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‘An Early Morning’ and ‘Moonlit Night’ by Thach Lam

Translated from the Vietnamese by Quan Manh Ha

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An Early Morning

by Thach Lam

Translated from the Vietnamese by Quan Manh Ha

Thach Lam (1909-1942) was a member of the Self-Strength Literary Group (1932-1945), which promoted the New Poetry movement, individualism in literature, French-influenced romanticism, and modernism. The Self-Strength Literary Group condemned feudalism and Confucian values that suffocated personal pursuit of happiness. Thach Lam is most known for his clear narrative style and the subtlety of his characters' emotions. His fiction differs from that of other members of the Self-Strength Literary Group because he prefers to focus on the life of the common, working-class people in the countryside setting, and he does not romanticize reality. Literature, to him, must condemn social ills and help people live morally. His childhood was lived in poverty, and he died of tuberculosis at the age of thirty-three.

Binh had tossed and turned all night, unable to get a wink of sleep, although he had gone out and not returned home until very late. The pillow was damp with sweat as he lay on his side with his eyes shut. Strange and incoherent dreams had haunted his sleep. Binh opened his eyes and gawked at the mosquito net; then he looked at its quietly undulating waves amid a faint light emitted from the oil lamp. The wall clock made mournful sounds, signaling each passing hour, and a consistently ticking noise marked each second. Binh was drained; he could feel exhaustion entering his toes and fingers, and spreading throughout his body—a consequence of his decadent lifestyle. A feeling of enervation permeated his whole body.

A rooster crowed softly from afar. The night was advancing toward dawn. Faint sunlight began to enter his room through the cracks of windows and through the palm-leaf roof that had been damaged slightly by the daytime heat. The early morning sunlight was dim but clear, resembling that emitted from new tins. Binh pushed open the flaps of his mosquito net and sat up. The air in his thatched house was becoming humid and unpleasant, and he could feel the heavy, fetid atmosphere on his eyelids.

By habit, Binh thought about lying down again, but this time he slid out of bed and stood up. The cool floor gave his feet a comforting sensation; he opened the door and went outside. Binh sat on the bricked front yard by an areca tree. The quiet, peaceful early morning engendered a peculiar feeling within him. He was uncertain whether it was cool stillness or still coolness. The cool water in the small cement tank was covered with morning residue; the ground around it was clean and well-kept. The coolness of the night remained on the surface of the tank's water and on the rose bushes nearby. Binh's exhaustion began to subside gradually, and blood circulated more rapidly through his body, as if it were rushing to catch fresh air.

It had been quite a while since he last got up early, and he had almost forgotten the experience of an early morning. For years, he had been indulging himself in late-night parties and social gatherings, and he often arrived home when people were preparing for the early market. Normally, as he reclined from fatigue in the bus, with his sleep-deprived eyes, on his way home after his parties, he saw women carrying baskets of vegetables heading toward the market. Their newly-cut, crisp, green vegetables were in great contrast to his limp, spent body of three or four o'clock in the morning. People in Hanoi were still sleeping at those hours; their doors remained shut. Outside, street lights illuminated the long, quiet, and empty streets. Dry leaves fell on the ground. Only at such hours did he walk out from dark alleys, wearing a hat partially covering his face, trudging along the brick sidewalks with his hands in his pockets. He saw a carmine light coming from an outdoor hanging lamp at the end of the street. He could not remember how long he had led such a wasteful life. It must have been years—since he was laid off, became penniless, and had to return to his mother's dilapidated house, his family's only property.

Binh looked around the small garden; the ground still bore some marks left by his mother's sweeping from yesterday afternoon. This familiar scene looked new to him because he always got up too late to appreciate the simple beauty of an early morning. The miniature mountain landscape built by his father, who had usually looked at it for hours when he was alive, the fish pond encircled by moss, the gray and moldy trunks of the areca trees, his mother's well-kept beds of vegetables, and the bushes of red roses blooming in early mornings, they all now became recognizable to him again.

The atmosphere and scenery evoked memories about his youthful days in Binh: he used to get up early like everyone else, and he had been energetic and healthy. He would pour water from the tank into a basin and wash his face; the coolness of the water was absorbed by his skin. He had enjoyed those early mornings tremendously. He used to look up at the wide blue sky and around at the lush vegetation in the garden. Everything about him had awakened, just as he had. Through the thin hedges he had caught a glimpse of people going to the market, listened to their laughter and chatter, and heard the creaking sound of shoulder poles laden with heavy bags of rice. While he was reviewing his lessons at his desk in the living room, he would hear the prolonged cooing of the pigeons next door.

Rarely did he recall those days. He wanted to forget everything after a long night of partying. He had always been too lethargic to remember those sweet moments. He was troubled by his disturbed sleep and had no time for reminiscence. And when he sobered up, he only wanted to continue in his meaningless life.

Binh did not excuse himself for his degeneration. Since his father's death, Binh had become more decadent and wasteful. His nocturnal lifestyle appealed to him, as a fire does to gnats. The colorful lights of night clubs made the red lips and rosy cheeks of flirtatious wantons irresistible. He immersed himself in alcohol and drugs. Several times, he had pushed

his mother away as she begged him to stay home, and he left the house quickly to avoid hearing her crying in a dark corner. He had squandered all of his family's money and ruined his health. A bitter feeling and a sense of ennui penetrated his heart. Perhaps he had fallen into this desperate abyss because he found nothing left in life to strive for. Deep inside, he vaguely saw a light glimmering in darkness, but he had refused to follow it.

However, this early morning's cool air refreshed him and cleansed him, awakening in Binh these memories of his happy youth. There was no longer the cooing from the abutting neighbor's pigeons, but he could hear the chattering of people on their way to the market coming from the other side of the thin hedges. The rainwater in the tank was cool and fresh, the sky was blue and cloudless, and very soon everything would brighten in the warm sunlight.

Binh stood up and walked toward the red rose bushes by the water tank. He bent down and plucked a rose, as he used to do in the past. He put the flower on a plate and observed its petals, which gently held a clear dewdrop like a pearl. The rose emitted a lovely, familiar scent, a plain scent typical of home-grown roses, and he thought about his mother, who loved him dearly. The flower embodied her, and Binh felt a burst of love for his mother. This morning, he wanted his miserable mother to see a rose nicely positioned on a plate as she got up, something that she had enjoyed seeing a long time ago. The rose was the early morning's precious gift that contained a sublime freshness within its leaves after a rain. A pleasant and serene feeling entered his heart. He felt younger, and he found himself bending down, appreciating the beauty of dewdrops on fresh leaves. The common sounds of early mornings and the cooing of pigeons seemed to return to him, freshly.

Binh stood up. The cool breeze from a rice field brought back the gentle smell of wet grass. The sky's color had changed from blue to pink. The sun started to rise on the horizon. Inside, his mother had just awakened; she pushed open her mosquito net and chanted the

Buddha's name with a beaded rosary in her hands. Her voice was still as clear and gentle as it had always been.

Binh quietly walked inside, afraid to disturb his mother's chanting. He went toward the ancestral altar, where he placed the plate with the rose and emptied the water from an antique offering bowl. When his mother finished her chanting, she asked him gently and affectionately, as she used to when he was a child, "Why did you get up so early, dear?"

Moonlit Nights

By Thach Lam

Translation from the Vietnamese by Quan Manh Ha

It was still sunset when the moon rose. A big, red, full moon slowly appeared on the horizon, behind a high clump of bamboo near a distant village. A few threads of cloud crossed in front of the moon, became tenuous, and gradually vanished. A gentle breeze brought the pleasant scent of a field. About an hour after the great bell of a local Buddhist temple emitted its early evening toll, the sky became high and vast, while the moon became smaller but brighter; it resembled a flute-kite flying high in the sky. Moonlight poured from the sky, illuminating tree branches and leaves and bathing the streets with its silver beams. In the small garden by a pond, Tuan lay on a narrow bamboo bed in a dark corner, looking up at the night sky. He observed the moon through sharp, dark bamboo leaves, and the scene resembled a Chinese painting. Cool air emerged from the moss around the pond; a flower wall in the middle of the garden glowed, and thick, small pomegranate leaves sparkled like crystals.

Shadows from trees made the place comfortable and private. Tuan's heart beat faster; he reached out his hands and listened carefully to the subtle sounds of leaves quivering and of someone's gentle steps. A tree branch bent down, then suddenly returned to its original position; its shadow reflected on the pond. A flower was blossoming slowly. Tuan saw a white shadow walking toward him; he extended his arms to embrace her and whispered affectionately, "Honey ..."

Without responding, she quietly fell into his arms. Tuan bent his head down and smelled the familiar scent of her hair. He embraced her lovingly and kissed her passionately. After a while, he released her slightly. Mai straightened her disheveled hair; a melancholic feeling overwhelmed Tuan; the couple were so intimate that they never got bored looking at each other. Mai's eyes glistened endearingly in the shadow cast by her scarf. Tuan held her gently and bent down to appreciate her eyes more closely. He was attracted by her round face, small chin, and light-complexioned neck; he was mesmerized by her beauty. She laid her head on his arm, and he bent down closely, as if she were a precious flower.

Since that moonlit night, they continued to see each other in his garden. At first, their short meetings lasted between the time the moon rose and set. Then, they stayed longer as the moon's glow remained, and their love grew stronger and more passionate. He was eighteen, she sixteen, and both were as youthful as fast-growing buds.

Mai and Tuan were next door neighbors. As children, they often played together. In the evenings, Mai would cross the hedge between the houses to visit Tuan; then they would whisper in the dark as if they were doing something wrong. Not until Mai's mother called her did she leave Tuan and quickly run home. When he was thirteen, and she eleven, his uncle took Tuan to the city for his schooling, and gradually he forgot Mai, his childhood neighbor. Tuan, however, did not know whether Mai had also forgotten him. Sometimes, during his

homecomings, from his garden, he saw Mai's shadow fluttering through her garden. He heard her voice clearly, and at night, he could hear her laughter or conversations with seasonal field workers.

One day, Tuan returned from the rice field and ran into Mai at the gate of his house. Shy and blushing, she covered her face with her conical hat. Tuan stood there and did not know what to say. After a moment of silence, Mai left the spot. Tuan's eyes followed her as she walked in the sunlight, and he was overwhelmed with sweet memories of their childhood. That afternoon, Tuan sat on a rock by the pond in his garden and realized that the path upon which Mai once had trodden when she came to see him was now covered with brush.

After his vacation ended, Tuan returned to the city and to school. He did not have another chance to visit his family; one year, two years, three years passed, Tuan did not know how Mai was faring. The image of her covering her face with a conical hat, revealing only her smile, became a blurred memory, just as the fading image of his village receded into the hazy twilight of his memory.

Before summer was over, while Tuan was getting ready for a trip to Sam Son Beach with some friends—some of whom were his pretty female classmates—his mother, who was visiting him in the city, asked, “Do you still remember our neighbor Mai? She's getting married very soon, this year!”

All of a sudden, Tuan stopped packing and remained quiet, as if he were thinking about something serious. Before his mother left, she asked, “So have you changed your mind? Are you not going to Sam Son as planned?”

“No, Mom. I am going back with you.”

Upon arriving home, Tuan went to the garden. It was the first day of the month, and a crescent moon was in the quiet sky. He then saw Mai in a white blouse in her front yard. He

was overwhelmed with strong emotions, and he felt nervous, as if he were anticipating a joyful event. He did not call Mai but stayed in the garden until it got very cold.

After that night, the moon gradually became fuller and brighter. A breeze carried with it a pleasant scent, a dark red rose remained invisible in the dark while a white rose became more conspicuous. Tuan sat on the flower wall in the garden and felt elated. He assured himself that tonight Mai would return his love, and that Mai desired his love, just as he did hers.

Tuan bent down to smell a dark red rose. Its petals, dotted with yellow pollen, were as dark as the night and emitted a pleasant scent. The moon was high above the treetops; Tuan walked toward the gate. In the dark, Mai was already there, waiting for him. He extended his arms to embrace her, heard the fast beating of her heart, and felt her warm breathing. In the quietude, they kissed each other passionately without exchanging a word.

When Mai gently pushed his arms away, Tuan saw tears in her eyes. "Are you crying?" he asked affectionately.

Mai did not reply, but lay her head on his shoulder. Her small body trembled with her sobbing. Tuan felt strong emotion for Mai, and their reunion was fraught with sorrow and tears. In the dark, she told him how much she had missed him. Mai had been in love with Tuan since childhood, thinking about him constantly since he left for the city, although Tuan had not known this. He was overjoyed as he learned about her love for him. Unfortunately, it was too late; she would be married very soon.

They continued to meet in his garden on moonlit nights. They sat on the rock, chatted affectionately, and expressed their love to each other.

* * *

Tonight was their final evening.

Tuan and Mai sat on the rock and waited for the moon to rise. After midnight, it was cold and misty outside. In the stillness they heard dry leaves falling from tree branches. In the pond, a fish stirred in the water, creating concentric circles. Mai leaned her body against Tuan's and asked, "You're leaving tomorrow, aren't you?"

She then cried without any further utterance. Tuan held her hands tightly, not knowing what to say. He wanted to comfort her, but decided not to. He was still very young and did not understand her desperation. He could not imagine that they soon would be parted forever.

Love could not be cancelled by sorrow. Mai and Tuan were like two dreamers. She put her arm around his neck, and her lips found his in an ardent kiss. Her lips bled, and it was painful. Mai, however, was happy in this moment of pain, and she offered him the most precious gift of her maiden life—her virginal body and purity of soul.

* * *

Three days had passed since Tuan departed.

During those days, Mai could focus on nothing, as if her mind had followed after him. She sat quietly for hours, having no more tears to shed. This morning, the groom's family arrived to present wedding offerings to her parents. Her mother greeted and welcomed them warmly. Her fiancé donned his best clothes, and he was somewhat shy but cheerful. Mai sat in her bedroom and heard the conversation between her mother and the groom's family in the living room.

At night, after everyone had gone to bed, Mai quietly crossed the hedge and went to Tuan's garden. She sat on the rock by the pond—the same spot where she and Tuan used to sit. Tonight, the moon rose late. She sat there as the cold mist penetrated into her skin. The

garden became darker. A few roses blossomed, and she could smell their gentle scent, which reminded her of the first time she was held in Tuan's embrace.

It was quite late, and the moon did not rise until near dawn. The moon looked melancholic and blurry behind the trees at the end of the garden. When the moon showed its light on her body, she put her head into her hands and sobbed. Broken-hearted, she cried for her ill-fated love and life.

The next morning, Tuan's parents saw her corpse in the pond; her hair was loose, floating freely with water ferns.

1938