This was the most precious thing her father left her after death. The medal on the chest of the Ukrainian soldier during the revolution war was now gathering dust in Amsterdam with a red-light girl.

Red Light was an open-air museum that showed the world what the open prostitution was like, including services for gay men. By the Herengracht Canal and opposite the Opera Meseum, there was a Homomonument for homosexuals. It was a deserted dock where some oil lamps and wreaths were laid. I sat in front of a dimly lit lamp regardless of whether somebody was looking at me or not, as if I were also a gay man who was mourning for lost souls floating in the canal before reaching the North Sea. Of the twelve docks who knows which one is clear [a Vietnamese saying about uncertainty of marriage for girls]! Klaas Termaat, a gay man at his early fifties, told me irritatingly on a train from Hanover to Amerfoot that nobody on earth wanted to be a queer who couldn't sleep with women according to God's law, that his world had suffered the most terrible punishment from God on behalf of the humankind but they had never been treated equally. Fortunately, there was Amsterdam and this monument in this world for them to commemorate his fellows, or offer incense according to Vietnamese traditions.

Maybe there was nowhere else like Amsterdam. Besides the Red Light and 34 famous art and historical museums, there was also a sex museum here. Objects from the life of Mata Hari, the well-known woman spy during the First World War, were displayed there along with ancient pictures and books on sexual life, including Chinese and Japanese works written centuries ago. The existence and sexual world of the humankind from primeval to modern times were introduced to tourists in this multi-storied building. Artistic works from China and Japan showed that it's Oriental peoples, not Western ones, who were masters of enjoyment of all possible pleasures; and it's the East where the earliest sexual civilizations were found.

And tonight, on a train crossing several borders in the rain, I sat beside one of their descendants. The Chinese girl looked like a young lady who had just stepped from an old painting onto my wandering life. It's strange that she did her business on trains, instead of a window or brothel.

"When I was born, my father named me Tao Zhi [peach branch]. But my life is not like the peach branch in his favorite poem from the Book of Songs," she said the poem slowly, "The peach branch is in blossom, its flowers are bright, she gets married, and has a happy family." I leaned towards her. From her lips covered with toothpaste foam, and from the body wriggling in the dirty toilet at the Amstel Terminal, lines of the poem were repeated. She gets married, and has a happy family. Words of the poem that were as beautiful as a dream seemed too ironic in her life. One thousand years before, and one thousand years after, the Li River in her native province of Guilin kept winding through magnificent hills and mountains, only Tao Zhi travelled up the stream on Euroline trains to sell herself instead of getting married and having a happy family by the Li River. I was lost in thoughts about a journey called 'bad destiny for the lucky in love' when Tao Zhi woke me up to reality with her wandering but academic thoughts.

"The poet Liu Ling said 'I consider the sky as my roof,' while Lao Tzu said 'people don't live forever!'" Tao Zhi smiled, "I work as an amateur prostitute without paying poll tax, travelling from time to time on these trains. When I return to China, I want to go teaching and write books."

"Teaching and writing!" my eyes rolled.

"Don't be surprised! You can only look at a gentleman every three days! *Haéo lé!*"

Tao Zhi had been a sociology student in Shanghai. Finding no job after graduation, she traveled across Europe, visiting places she only knew from books and wanted to see and discover them with her own eyes.

“I didn’t have enough money to visit all 500 places these Euroline trains go to. So I decided to sell myself at stations to earn money for my trip. Selling myself to buy a pleasure of discovering new cultures isn’t something mean or base. My body will be reduced to dirt but I have no regret about passing this world. I will come back to China and nobody knows I have paid the price. People only know me by my books that make me immortal.”

“Is the price you paid too low or too high?” I ventured.

“Neither high nor low. If it is too high, nobody buys me. If it is too low, I never sell. To a woman, to save the first and the last time for her lover is enough, who cares about chastity in the rest? Other whores sell themselves to make a living, I do it to cultivate my mind. If the money I made in Europe is dirty, I will finally spend here on tickets to museums, hotels, restaurants, travel, and tourist attractions. I gain a lot and lose nothing. I am a Chinese person now, not only a little girl by the Li River. I have visited many places and know how other peoples live. To tell the truth, you’d better choose between your body and mind,” Tao Zhi snapped her finger and repeated her offer. “If you say OK, you will help me go further in my effort to discover civilizations. But, perhaps, you don’t have much money.”

“Why don’t you feel embarrassed when telling your story to a stranger?” My question slipped out.

“Want to know why? Because you are from the East, like me, and it’s easy for you to understand me. Moreover,” Tao Zhi hesitated for a moment and continued, “we Orientals are usually confused about body and mind. From the ancient time on, our sages held the body in contempt and honored the pure mind, but who among them could do what King Kie had done? Crossing a river to kill Ch’in Shih Huang-ti or be killed. He failed but his deed was immortal. *Haêo le!*”

“You want to be King Kie?”

“Oh no! How dare I?” Tao Zhi swayed in rhythm with the train. “I only want to do what I love. I’m definite about it instead of saying yes to everything. If you want to master everything, you will end in nothing. I want to make up for the time my father –an intellectual and a teacher - had lost in the hands of Red Guard reined by Jiang Qing.”

No King Kie, no Liu Ling, no Lao Tzu, but her words full of ideas from King Kie, Liu Ling, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu were like a flash of lightning that struck in my mind. The world doesn’t consist of brave males. Such ideas and strange and adventurous life are enough to make up a brave female. I felt I was only a humble person bound to a lot of common things. In this vast and open world, sitting when being born, lying when passing away, and ending in a decaying skeleton, are not good deeds. They are no good deeds, as you put it, didn’t you, Hui-neng, didn’t you, Tao Zhi? How could we enjoy the clear water when we never wade into muddy water? How could we enhance our mind if we never hold the body in contempt? I thought the first human words were calls for the sun, the source of light and fire, that was not used for broiling meat at night but for turning ourselves into torches to illuminate our paths. I called the act of turning oneself into flames and creating new images the transformation of the enlightened.

Sitting there beside me, she stopped being a whore who cleaned teeth without water and performed a guitar love making in a toilet, and became another girl, an unusual within an ordinary. At least, it also opened several pages on a new style of whore in the whole life as a manuscript. Tao Zhi had slept. Her face was also as dreamy as everybody else who was asleep in the car. With the light cast by street lamps through windows, I could see new

freckles on her cheeks that had experienced tears for her lost youth. They are no good deeds. In her sleep, new European horizons would help erase sorrows caused by the wandering and ill-treated life.

Prostituting on trains couldn't lure rich customers. Traveling by trains means poor, not to mention pimps who were present everywhere. Sometimes she made some money and sometimes her customers welshed on her. She said she had been raped by two vagrants at the Warsaw Central Station. But Tao Zhi, the lonely and daring girl, up to the time she met me, had visited some 10 Eastern European countries. In her bag, some rolls of film and a notebook are the most precious belongings. She took notes of all places she visited, where many rich people hadn't had a chance to set foot on. On this very trip, I had more than one time watched her taking notes, under the light of the train, of a footprint carved in a milepost near the border between the Netherlands and Belgium. Tao Zhi said she felt there was something between her and the carved footprint. Human feet made the world smaller but she had never seen any place where people commemorated their simple feet like locals in that border.

At daybreak, the train arrived at Gallieni in Paris. I hastily handed her some rolls of film when we said goodbye, wishing she would take photos as she liked. Looking at a beggar covered up with rags on the empty floor, Tao Zhi told me:

"Look! They are no better than me! Their lives are more miserable than mine! Many European people are wasting their lives! Goodbye! *Xieo xieo.*" Tao Zhi waved at me. "Where will you visit in Paris? Good luck! I am going to the Lourve. It and world civilizations have waited for me so long."

Her voice faded out on the pathway to a subway station. Above the ground, the sun appeared and sent a piece of Eastern sea-foam to my soul, it permeated the Paris soil and flowed into Tao Zhi body. *Haêo le!* Someday when I see her again through her books, how could I save myself from some mood of melancholy? Oh the whispering of autumn breeze, please tell me if she is still a little girl from Jiangnan!

*

From *Three Vietnamese Poets* (Tinfish Press, Kāneʻohe, 2002)

Translation from the Vietnamese Linh Dinh

The Rivers Have Not Only Me

Vietnamese rivers are often contemplative
 cloud levels of memories
 slurp the sad grass a mouthful of blue river
 on the body convulsed with laughter bomb craters reflect back at the sun
 from high above a tongue wanders
 her language is a tireless light spread evenly, in spite of the sleepwalking rain,
 the roof of a church, a pier, a dry log like death leaning against your porch
 my pain does not have a flowering or fruit-bearing season

night barks at a face with countless pimples
 a rose holds a gun
 my heart
 a flame-blowing tube
 a time when words fall asleep drunk next to the wood-burning stove
 a hand spits out a well-chewed death expression
 my brother's previous life
 a blind tv
 still I watch till the end of the card game
 a cigarette burns a naked body
 a car collapses on its knees having won the eternity prize
 even if someone does howl a dirge tomorrow
 O my scent don't you borrow from a deficit
 to the rivers is added a little sister's waist
 filled with the self-confidence to seduce the map of the world.

*

Academic Garden

Colliding with libraries
 the fort of Athens is stranded on a draft manuscript
 the vast academic garden a copy Judas's tongue bends a computer finer
 against philosophy pain intermingles with man
 S.O.S. about me
 poetry tastes artillery
 a bowl of poison reminds the rooster to crow loudly
 strums the mourning cloth
 the waste land dreams
 peasants overflow vegetation
 leisurely drive breakfast to assist the dawn
 village philosophy
 does not copy anyone's harvest season

*

Remembering the Time when Men Appeared as Ghosts

On the edge of the Pacific we rub against each other
 the sandy hills are like thousands of buttocks awakened to dance
 the tide rising and ebbing is stupefying a billion bodies
 death is lighting a wedding candle
 to walk again behind the shadow of children
 and it calls to the ghosts
 resuscitating a life cycle blooming every twenty centuries

sit right here and be calm in this dark house your armpits
 body hairs are chasing the breast species
 the lit realm
 is running pell mell crisscrossing all the beds
 the white blanket, the yellow blanket, the black and the red blankets
 cannot cover this thirst
 the fantasies of tongues
 You and I fumbling to clean up this final mess.

*

Deluge

Rain strangles the veranda
 you are infected white the flow of night is level
 I harried
 shrunken the kitchen
 a browbeating chest fries the air
 a few steps though not colorful, you sidle through the door: 5 limes/5fire fingers
 a rain alley slow to answer
 the head of the storm surges forward searching for a prey
 an urban nest
 street intersections spill out on strike
 the poet stretches
 wears each phrase of loose fitting narrative
 from the peak saliva and blood are jealous of each other
 the calm hem of your dress the neighbors climb up to rebuild a leaky fantasy
 paralyzed
 you do not look at the sky through a rare crack my wound
 the street looks askance and knits
 a scarf turns out the light
 the prying day leaves this life
 clueless
 a laughing round

*