

## *The Edge of Dreams*

By Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut

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"That bastard Tsao!" exclaimed Phu, the wine-seller. "I hope the demon of cheating cuts that rat's hands and tongue off and wears them around his neck." He spat on the ground. "I'm sure that dirty Chinaman had a card hidden up his silk sleeve!"

"How else could he have cleaned us out without our realizing it?" wondered his companion, a small man who was clutching the lone brass coin they'd salvaged from the pathetic operation.

"We were paying more attention to the fried duck rumps and rice wine he bought than those damn cards. The louse took the duck fat and greased the skids under us."

Loc the handyman had spoken, his deep voice shaking with anger as he trudged along the dusty white road with his companions in misfortune. His clenched jaw and hard features betrayed annoyance as he glanced at his friends, who were wallowing in lamentations. Their steps raised little puffs of dust that were barely visible in a night whose crescent moon was as thin as a backbiting woman's lips. Baffled and defeated, they were walking away from town, the scene of their financial rout.

In his mind, the handyman went over the disastrous card game that had relieved each of them of several strings of coins. The oblong cards had wheeled and darted in a demented dance, the elephant chasing the cow and the general trumping the swordsman, without the Chinaman losing a single hand. Loc could see him now, his catfish mustaches twitching each time he won another coin, while the three friends shrugged, their eyes on the appetizing dishes passing by. In the convivial atmosphere of the riverside inn with its colorful paper lanterns, the three hungry men had let their guard down. Waitresses in blue and ocher skirts and made up like courtesans came and went with roast quail and ducks with gleaming lacquered skins. The three were so busy choosing decent-sized duck rumps that they didn't notice their adversary doing anything amiss. At most they counted themselves lucky that he didn't seem interested in the choice golden morsels that accompanied the rice wine he poured so freely.

"We should've been suspicious," muttered Loc, who was finding their defeat hard to swallow. "Dang, you would've done better to keep an eye on that old cardsharp instead of licking your fingers, looking as happy as a rat in a flour bin. You know damn well the only thing the Chinese haven't stolen is their reputation as cheats."

His accusation was aimed at the short, skinny man who had snatched the biggest duck rump for himself.

"Easy for you to say!" the soup-seller shot back, stung by the accuracy of the criticism. "You kept gulping cups of wine! Your eyes were so bleary the Chinaman could've grabbed ten cards at once and you'd never notice!"

"You have to choose," said Loc. "Do you stuff your face, or do you think? This is the last time I'm playing with a guy with such sticky hands and greasy lips."

"And I'm not sitting next to a man with bloodshot eyes whose breath would fell a monk at twenty paces."

Phu raised a conciliatory hand.

"Come on, let's not spoil an old friendship for the sake of a few coins that we can hope will bring bad luck to their new owner!" he said. "Next time that crafty Tsao invites us to an inn for a game, we'll just fill our bellies first."

Calmed by the wine-seller's words, the two others diplomatically kept silent. In step, they walked by rice paddies fringed with white morning glories. The steady croaking of sleepless frogs rose along the paths. The day's heat had been merciless and the night offered little relief. The men's sweaty jackets stuck to their backs like furled banners of defeat. The card game had lasted longer than expected, and they now had to slip into their huts without making any noise, to avoid awkward interrogations.

"What in the world am I going to tell my wife?" worried Dang aloud, unconsciously pulling his head into his shoulders. "She's gonna scream bloody murder when she finds out I've gambled the household money away."

"Bah! You can always go burn a few sticks of incense at the temple," said the handyman unkindly. "Buddha protects the poor and the brainless."

To defuse a situation that risked becoming tense again, the wine-seller quickly spoke up: "Just borrow it from the village moneylender. That way you can top up the cash box before your wife sticks her nose into it."

"Yeah, but he holds back ten percent each time," moaned Dang. "I visit him three times a week and his smile gets broader by the day. I hate that blood-sucker! How do you manage to cover your losses, Phu?"

The wine-seller, who didn't like to reveal his financial dealings, coughed in embarrassment.

"I ask my mistress for the money," he said. "She isn't a penny-pincher like my wife. In return, I occasionally give her jugs of wine that have been set aside for tastings. I find it's best to keep my wife out of things. The only words she understands are 'gain' and 'profit.'"

Loc the handyman laughed, shaking his head.

"You all seem to tremble in front of your wives, those sweet companions you married for their beauty and their gentleness. Where are those husbands who run their households with an iron fist and manly authority?"

"You don't understand the subtleties of the marriage bond," said the wine-seller stiffly, in an attempt to turn the argument around. "After all, you're forty-two and you still haven't found a wife! It's all in what is *not* said, in illusions and appearances. The wife pretends to dominate, the better to bow her head in the intimacy of the bedroom, where she submits completely to her lord and master."

Engrossed in their argument, they were surprised to realize they had already reached the crossroads. It was marked by a small pagoda where cakes and bunches of longans were left as offerings to the genie of crossings. In the distance, protected by a row of bamboo, the village drowsed near a grove of slender areca palms.

"I'll leave you to the welcoming arms of your submissive and obedient wives," said Loc in a tone of feigned envy. "I'm sure they'll hasten to comfort you for the loss of your strings of coins. Ah, how I wish I had such an affectionate and compassionate companion."

"Who knows?" snapped Phu irritably. "You may yet meet her before you die, despite your balding skull and disgusting face." With that, he dragged his skinny companion down the road toward their village.

Now alone among the paddies, Loc laughed. He knew he was still good-looking, even if he was far from the prime of youth. The wine-seller had only a few sparse white hairs left, and

turned green with envy at the sight of Loc's black hair. Manual labor had kept him from getting fat with age, and he still had a washboard stomach. Loc had turned many female heads when he was young and could easily have taken a wife, but he didn't like having to choose. Why chain yourself to just one woman when there were so many available? Fidelity irritated him, and so did the hassles that went with married life. It was simpler to spend a few coins on women for hire than to drag a legitimate spouse behind you. In any case, he wasn't about to let some female call the tune. He had no intention of living his life as a dishrag.

Loc walked a little farther down the road before angling off to the left. The crushing dark mass of the jungle rose before him, a wall of green ringing with a thousand mysterious voices. He would have preferred to follow the road along the peaceful rice paddies as it meandered around huts and stables, but he would have to take the shortcut through the jungle if he hoped to get home before dawn. With a sigh, he stepped onto the barely visible path as it plunged through a curtain of vines. This wasn't the first time Loc had gone this way, and tonight wouldn't be the time he turned back.

Surrounded by vegetation, Loc felt so oppressed by the closeness of the trees that he felt he was going underground. Saturated with damp smells, the air carried hints of incipient rot mixed with the perfume of night-blooming flowers. He stopped to let his eyes adapt to the dark and to light the oil lantern he carried for the occasion. The lamplight cast the ridges on the massive trunks in sharp relief and rose toward invisible canopies without ever reaching them. A yellow-footed squirrel crossed his path, its eyes glowing in the lamplight, while a lizard the size of a newborn baby lifted its head, golden spots standing out on its black skin like sparks from a fire. The cries, croaks, and whispers echoing in the jungle had barely stilled when the lamp's wick crackled to life, and Loc set out again in a deafening racket.

"Goddamned vultures!" he yelled, rubbing his neck.

His hand came away flecked with red, and he could feel a sting that would soon become an itch. The lantern was essential, but it drew clouds of mosquitoes hungry for fresh blood. He could see them circling him like miniature birds of prey and hear the high-pitched whine of their wings, more annoying than all the rest of the surrounding cacophony. He quickened his pace, nimbly stepping over roots that rose from the depths of the earth and ducking vines that seemed to want to strangle him. The stifling heat was oppressive, forcing him to gulp air in gasps as sweat ran into his widened eyes. Swiveling his head this way and that, he cast wary glances into the tall weeds and through the tangle of vines. When would he ever get out of this damn jungle?

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, Loc spotted a glow that had no business being there, a golden glint piercing the dark foliage. He stopped dead, his curiosity aroused.

"What the hell...?" he muttered, squinting into the shadows.

It was a light shining in the heart of the jungle, a drop of amber suspended in the dark. Drawn by the unexpected spark like a moth to a flame, Loc approached, panting.

At the foot of a banyan tree, an oil lamp illuminated a tray bearing a teapot and two cups. The handyman peered about, but couldn't see a soul. As he stepped closer to the tray he heard odd laughter, light but also guttural.

*Darkness is the couch I lie on  
Sprawled beneath a veil of silence  
At the very edge of dreams  
I am waiting for a man*

Loc froze and looked up.

Sitting in the branches of a tree festooned with hanging mosses and air ferns was a woman so beautiful it left him speechless. Her hair, falling to her shoulders, seemed to float, as if lifted by a wind he couldn't feel. Her white dress gracefully enveloped a body as fine as porcelain. Was it just an impression or had the jungle suddenly fallen silent? Loc could've sworn he heard the trembling of a leaf.

"Will you drink a cup of tea with me, traveler?"

Loc croaked his assent, swallowing to get rid of the dryness that seemed to burn his throat. In the blink of an eye, and without his knowing how, she climbed down from the tree and was standing next to him. She kneeled before the tray and filled the cups with steaming tea. Respectfully holding a cup in both hands, she offered it to the mesmerized man. He took it, trembling, and when she lifted her face to him he noticed the woman had eyebrows made up to look like silkworms and the bold eyes of a phoenix.

Far from slaking his thirst, the brew inflamed his body with a desire he could barely contain. By what magic did he find himself in this enchanted jungle, next to a creature of such devastating charm? He couldn't take his eyes off her vermilion lips and peach-soft cheeks. But the woman had still more surprises in store for him.

"Will you accept this modest mouthful of betel-nut, handsome traveler?" she asked, holding a small ball out to him.

Loc started. This beauty was offering him the only present it was impossible to refuse without being rude, a mouthful of betel-nut shared with a traveler. Made by a young woman, such an offer clearly revealed desire. It was completely provocative! With shaking fingers he took the ball and wrapped it in a leaf covered with the ritual lime. He watched as the woman in white did the same, and together they chewed the betel leaf that would seal whatever they did next.

Loc wanted to jump on her, but she beat him to it, slipping an arm around his neck and teasingly stroking his stomach. The touch of her skin and the expert play of her fingers on his body made him moan with pleasure. She leaned her head close and nibbled his ear, her breath stoking the handyman's already unbearable excitement.

"Do you want to play at the Mist and the Rain?" she murmured, rubbing herself against him.

Without waiting for his answer, the woman started to undo her robe. His throat tight, Loc followed the pure line of her neck as it flowed into the matchless curve of her chest. She parted the panels of her dress and he almost fainted at the glimpse of her mysterious, shadowy belly. With a roar, he tried to pull her down, but she wrenched free and pinned him flat on his back instead.

"No! The White Tiger will straddle the Green Dragon!" decreed the young woman with her unusual laugh.

And she kissed him full on the mouth.

Loc could feel her tongue driving into him as if the beautiful creature were trying to reach his depths, to suck at his very being. He struggled not to pass out as a wave of pleasure overwhelmed him. Suddenly she bit the tip of his tongue. A salty, metallic taste washed across the handyman's palate, and he shuddered.

Though at the edge of ecstasy, Loc restrained himself. That little drop of blood had awakened a terrifying doubt. *What if this wasn't a woman?* Too late, he remembered the stories of ghosts disguised as women who led heedless men astray. Eyes bulging, he thought of those spirits of girls who died before knowing love and who returned to experience that pleasure with

the living—the terrifying *con tinh*, who wound up driving men insane. Suddenly, panic knotted his guts. He tried to break free of the young woman's fierce grasp, but her arms held him captive with unexpected strength. In his crazed mind's eye arose flames that should have died out long ago, the horror of a blazing firmament. As he struggled to breathe, the creature's hair suddenly seemed to give off an acrid smell of smoke. In a desperate effort, Loc freed his face from the entangling locks. And screamed.

The young woman was now sneering at him, a blood-red liquid dripping from her lips. Her stained teeth seem to have bitten into living flesh, and wet streaks ran across her neck like the scraps of an interrupted meal.

Using every ounce of his remaining strength, Loc jumped to his feet and turned to run, barely able to control his faltering legs. This cursed place reeked of death and revenge. He had to flee. Staggering away, he could hear the sound of clothes being picked up behind him. The ghoul was chasing him! Lost in the darkness, the terrified handyman ran blindly, but the small light relentlessly followed him. He nearly escaped through a break between two banyan trees, but tripped on a root and fell. The ghoul pounced on him with a triumphant cackle.

She flipped him over, boldly grasped his Jade Stem, and with a hungry laugh, impaled herself on it. As she voraciously drew out his semen, Loc felt as if the woman had slit him open, and was sucking out his very reason.

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#### About the Author

**Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut** (1962– ) was born in Hue, Vietnam, studied in the United States, and lives near Paris. She is a mechanical engineer, a tireless traveler, and with her sister, the author of the popular Mandarin Tan book series. Set in 17th-century Vietnam, the novels relate the travels and adventures of a young civil judge, his eccentric sidekick, and an erudite doctor. They are also a rich mine of Vietnamese culture, history, politics, food, and religion.

#### About the Translator

**William Rodarmor** (1942– ) is a veteran French literary translator. His translation of *Tamata and the Alliance*, by Bernard Moitessier, won the 1996 Lewis Galantière Award from the American Translators Association. Rodarmor recently translated *The Last King of the Jews*, by Jean-Claude Lattès (Open Road, 2013), and *The Yellow Eyes of Crocodiles*, by Katherine Pancol (Penguin, 2014), and was a fellow at the Banff International Literary Translation Centre. His other accomplishments include sailing solo from Tahiti to Hawaii in 1971 and winning *The New Yorker* magazine's cartoon caption contest in 2010.

#### Note

"The Edge of Dreams" is the first chapter of *L'Aile d'Airain*, a 2003 book in which Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut explores village rivalries, arson, biological warfare, the complex interplay of Taoist and Buddhist beliefs—and a couple of sexy ghosts.