

IN AN UNSETTLED TIME

(Ngày Tháng Bồng Bềnh)

By Nguyễn Văn Sâm

English translation by Thiếu Khanh Nguyễn Huỳnh Điệp

1.

“Those in days of yore / where are their spirits now?” The old verses lament the images, which have slipped into oblivion; the images now revived like a miracle and evoked my deep memories when a singer who was so young and who had just been warmly applauded on the stage some moments ago, timidly asked what my name was. Having the answer, the young girl burst with joy saying that she was a college student of mine and she used to sit in the lecture-hall listening to my lecture.

She said my lectures had been very good and they usually sounded definitely; and that at that time I was dressed up so smartly and I looked so noble. My clothes in that past, I thought, must be contrast to these ready made stuff I put on now which could be found on sale at any common shop in the States. In addition, my face might look so listless (I recalled having clicked my tongue and combed my hair casually before coming here) which gave me a sad feeling and I had a pitying smile. I felt sorry for the former student who was so truthful. I also felt sorry for myself for having looked rather miserably sleepy and lost like a sleep-walker after having spent ten years under the curse of those wicked wizards of the time.

The singer was standing still timidly as if she had two left feet, unlike the air of freshness and confidence she had worn when performing on the stage. I felt somewhat proud of my past. At least what I had said was listened to; my role as a lecturer had made me a toast of the town – or was it the Vietnamese education and moral that made me so? I smiled again. Our talk was sincere but the things we were talking about had faded in the ups and downs of life. One thing was true that I was now sitting quietly, looking to the stage and luxuriating in the romantic ambiance that was full of fresh and cheerful sounds of traditional melodious songs. The singing sounded the pure voice from my native land; the voice of life-loving youth, of the poetic landscape from a coastal zone with the sounds of waves murmuring on long sand beach in a windless quiet night mixed with the rustling shore pine trees evoking a familiar grove of vacoa filbre or a luxurious plain of mulberries, a dreamy expanse of sand where I used to stay up the whole night to enjoy listening to the endless music of waves and dreaming of being a ship on its long voyages... The singing was so passionate and it blended with the situation to tease, chase, and fascinate my mind, which had been dull-witted for a long time; it pulled my spirit out of my body; it made my soul soaring high as I felt slightly sad about a love that had broken down in the past.

Looking at the audience around and those in front of me and thinking of myself, in a sudden, I had a complex about being distant from the others. The vicissitudes of life relegated me and so

many others to the bottom of the society, pushed the knowledge we had acquired for a long time to oblivion, and lifted the student who had started her life empty handed a decade ago to the crest of fame. I frigidly shut the door of friendliness which had just been opened.

Questions of old things and of my current life came down in sheets from the former student with a surprising warmth – despite my abstracted look on purpose and interruption on harking back to the last days of the dying old regime. The talk helped revive the relationship between an old teacher and his student; it was also the relationship among those who had had common memories about some situation in life to remember of.

* * *

Leaning against the hand rail in front of the Lecture-hall Two on the third floor, I was pitifully looking at those students on the ground. The area was as crowded with people as the floor where I was on. There was something different in the air, though; there wasn't the brouhaha as usual at changing class. There weren't the rumblings of chair moving, the rustling sounds of note books opening, or the noise of last words in low tone of interrupted conversations either. All was like a military march out of rhythm. It was deadly quiet; a mourning quietness that followed a piece of sad news. Male students look worried, whereas females quite flurried. Their worry and flurry implied acquiescence to the advent of anything. How could it be otherwise? The country was being paralyzed in a game of power exchange and fishy bargains behind the scene by those ambitious participants who did not care whether they would leave an abyss for the people to deal with. These youths were not participating in the game but they had to receive the heavy impact. They all seemed to be helpless awaiting whatever would happen. Despite the prospect of a dark future, they kept going to college, and quietly and diligently acquired pieces of knowledge, or took notes of lecturers' words which sometime came with his thoughts at the moment and wasn't verified beforehand. There were bewildered wide open eyes hither and thither. Insouciant and merry laughter were heard no more around the refreshment stand at the end of the pre-fabricated class-rooms. At times, there were reserving smiles when some sharp comments were made to lessen the strain. They seemed to have given full weight to their attitudes and behavior which were reasonably limited. It was the sign of young people who were just grown up but had to face difficulties. Sometimes, during my lecture, I stopped speaking, took a heavy drag at my cigarette⁽¹⁾, gave my mind to the wisps of smoke, enjoyed listening to the soft sound like that when the wind moving banana leaves at night, or that of the tip of a ballpoint pen running on paper, all such sounds were monotonous and vague like those of a stream running far away; or I would look for the eyes which were looking at me awaiting something and with surprise.

In a sudden I felt kind of blue. Who knew if this was the last day that we could gather here, reading an old poem and reciting the stories of some old events. Something seemed to be futile; deleterious reality could not be ignored as the sounds of gunfire were still heard; anxieties for an

¹ *Until the 60s and even the 70s of the 20th century, teachers were allowed to smoke in their classes.*

unknown future could not be got rid of from one's mind as raiding rockets kept playing havoc around here; the "return of those oppositional brothers" would be deadly mourning and it would cause extreme changes. The furious earthquake of ill devils and the arrhythmic turn of history would spare no one. I would probably be arrested or even be killed, or I might be forced to say something which was now untrue. Either would be the same; at least a period of one's life would be deprived; one's true ego would be denied this way or the other. That would be all right. But what about those young people sitting there? What had they done wrong? The buds were too green and too tender to stand a great flood. All would soon be shriveled and withered up, and they would be reduced to mere dummies who would be bewildered, wandering around in a society whose individuals would essentially find themselves having feelings of guilt. The threatening black screen thick with iron hooks on it was about to fall down covering all everything. The images of small animals in chaos trying to escape from a burning forest could be foreseen without having to recourse to imagination.

In emotions my voice sounded quite hoarse with words linked together and became worse through the microphone. The skin on my limbs crawled and the hair on my arms under my shirt rose as I heard my voice finishing my lecture. History is a repeat of the events in the past. The south part of Xứ Đàng Trong had fell into ruin due to the lavishness and incompetence of Nguyễn lords and their court officials. The power that be in South Vietnam was now also full of wrongdoings and mistakes. The country might be coming to a blind dead end.

I recited the poem I had just presented to feel sorry with every word in it. The lesson had been written by our forefather for almost three hundred years before but it seemed few people managed to learn it.

The lecture hall was very quiet. The sound from electrical fans and students' breathing could be heard clearly. Some kind of sad blood was infusing in their souls. Half the country had been evading such a net for twenty years now was going to be tragically trapped in it. A female whispering sound of voice, which sounded so sad like a tear that could not be held any longer, and had to fall down, rose somewhere amongst those students:

"It was like our present situation. News of losing battles comes down in sheets; military units disintegrate en mass..."

The whole class turned to that direction. There was some voice in low tone. I pretended unaware of that and kept continuing to sum up the lecture after having a quick glance just to see the familiar female student with her reddened eyes.

The class ended with my words of consolation assuring that tragedy would in no way to occur very soon, and that the world's politics would turn its scale of power to South Vietnam should the country incur absolute disadvantage.

It sounded like I lied to myself in thoughts. I felt ashamed of myself for such impudence.

I sat by after the last student having left the lecture hall. I thought of the lines of people standing in the street near by. The U.S. Embassy. Very crowded. Very many people. And very noisy.

Leaving their danger and tragical collapse – the bloody volcanic lava which was running slowly but steadily – behind, they came and gathered there, every day, for almost half a month up to now; they all dressed the part, with their individual documents ready in hand. Sometimes, someone was coming out in good spirits and with proud bearing. The crowd grew larger and larger. On my way to the college, when coming over this place, I felt myself in queer and contrasting feelings: I wished I had had the same conditions like theirs and, at the same time, I felt admiration for those students who were sitting in the lecture hall some streets apart quietly opening their mind to the world of literature.

The two extremities or two conceptions of life style, or were they the two situations?

Late in the afternoon, the sun hid itself behind the building of the Med School. As someone was leaving the college late their motorcycles were sounding unnoticed puff puff. Some conversations I had unintentionally heard some moments before were resounding in my years: that lass X. and lassie Y. had followed their husbands or their families to Guam the day before; that lad A. or that lad B. had been staying out there in Phú Quốc Island for a couple of days. ..

Any running away deserved justification. Disasters, not the ones who fled for their lives, were to blame. Looking at unaligned rows of unoccupied tables and chairs spreading to the other end of the immense hall which was hedged about with the four pale white walls, I felt so lonely.

2.

The living room was large. A set of sofas upholstered with green and red flowered velvet was contrary to the color of the walls. Above the fireplace hung a large portrait of the house lady who was smiling slightly showing a fine upper set of teeth with two very nice protruding teeth. Some men were sitting fuming with their cigarette while in front of them were their glasses of coffee. Children were sitting or lying around an American-styled game. Behind the counter dividing the living room and the kitchen, two female friends and the house lady's eldest daughter were busy with their pot of "*phở*" and additional dishes.

The ambience was friendly, warm and cozy.

Casting a glance at the living room, Dzung asked her friend:

"Hải, have you brought the tape along? I'd like to show the two teachers their students' skills. More than ten years have elapsed. We've become pro and no more the novices any longer."

Put on the spot, Hải was smiling:

"You said... But it's the original with the raw unmixed voice. I'll be very ashamed if they took the mickey out of me for it."

"That's OK," said Dzung. "Don't worry. These teachers are now much gentler than they used to be."

“Why,” Hài responded. “In the old days, I usually trembled when meeting and talking to them. But I quiver no more now.”

“You must have the complex of having asked for grades, mustn’t you?” Dzung teased her friend.

Without knowing being poked fun at, the singer honestly justified:

“No. I’ve never asked any teachers for grades. I stayed up late every night to study, you know. And that was why I am this ugly. And I don’t know why I kept trembling even when coming across those teachers who never taught me. So embarrassed.”

Dzung teased her friend to the core:

“Or was it that you’d fell in love with someone in your very freshman year at the college and you’d be ashamed if it became known to the lecturers?”

The two friends gave each other friendly pats as they used to when they were very young enjoying participating in their students’ unbiased activities with peaceful expectations in their homeland.

I happened to encounter that joyful sight when leaving the living room in order to make a phone call. I asked, just to make it natural:

“It seems you’re very delighted at something. What’s that? May I join it?”

The singer flushed as if she were in her debut. Her friend related their conversation to me. I smiled:

“It’s not that I’m now gentler than I was in the old time. It was that at that time teachers were under some ascendancy. Such ascendancy exists no more now, but something miserable does instead. We’re now bewildered and destitute, you see? Every week I find myself running to seed.”

One of the two ladies comforted me:

“That’s what you said, but both of you don’t look any older, teacher...”

I sensed something formal and untrue in their hackneyed phrase. They seemed embarrassed and their empathetic eyes were gliding over my face. I flushed knowing to be in their pity. Why was I always pushed into such a situation like this? Had my woman had enough of marriage life or had the new environment opened to the ambitious woman new potential promising to match up to her cherished desires ? Had my faults or mistakes been being accumulated since too long time before or was it because I had to devote my time to writing literary works and forgot the husband’s responsibilities? The bust-up had taken place and it played me up badly since then. Their pities reminded me that I had been getting the short end of the stick. I isolated myself from the world in order to give my loss the go by and deny any reminders.

I tried to act naturally, opening the fridge to look for some beverage. The singer asked inadvertently:

"It seems that only you and your children have been seen here so far. How about your wife? Did she make here with you?"

"Yes, she did," I replied.

"Where's she? We haven't seen her anywhere so far..." asked the singer after some moments of silence and hesitation.

To prevent the conversation from infringing on my privacy, I replied her in half joking tone:

"What a question! She's is here in the States. Where else do you think she could be?" I laughed and leaving them guessing: "You ladies usually ask me the same thing. I've heard the question too many times for eight years." I took my coke away to make a phone call. The two ladies looked at each other understandingly.

The phone rang at the other end. A barrage of somnolent English tone was heard. "*Shop X. What can I help you?*" "Forget it. Can you come for some chatting coffee with us right now?" "*No, thanks. I can't. I'm on my shift, and will be in my wife's place too. She's tired now. Just two of us have to take care of the shop around the clock, and we're quite winded now. Our son's too young to help us.*" "Don't work so hard. Don't have such a weakness for money. Just live in an apartment, and use used cars like we do..." There was a strained laughter. "*We've just tried within our effort. Not just for the money...*" He went to bat for something but I didn't want to listen to, and I teased him: "We've spent more than half of our lifespan already. It's too late to become a millionaire now. Do you wish to slough off all what you've learned and resign yourself to being just a money hunter year after year? Why don't try to do something for life's sake?" The man tried to defend himself weakly: "*Don't pile it on like that. I've done a lot of things... But we have to try our best so that our children may have a house. We've known how hard it was when we started everything from scratch. We wish our children to be better with their lives. Don't take it hard for what I said. I doubt if writing something like you are doing now is any useful for life.*"

There was no need to start an argument about one's concept of one's way of living, I changed the subject:

"You may be busy, I think. It's not very interesting to talk with each other as I hear some American customers buying things and you are counting money and giving change over there. When having time I'll come to see you latter."

"That is untrue," I thought. The man was working hard for his own sake but he ascribed it to his son. Would your son expect to inherit your house? Having graduated your son would find a job somewhere and, as a matter of fact, he would prefer buying a house where he would be working to taking over the house you and your wife had spent tens of years earning money with your business to purchase it.

I talked to myself but, by the way, as an explanation to my two former students: "Things are always going that way. They refuse to leave their business for an old friend get-together, but whenever an event or a meeting come of for choosing someone for some titles such as

president or chairman of something, such people would immediately show up and make their presence felt. They are very good at that. With particularly acute sense of opportunities.”

I found myself back to the living room. People were still interesting with their talks, about the situation of literature and arts overseas, about the market for music tapes, some new articles on the papers, some writers, the consciousness of responsibilities, and about someone’s expectation of achieving something in life.

I’d better to listen. Everything depended on what you liked and what your nature and your competence were. The good or the bad could not be argued from stem to stern in a short get-together. I was distantly smoking and I released my mind into the soft music coming from the two speakers which were located in two opposite corners in the room. The singing voice was rather sobbing and desolate, resounding bits of the tones of famous singers.

I asked T., who often proudly talked about his dangerous flights and difficult tasks when he was in charge of an air force group in the Central Vietnam, he shook his head. “I don’t know beans.” My friend, a man of letter, was frowning trying to distinguish the tones. K., who waited until the others had enough time to pay their attention to the question, spoke gently:

“That singer X. had her debut very long time ago, but she hasn’t become any better. She just keeps herself as a B grade.”

I was smiling: “T. must be the best one. Nobody knows how he’s trained his wife but she has become more and more a good singer. Now Hải is the most sought for singer overseas.”

T. exposed his merits somewhat proud: “Yea, she sings well, but I’m tired of having to babysit our two children some couples of nights a week. Recently she travelled to Cali to give performance and have her singing recorded for a month. Since hamburger became my sole daily meal during that time, I grow fed up with it now.”

“The anguish, however, is not that you had to babysit for a month,” teased K.,” but that she was away from home for 30 days. No wonder when Hải was in Cali, you claimed to be in need. If you were sustained exclusively on hamburgers, why was your money lacking? I didn’t dare to lent you as I didn’t wish to be blamed for it.”

My man-of-letters friend looked at me secretly to exchange his thought. There was an intimate touch in the tease. We laughed ourselves out of troubles in life. The husbands of the two former students of mine often retold this episode. The man quickly integrated with the friendly ambience in the room:

“Your life has some meanings only when you can borrow money from somebody. Otherwise, as you’re refused a loan, that means that your life has been suffering misery.”

People were giggle with that funny saying. In a sudden, I came to look back on my own situation. The leaver must have her reason, just the one that stayed behind had to face many problems. That joke was for one of them. The other was one’s children. My elder daughter might have something that she could not share with her father, she lied sobbing to herself in her room.

She was in her adolescent age. She had to explore everything for herself; there was not a woman around to help her. She was lonely and she got the short end of the stick. Who was to blame? And why? I was touching my shirt pocket. The unsent letter my younger daughter wrote to her friend which I found accidentally and kept as evidence of the lack of my responsibilities on her, and also my helplessness to the situation. My daughters would grow up and they would learn something wise here and there, but they would certainly either go short of something very subtle necessary for Vietnamese girls, or they wouldn't have enough self-confidence to lead their life without batting an eyelid at anything unexpected like American females. It was pitiful that the flowers were opening but there wasn't a hand to fertilize, water, and take care of them. As much experienced and deaf to many things as I was but many a time I couldn't help my self-pity as I had to look for a pill when getting sick; or coming home late after a class I had to take a cold meal, much less my young children who were apt to be moved and to have self-pitying feelings.

I felt myself out of inspiration to join their talks. I sat leaning against the back of the sofa puffing my cigarette and released my mind again into the music. Their talks went on excitingly. The children kept squabbling in their pure English. Nobody felt surprised about that, except me, who felt deep regret and pessimism about the family foundation and the future of the Vietnamese community overseas. Carrying a box of milk to serve the men group, Dzung told the children:

"Games again! You children shall play something other than games. It's so noisy to squabble."

The children found a chance to get uproar:

"This isn't a gambling Mom! You see, this is something helps to study."

Someone commented:

"The kids now are all the same. They speak English all the day."

There was no help for it. The young did not expect to be blamed for it, nor did they want to annoy their parents. Someone even deemed it a shame to talk to adults in English, but they had to spend 8 hours a day at school, and 3 - 4 more hours being tutored at home by a system of outstanding teachers with an endless depository of lessons prepared for hundreds of millions of people via dozen TV programs. Consequently, it would be very hard for them not to forget their mother tongue.

I thought I should speak my mind: "That's inevitable, I think. It's like most of us when we first came here; we were over our thirties then; our tongues had become "hardened"; the "nerve cells for languages" in our brain had been "settled" already – I coined the phrase of "nerve cells for languages" – For reasons given, we usually kept our mouths shut when working with our American co-workers and preferred babbling with our fellow-countrymen at our office. The same happens to our children. They started listening and speaking English at home and at school since they were very young, and they become used to it; so it's obvious that they're afraid of using Vietnamese.

A friend spoke pessimistically:

"I'm afraid that our Vietnamese community might be assimilated sometime later. It'll be very regretful if our community would turn out to be inferior to the others concerning preserving our culture identity."

T.'s voice was quite mettlesome:

"Articles should be written to appeal to parents to help prevent and put their children's deracination straight; how future should be like should be delineated to them. If every family strives to train its own offspring, the matter may be satisfactorily settled."

That was right. Everybody saw the problem, and nobody expected their children to become a kind of "Westerners" alien to them. But how about their business? It seemed all that we wrote would be likely to prove futile. We all knew a thing or two about it, but how could we get by on it? That was the matter with my own daughter. I smiled at myself sadly:

"Please listen to this letter written by a writer's daughter – my own daughter. And you'll think about it. That's a chip off an other block? There are lots of causes for it, and the matter is not as easy as we could have thought."

With that, I started to read the letter aloud.

"Dear Hà, Hà có mạnh khỏe không? Vân thì same as usual. Summer này Vân và family của Vân sẽ đi Vacation ở Illinois, chỗ nhà cousin của ba Vân để thăm họ hàng. Vân don't like it, nhưng mà ba Vân đi đâu Vân phải đi theo đó. Gần bãi trường Vân fell sad vì... thằng Jack cute với thằng John baby face đó mà. Tụi nó nice với Vân lắm. Hồng có gì, you know, nhưng mà sometime, I'm proud of myself. Tuần trước Vân took some pictures trong lớp, this is on of them... Cho Vân xin lỗi cái gà bới hand writing của Vân..."⁽²⁾

"You see," I commented, "The fault can't be ascribed to anyone! Parents, children, situation, acquisitiveness. The love for our native land becomes more and more withered. And those in our homeland, who have pushed us to move over here hence the problem..."

All participants of the meeting were discussing the matter, each had his own opinion. The letter was so funny but no one was in the mood to laugh. I wearily stood up and went to change the music tape. The tape was labeled in hand writing: "Little love stories", original unmixed tape. Oh, it turned out that this was the work that had been being developed for months so far. I turned back to my seat and sat back dreamingly in the sounds of music.

The instrumental bass and the drum enhanced the singer's voice melodiously in a new song recreating the images of one's pieces of beautiful love in days of yore. My sweetheart in violet

² *Dear Hà, How are you? I'm the same as usual. This summer I and my family will have our vacation in Illinois, at my dad's cousin's as we'll, by the chance, pay our visit to our relatives. I don't like it, but I have to go with my dad where he's going to. My school is about to close for summer holidays; I feel so sad [to leave] Jack the "cute guy" and "baby faced" John [behind] . they're very nice to me. There isn't anything with us, you know, but sometimes, I'm proud of myself. Last week I had some pictures of me taken in my class. This is one of them... Forgive me for my cursive handwriting...*

dress with flowing hair on her shoulders, and her rosy cheeks were like flowers in an early morning, was shyly walking hand in hand with me in Chợ Lớn's streets. And yours, or someone else's white-dressed beloved was brightly pretty when you coming home as a soldier on leave. Those pieces of truthful or desirous love were brought to an end painfully or satisfactorily. But one thing was sure that the singing created in my mind an image of my sweetheart that I could think and remember of to push my present sorrow toward oblivion. All my qualms about the wife who was wandering aimlessly, the elder daughter lacking the caring hand of the mother, the younger one about to forget her mother tongue, the identity of our community on the brink of disappearance, the head splitting noise in the factory, the ridiculous manners of people around, the sounds of calling for help on the sea, and the sigh resounding from the confined fatherland, all disappeared in the tuneful voice of singing.

The rock of anxiety I had carried with my life on the drift for ten years seemed to have dropped out of me. I emptied my glass of coffee which had been left untouched for a while and already turned cold, but the coffee had never tasted so good.

"Time's rather curious," I spoke out. "Ten years ago I never thought I would be like this: out of my element in this foreign country, listening to the singing voice of my former student to look-over my lot on the drift now."

Nobody bothered to notice my out-of-place trifling philosophic phrase. The singing voice which was slightly shaking the homey air in the room, continued to lull everybody into their beautiful memories of yore. The portrait of the house lady on the wall seemed to smile – a smile usually seen on "La Joconde".

San Marcos, Texas (11-85)