

I will watch their
wings turn into
ember

An epistolary response to

Love After Death

by

HUNG DUONG

Beloved P,

The fire was resplendent last night. Smoke, gong, oil, ash swirling into a viscous, matted atmosphere. The Gates of Hell cracked open, as the effigy of Da Shi Ye evaporated into colorful morsels. I watched the mob from afar, as they circled his scorched remains, mumbling words of prayer until their voices congealed into an undulating hymn. Some begged for health, some wealth, some salvation, some silence. Even the ones who breathed no prayer had one stored in his subconscious. The mind is truly a versatile machine, capable of both rational cognition and elated delusion.

I remember, when we sat together in that closet in a storage shed. Do you? That house in Sathorn, where the birds chirped in green emerald. Such a cozy place, our closet, tucked into a dusty, cobwebbed corner. And that little boy, who came in one day. You gave him such a fright, shifting into his nanny's doppelganger with her eyelid inverted. Funny how he didn't scream and bolt immediately when he saw you. The boy's face, indistinct now in my memories, was one of awe, confusion, and anxiety. Then, his instincts kicked in and pulled him in the opposite direction. Humans are truly quizzical. Abjection is a ghost that repels and attracts. They can't rip their eyes away from horror, like moths to a flame they crawl back, begging to be flayed open, to be seen and consumed by fear. A fatal attraction. There is freedom in submitting to your internal drives, I guess.

Ah, the ash has drifted. Soon, the Gates will shut once more. Will you come back to me?

Yours,

Bunny

Bereft P,

I followed the trail of ash in the air, and it led me to this abandoned cinema in a temple on a northern mountain. No one sits here, the place now swallowed by time and human forgetfulness. A long time ago, soldiers traversed this mountain with projector and films inscribed with ideological stories, hoping to enlist people into their cause. Afterward, the monks at this temple have adopted the soldiers' tactic, providing a space where films can be screened in return for favors from ancestral spirits. Ghost cinema, they call it. I find the whole idea somewhat absurd. If you could come back from Hell for only one day, would you sit and watch a film, out of everything that you can choose, like eat, shit, make love, seek revenge, or play pranks?

Still, the cinema was built out of devotion and negligence. A living space, yet not lived in. When they play movies on the massive white wall, this cinema's body slowly awakens from its slumber. Its multiple eyes flicker as light dances across rows of empty seats, while sounds echo in a thundering cascade in its roaring belly of an amphitheater, taking those inside in an acoustic hostage. Its shadowy fingers reach up your spine, playing it like a flute, forcing you to sit up straight while keeping your eyes fixed on the screen as if in trance. A complete possession, a spellbound state of mind undergoing a rite of passage. Is it mundane escapism? Or profound transcendence? Who knows. Everyone keeps eating popcorn.

Not in this cinema. I didn't sense any spirit here, maybe they are too busy frolicking elsewhere. Only the monkeys descended in troops. They chattered in shrieks, hoo-hoo haa-haa, groomed each other, kree-kree, jostled around and play-fought, khec khec jgak jgak. Completely consumed by social fancies, they ignored the films completely, only noticing the bright screen when bored of communal locomotion. They seem to not possess the same proclivity for horror as humans, gazing at ghastly bodies in jerking contortion with polite nonchalance. I wonder if there too are monkey-ghosts that haunt the apes' dreams. Do they wear amulets or carry pebbles to

ward off evil monkey-jinns? The monkeys remain noncommittal, too busy in their own chaotic bubble.

But I saw him again, Pi. The little boy in the shed, all grown up now. Or, rather, I saw his apparition. He was carrying candles into the cinema's cave, descending down the stairs at a calculated pace toward the tribe of monkeys. They noticed him immediately. The candles went out in a huff. Bellowing a collective shriek before pouncing on him, the creatures ripped him to shreds. His flesh crumbled like cake, his latex skin pale and glossy. Instead of blood, a tar-black goo oozed from his dismembered body, an alien massacre. The monkeys devoured his flesh with glee and gumption. Perhaps he came to sacrifice himself to the cinema, or the monkeys, or the spirits. Maybe I was wrong. The monkeys are the spirits. The ghosts that I have been looking for were right here around me, eating, shitting, farting, snoring, cursing, singing.

The boy's final breath triggered a deluge of black water, eating away the cinema space with liquid tongue. I sat at my seat, unbothered. If I let the water drown me, if I sink to the abyss.

Maybe you will be there too.

Yours (?),

Bunny

Belligerent P,

I can only recall fireworks in my eyes and uproar in my ears before the bullet hit.

The heat was unbearable. Fissured, tar-black ground, arid and unforgiving. Dragging myself through this landscape of tropical gothic, I looked for you, your eyes, your fire. How many eyes and ears do you possess? Four, five? Memories are fading. I must act quickly.

This post-apocalyptic land seems barren, yet at the same time swarmed with the soot-men. Charred-black bodies made from skin and coal, their milky eyes clouded from lack of light exposure due to life in burning haze. Hair long and slick with oil, they parole in groups, staking territories over coal mines, oil fracks, and gas reserves as their nutrients. They used to be humans, I believe, but after the Great Fire, those who didn't perish had mutated into soot-men, adapted to live in toxic waste and charring temperature. And they also established social hierarchies based on resource hoarding, much like before. It was as if division had been coded into their genetic makings. A specific trait even fire cannot cleanse.

P, there was a clash. One mob of depraved soot-men amassed and stormed a festive ritual of some kind. The soot-men attending the ritual were playing music and preparing large plates of charcoal to appease their god, the Sihuhata with his five eyes and four ears. Giant barrels of red oil were sucked from the carcasses of many species underground, laid out in a circle around a gigantic bonfire, its flame seeming to lick the sky in delirious heat. The mob emerged from a marshland, their half-naked bodies shined with a sebaceous sheen, armed with torches. They moved in choreographic tandem, hands outstretched with three fingers flexed. Three, four, five. The burning phoenix was the totem they carried into the battlefield, droplets of liquid fire dripping from its incendiary wingtips. For unity, they yelled. With what, or whom, they do not know. The darkness thickened its grip, as firefly-glow torches clashed with explosive

fireworks and tear gas. Soot-men dressed in soldier gear were deployed to tranquilize the mob. Bloodcurling screams, moans of pain and dejection, eyes gleaming with determination and desperation. P, P oi, where are you? Are you here within this scrambling swamp of bodies, heaving breaths, stinking sweat, and scathing heat? The cultists from both sides were chanting their prayers to their Gods, one of prosperity and one of liberty. Which one is more legitimate? Which one legitimizes? I could only see ashes in my eyes.

A bullet, hot like ember, tore through my abdomen.

I fell to the ground, black gunk oozing from my gaping wound, like the Nile river during the plague. The Gods' totems waver and blur in my optical vision, before merging, a creature with four ears, five eyes, and diabolical wings spread to all corners of Earth. One swallow, and I disappeared.

P, I can't go o o nnn any mor eee.

Your s ss,

Bu uuun nnyyy y

Black P,

Is there love after death?

I am lying inside a narrow tunnel, its walls mucous and fleshy. My body feels absent, a phantom self long dissolved into the universe's sea of milk. A tiny stream keeps me buoyant, black, molten liquid. The smell is rancid, an air of rot. Squelching sound fills the airtight flesh-tube, as my flesh, whatever is left of it, is slowly digested by the riverlet.

Remember the printing house that burned down after the war? My mind travels back there often, where I saw you in a metal cage. Your face was hidden behind a mask of a mongrel, but I could recognize your blazing eyes anywhere. *[I am becoming immaterial]* A sacrifice that you made to come back from Hell, to seal the fate of the boy in the shed. You grew fond of him, your love like a simmering flame even after your last breath has deserted you. You consumed coals to shit out gold, all so that he could have eternal abundance. Did he ever thank you? Did he come to rescue you after your capture? *[My eyes become soup]* Or did he move onto an even more abundant future and continue to gobble down gold? I watched you writhe and twist, banished into forlorn dreams. If consumption is love, then we are bloated. Too much love is rotting inside our intestines, leaving ulcers and infestations. The kind of love that they sell in magic bottles, mass-produced by children with thorny fingers and charred lips. *[My ears glug glug, water filling my ear canals]*

I yearned for nostalgia, Pi. I can't recall much anymore. I have forgotten how to be nostalgic. How does it feel to remember?

At the end of this tunnel, are the angels of death waiting for me? Will they take my decaying body and bathe it in flowers and oil? Will they wrap me up nicely in a diaphanous shawl of sunlight, before casting me into the crematory? I wonder how the fire will feel. Tingling, warm at first, then singing, scalding, bone-snapping heat slowly engulfs my body as the flames turn up an octave. Blue and

yellow tongues licking my lacerated wounds, purging me of all my memories. Can fire store memories? Can fire remember the lives that it took? Will my memories somehow become smoke and drift toward you? Where is that boy now, I wonder. Is he burning too, or is he leading a mob on fire? What will they do with my ash after they burn me? Will I be scattered into the wind, or swallowed back into this tunnel for another round of life? I pray for no reincarnation. Yet, life flows on, and the fire is my only companion.

I will see you again soon, P.

Y,

Bun y

ผีที่รัก

I am at the Gates now, waiting for you.

So many people have gathered on the other side. The air sparked with excitement, anticipation. A moment of death uncaged is fast arriving. The glass mirror separating the two realms will soon become permeable. I watch the people sitting on the other side. Monkeys, spirits, creatures, ancestors, friends, enemies, half-dead, brain-rots. There is a seat for everyone in this dark space. Maybe in death we will truly be united.

P, the boy has become an artist. Do you see this, a projection of his life? Autofiction, he called it. The cave was transformed into a mnemonic portal, through which we all became submerged and merged into his stream. Gravity gently pulls me down, while grace lifts me up. I am floating, airborne, weightless. All the images that he captured, all the dreams he swallowed, now metamorphosed into a montage of symbols, an empty hospital bed, soldiers chasing a monster, a desolate monument, monkeys shrieking, a bonfire in the depth of night, angels of the future dressed in street styles, denim jeans bleached with heat, nagas swimming beneath a house set ablaze, do you see them P, the hitched breath, multiple arms, patchy skin and tar-black eyeholes, P, flowers for the dearly departed, fireworks across the sky, riots on the earth, all is beginning and all is ending, seeds germinating after forest fire.

P.

It is almost time. The moment the atmosphere breaks into halves. Everyone is waiting on the other side. Take my hand. Fear not, P.

Destiny is written in the ash.

Hayah asher hayah.

I am what I am / was / will become.¹

¹ From the writer: Letters have always been a method of choice for me. They present a response to artwork that plays with ambiguity while invoking imaginative spirit. Far often, we are asked to analyze and rationalize art. Letters, intimate, slippery, and chaotic allow a different experience, another portal through which narratives can complicate art appreciation. For Korakrit, for *Love After Death*, I leave my letters. May the fire burn them and the wind carry their ash.

Hung Duong is an independent writer and translator, whose reflection on contemporary art spans a diverse spectrum of subtle forms and themes, addressing sociopolitical issues, micro-histories, and material reinterpretations. His writing has appeared in international magazines such as Artforum, frieze, NO NIIN, and Art Review Asia. His recent publications include a reflective essay published on NO NIIN Issue 36, positioning intentional ambiguity as a generative force in Vietnamese artists' moving images, text contributions for the catalog and reader of the 36th Bienal de São Paulo, artwork descriptions for the guidebook of Sharjah Biennial 16, translations of artists' writings in 'The Modern in Southeast Asian Art: A Reader' (published by National Gallery Singapore). His website sea-through.net serves as a digital platform featuring artists and events across Southeast Asia. When time allows and resources align, he also organizes pop-up screenings.

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CITYCITY ซิตีซิตี
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