

## Hanoi Rooftop

Hanoi. A hot summer night, June, 2007. I am almost at the exact halfway point of my five-month pilgrimage across Asia, tracing the paths of Buddhism, war and peace from India to Japan. I celebrated Buddha's Enlightenment in Bodhgaya, learned about civil wars in Nepal and Sri Lanka, said prayers for peace and democracy in Burma, marked my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday at a monastery in Thailand, bore witness to the dead in Cambodia, and now am visiting my friend, the Vietnamese American writer and journalist Nguyen Qui Duc, in Hanoi, nearly 40 years after the middle of the war which forced his family to leave Vietnam and take refuge in the United States. He recently returned here with his mother, in hopes of providing better care for her as she ages with Alzheimer's disease. Moving here was an act of extraordinary filial piety; he left home, work and friends in San Francisco to do this. I admire his devotion to his mother, his embodiment of Confucian virtue. It seems like self-denial, but he might say it is fulfillment. His family has been uprooted by war and migrations. He has what my friend, poet Bao Phi, calls a "refugeography." This return is an exercise in completing, or at least continuing, the circle of relationships – to mother, birth country, and perhaps, in time, to his own heart, which bears both loss and hope. Perhaps it is a move towards redemption, renewal and wholeness, not just for himself but for all the people he represents and to whom he is connected. I'm at the middle of my own journeys, across Asia and in life. The movement of the heart, transcending nations and boundaries, appeals to me. I savor this time with him, a dear friend in an unfamiliar land, which he makes familiar to me.

Duc seems to live at the fulcrum of expatriate and artist communities in Hanoi. Tonight, we are going to an expat friend's birthday party. Her apartment is on the top floor, and opens onto a rooftop, where we sit and mingle with expats from around the world, all of them looking for opportunity, adventure or a kind of asylum in Vietnam, far from their native homes. Wine flows, and conversations and laughter echo into a warm, dark night under the stars.

A beautiful young woman, Yasue, introduces herself as she sits down next to me. Soon, we're immersed in each other's stories. She's Japanese, but grew up in England, and could easily be a Japanese Kate Middleton, complete with British accent. Now she calls Vietnam her home-for-now. Yasue tells me of family and relationships, past and present. They've been a challenge, to say the least, especially a boyfriend or two. Her loves have been passionate, intense, and even dangerous, taking her to extraordinary vulnerability, where she'd shown her strength, faced down the threat of violence, and transformed the ones who threatened her. The coin of this queen's realm was coolness under fire. Keep Calm and Relate On. Relationships were messy, but they could be revolutionary. As she discloses difficulties and traumas, my heart opens for her. It seems to be just the two of us here, our friends forgotten in a moonlight spell. It doesn't seem that we've met for the first time, but that we're reunited after lifetimes apart. But even if we didn't know each other before, from some enchanted past life, we're new best friends now, on this Hanoi rooftop, with the stars aligned above us.

After a few hours of listening and sharing, I have to leave. Duc gathers me, shooting me a look of bewilderment and perhaps a twinge of jealousy as he mentally compares our evenings. He seems to think I got a bigger slice of the pie tonight. But he has many Hanoi rooftops ahead of him; this is my first, and possibly last.

Yasue calls out to me as I leave.

"Are you on Facebook?" she asks.

"What's that?" I ask in return.

She says she'll send me an invitation for this Facebook thing, whatever it is.