

NGUYEN DO

Translated from Vietnamese by the poet and Paul Hoover

The Light

the pain appeared late at night
with its odor of acrid perfume
even my fingers seemed to be lost

in the morning I woke up
and had just one more drink
tonight I'm touching myself
as one slowly climbs a hill

"gently, please"
footsteps from two years ago just flew by
and three days in a row the sun didn't come up

the zipper of my memory is closing
your nipple is suddenly bright

Headache

suddenly I'm like a helpless goalkeeper
dumbstruck looking at the empty space beneath the players' bodies

shaking hands on asses walking out of a blind alley
I'm the same, a rat sticking out of a hole

punching the back of my head I see
flamboyance blossom but not redness

one step ahead is a news stand
another step is a country liquor store run by a dwarf
tomorrow I have to give you a new broom
why don't people say anything?

I place my hands on my head and press it to the ground
it becomes dark and sweaty
I'm scared to look at you
you smile so nakedly

I will give you a bowl of vegetable noodle soup
Although it belongs in the trash, it has a sweet scent
darkness illuminates darkness

Ho Chi Minh City 5/13/93

Memory of a Day

eight hours a day my only duty
is talking softly to myself, "take it slow and easy,"
and sometimes I get it right

I drop by a pharmacy to buy some aspirin
and jump onto the scale
yesterday it was up two pounds, today down one
I saved fifty cents by buying the medicine, too

the last scorching beam of day chases my family out of a tree house
the house is full of mystery and the stresses of the day
as a ball rolls out of its net
as we back slowly into the darkness, we seem happy to argue together

we have to be there anyway
any way it has to be
talking with a deaf person is better than speaking with just anyone
who has a funeral for a dead tree?
a thousand Beethovens stand along the highway

Ho Chi Minh City / 1994

Morning

every morning my heart beats nervously
when I look up at the sky, where a dead leaf is hanging
I don't go out on the street
my chair is my boundary

hugs from people are like the bars of criminal courts
the crescent moon hides its full flame
a cigarette burns in an alarming way
only the darkness is safe and the bed is tender

don't go out on the street
three roses surprisingly committed suicide
light is the color of bread
just like the faces of those who've betrayed me

A Symphony of Friendship

is it possible to return to an old blind alley
full of nasty eyes?

I launch into questions in a darkness that's five below
then call myself at my old phone number

011

848

8299221

and listen to its lonely hoarse voice scream continuously
my heart is so painful it seems to be choking

my memories are like a door falling off its hinges
old, broken, but full of love

I'm scared to put it back together
because it opened and closed my life

nowadays I fall to pieces easier than the kids
I sit feeling sorry that I couldn't bring with me
the phone's voice and an old tattered shirt
shirts and other garments have their own fates

writing "done" above each sentence I suddenly remember
a small likeable poem of an old friend
every thing has its own karma, everything
so

a song of sounds ceasing
is more interesting and lives longer than the original itself

and me?

my lovely friends

I'm not a Tagore or Whitman

or Ginsberg writing to praise you

I'm Do, a skinny illness

but I swear I won't be less than you without sorrow
the cane-grass hair of my fate will be gray as you are

living miserably but well on the way to my goal
with fresh airlessness and lacking the cheerful, particular perfume of your
faces

I'm dropping a long rope down my life-well
to fish out your shining glances
which would never be there if the well were dry!

Mission

hearing the wind whisper and the dew call my name
I ride my bike down the street at noon, smiling like crazy
I always go too fast—sorry!
I promise to write a letter this evening

alone at night, growing smaller and smaller
and frightened, I bite my wife's feet
thirteen alleys, thirteen cups of coffee
thirteen successful missions
all ending in fire and the odor of smoke

everyday I try to push myself
closer to the bead of a rifle
in order to become its favorite target

Ho Chi Minh City 9/13/95

The Unlucky Days

To Thanh Thao

this evening I want to hug the trees on my street
but not because of their courage
I want to embrace my typewriter
the key-pads that whisper to me

my home is on the blind alley of a lonely street
all year long only a few bohemian faces appear on its veranda
I rely on the sound of their footsteps

the sad songs no longer make me sad
the cat pissing on my desk doesn't bother me any more
the little pine tree is suddenly half-dead
it laughs at me while I chase a rat

I'm half-naked walking into the street
suddenly I remember the name of a person
who was not my friend and died a long time ago . . .

Ho Chi Minh City 3/25/93

With . . .

I'm a stone on which you usually sit
that has forgotten to grow.
When I raise my hand to shake,
the door smiles.

The cat reminds me, "Hey, man, stop it."
I suddenly remember an unlit cigarette in my mouth.

I got married for two years, zero months, and twenty-nine days.
Choosing a night with no moon, you and I went to the swamp to make a
fishing net.

Stuck in my pocket is a strange handwritten letter
in which there's a trace of sweat, or a lightning strike
from a thicket, or the sandy shore of the river's source.
So tonight I sleep with a picture,
only just
one.