

New Moon

by Michael Howard

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HE HAD DARK BLOND HAIR with conspicuous waves in it that was cropped pretty close and he was rather tall with an athletic sort of build although his muscles were not very well developed for a man of his age which was twenty-five or thereabouts. Certainly no older than thirty.

His bedroom was big. A white balcony ran the length of it. It had a small wooden desk—the bedroom did—where he often sat and typed on a laptop with bad posture. The desk had a few books and a fan and a lamp and miscellaneous objects on it. Also a small house plant. A wooden wardrobe stood against the far wall. The white walls were bare. Overall the room was tidy. He never used the air conditioner mounted on the wall above the television, also unused.

His bedtime ranged, roughly, from eleven at night to five thirty in the morning. He was ordinarily awake by nine o'clock, though he was capable of sleeping till noon or even later. Sometimes he was up and gone by seven. Other times he spent the whole morning in bed, shirtless, looking at his phone or reading a book, or just lying there in various positions with a mask over his eyes. Once in a while a girl lay beside him, or a small brown dog, or both.

He moved in a slow methodical way, except when pacing his room which he did on occasion. He blew his nose a lot, and tissues tended to pile up on his desk. He chewed his fingernails. He had a habit of hanging his washing on his balcony overnight which was foolish in the extreme, akin to inviting malevolent spirits into his home. He ironed his own shirts and slacks. Fussed with his hair frequently. Could often be seen standing on his balcony peering down at the ground where dogs and pigeons and rats moved among the people and the motorbikes—then up at the sky. Kept a jug of water next to his bed. Used his index finger to type on his phone. Slept on his back. Appeared to talk to himself at times.

He almost never shut the doors giving onto his balcony and when he did it was only for a few minutes at a time—half an hour at the most.

That's how Tram came to know these things. She and her family, consisting of a mother and much younger sister, lived on the fifth floor of a crummy apartment block located in a *hẻm** parallel to the main road that cut like an artery through Saigon's District 3. His apartment was also on the fifth floor and almost exactly level with Tram's.

The back of his building faced the front of hers, and in that way they shared the same view of adjacent apartment buildings, rat-infested kitchens

* alley

of *quán ăn*^{*}, a parking lot for motorbikes, a shabby little courtyard where old men played Chinese chess, and lots of corrugated metal roofing covered in litter and bird shit. The view from the front of his building, Tram knew, was different: a tree-fringed avenue, a manicured park, some nice hotels and restaurants, the financial ward with its glass towers off in the distance.

Not that Tram cared for views. Nor could she understand why anyone would. If that was the sort of thing that money could buy she could do without money. She always had and, at nineteen, supposed she always would. That was fine. Most of the money she earned waitressing at a typical Vietnamese drinking place located a couple districts over went to the household: food and bills, insurance, medicine for her mother, English lessons for Linh, her sister. What little she had left over she saved. Occasionally she bought clothes for herself, usually online, though whether they were fashionable or chic or whatever she couldn't say. Every so often a friend would ask her where she'd gotten something, and Tram supposed that meant it looked alright.

Tram had simple tastes and few hobbies. She neither drank nor smoked. She ate only when she was hungry. She enjoyed going to the hair

* eatery

salon and the nail salon yet she'd be lying if she said she gave a damn about her appearance. People told her she was *quá đẹp*^{*} and she took their word for it. So what? She was puzzled and vaguely disturbed by her friends' vanity which compelled them to take photos of themselves with their phones anytime they went anywhere, and then spend long stretches of time manipulating those photos until they appeared to show a different person altogether.

It had never occurred to Tram to go to university, despite most of her former classmates having done so. She listened with a patient apathy as they held forth about their studies. Tram had always excelled at school, aced every subject with the exception of art, but then there was never any emphasis on that anyway. She spoke good, rounded English with a negligible accent—better than those friends of hers who were now going for advanced degrees in English. She knew some Chinese as well. It came easily to her. But what was the point in talking about it? In nearly every situation, Tram found herself listening rather than talking.

“Tram ơi, con qua đâỵ†.” It was Tram's mother's voice and it was coming, weakly and irritably, from the back bedroom.

* very pretty/beautiful

† Tram, come over here

Tram leaned the handle of the broom against the near wall—she'd been sweeping the floor; after that she'd do some laundry and then go to work—and moved slowly in that direction. It took about five seconds to reach her mother's room, which was bright with daylight and uncomfortably warm since her mother was always cold.

Tram stood and listened while her mother, lying on her back in her traditional Vietnamese pajamas, told her how terrible she felt that morning. She hadn't slept well. Her head ached. She was having some difficulty breathing. Hadn't she told Tram to fetch her some *nước sâm** an hour ago? Tram said that she had not. But she'd told her in the past—had she not?—that on days like this she liked to have *nước sâm*. Wasn't that so? Tram said nothing. Her mother groaned and propped herself up on two pillows. How did Tram expect to attract a husband and bring up a family, she asked, when she was constantly forgetting basic things like bringing her mother *nước sâm* when she wasn't feeling well? Tram said she didn't know.

“I feel terrible,” her mother said. “Did you take Linh to school?”

“She went with her friend.”

“Will you pick her up?”

“Her friend will drop her.”

* herbal juice

“I feel terrible.”

Tram asked whether she wanted to go to the hospital.

“What’s the use? The doctors can’t help.”

That may or may not have been true. Tram didn’t know. Her mother had been ill for longer than Tram cared to remember—approximately the same amount of time that had elapsed since she’d last seen her father. Quite a while ago. Since then Tram’s mother had seen countless doctors and been prescribed countless medicines. On her bedside table right now stood at least a dozen pill bottles. The doctors were always vague in their diagnoses—something to do with the immune system—and Tram’s mother was even vaguer in relating the information to Tram. So she’d given up trying to understand what the matter was. In any case, her mother had embraced her role as a sick old woman. She spent most of her time in bed, emerging here and there to eat *canh** which Tram either bought or prepared for her and wonder aloud why the apartment wasn’t cleaner. If one of her sisters, Tram’s aunts, came by she would suddenly perk up and even express a willingness to go outside. That didn’t happen often, though.

Now Tram’s mother was asking her to pick up some ginger root and turmeric powder from the market, if it wasn’t too much trouble. Her

* soup

stomach was bad today, she explained, and ginger and turmeric aided her digestion. If it *was* too much trouble, of course, Tram needn't bother—she could leave her mother to lie there in agony. It was up to Tram.

Tram went out to buy the requested things. Before descending the stairwell she peered across the courtyard. He was still lying in bed with his eye mask on. He was wearing a t-shirt and shorts. That was unusual. Normally he was half naked. Tram bought the turmeric powder and ginger root from a nearby market, then drove a bit out of her way to the closest *nước sâm* stand. For herself she bought nothing.

When she got back home she spied him sitting on the edge of his bed, holding his phone to his ear. A few minutes later he stood and slung a towel over his shoulder and disappeared into a narrow hallway. She gazed across at the still room, the unmade bed with its rumpled blanket, and her mind was empty of conscious thought. She went and delivered the *nước sâm* to her mother who was pretending to be asleep, a frown of discontent fixed onto her face. Tram put the bottle down on the nightstand alongside an empty glass, moved to her own room to get dressed for work.

*

Why did she watch him, and only him? A logical question, but not one that Tram had ever seriously considered. Why did people do anything? It was

mindless diversion, like watching a football match, something Tram had never done. That's how it began, anyway. Over the past two weeks it had admittedly become something else, something habitual and obscurely meaningful. Did she desire him? Tram doubted it. She'd never seen him undressed, nor did she wish to. When she imagined herself in his bedroom—and she did that a lot—she was usually alone: shuffling about the room, flipping through his books, attending to the house plant, hanging clothes (not hers) in the wardrobe, sitting at the desk, lounging on the bed with the brown dog. On the rare occasions when he was there with her they simply shared the space. Nothing more. There was no sexual component to the fantasy. It was all very dispassionate. Curiously, though, and perhaps importantly—who could tell?—these scenes were always viewed from the perspective of her own apartment: she was imagining herself watching herself. It gave her a potent and unfamiliar sense of possession and control which was more discomfiting than anything else. She preferred not to think about it too much.

Tram was a few minutes late getting to work which didn't matter since business was almost always slow in the daytime. She worked at a *quán nhậu*^{*}, where Vietnamese go when they want to get drunk. It was

* eatery that serves beer

called 867, after its address. There was a broad sidewalk out front which served as a patio, and that's where all the tables and chairs were set up. There was an awning in case of rain or unadulterated sunlight. Inside was a long narrow kitchen, refrigerators for the beer, a freezer for the ice which was delivered daily, and two toilets which were necessarily disgusting although the men's toilet was of course far worse. The dishes had to be washed by hand, but that wasn't Tram's job.

Hundreds of nearly identical *quán nhậu* dotted the city. They had more or less the same menu and served the same beer. Tram worked at this place six days a week, from late morning to eleven at night or, if business was good and people kept ordering beer, twelve or twelve thirty. Sometimes she left in the middle of the day to pick up Linh from school and take her home. That took about forty five minutes with the traffic.

Tram, whose work outfit consisted of a plain white buttoned blouse and a short black skirt, waited joylessly on a table of three old men. They ordered bottles of Tiger and drank them slowly. They also ordered two packs of cigarettes. Tram preferred waiting on old men. They were quiet and relatively cordial. They didn't become drunk or boisterous. For the first hour and a half they were the only customers, so Tram spent most of that time sitting around with her coworkers, not saying much. One of them,

a twenty-year-old girl called Phuong, was out of sorts after discovering that she wasn't her boyfriend's only girlfriend. Tram watched two tears streak neatly down Phuong's face. A third waitress, Uyen, said:

“Forget him.”

Tram, half-listening, concurred. Forget him.

“I don't understand though. I really thought—” Phuong broke off, staring blankly at her phone.

From the party of old men came a command for more beer. “*Con oi, cho ba bia nữa!*”*

“*Dạ!*” Tram called, and made for the fridge. The others stood up, too—two more small parties had arrived.

It was well past eleven when Tram pulled her motorbike into the parking area just down the street from her apartment. As she approached her building on foot she saw that his lights were off. He was out. He would probably be out late. Until three or four or even five. But then it wouldn't be late, anymore, would it? It would be early. Moving inside Tram went to the kitchen and sliced a guava and ate it under the dim ceiling light. She rinsed the blade of the knife and the cutting board. She took her time

* bring three more beers

† yeah/OK

drinking a glass of room temperature water. She looked in on Linh, who was asleep, and her mother, who was also asleep. Then she brushed her teeth and went to sleep herself.

*

A week passed without incident. Tram brought things to her sick mother, took her sister to school when she could, did the housework, hung the washing on the rack outside, put in the hours at 867, sat at her window and looked across the way and watched him for intervals that felt like a few minutes but were in fact much longer. Still no desire gripped her—she watched him impassively, as an old man watches pigeons strutting around a park. Tram began to wonder whether there was something wrong with her.

One morning she met an old school friend for milk tea at a popular cafe that Tram wasn't crazy about. Her friend had been with a new boyfriend about three weeks. Was now the time, she asked Tram, though the question seemed rhetorical, her friend not bothering to look up from her phone as she asked, to let him have his way? Tram made an ambiguous gesture with her head and shoulders. Sex. Another thing people liked to talk about. Tram had had it, of course, had had it before any of her friends, in fact, and had found it underwhelming in spite of a strong attraction to

the boy. Afterwards she hadn't spoken about it, though naturally her friends had caught wind of it through other channels. They were hungry for details, and she tossed them a few tiny crumbs. Their envy was extreme, as though Tram were the beneficiary of some great inheritance. Tram found this amusing. As for the sort of cat and mouse game her friend was now playing with this new boy of hers, Tram was unimpressed.

"I don't know," she said flatly. "If you want to do it, you should."

"Yeah—I know, but—well, you know ..."

Not really, Tram thought, nodding, and finished her milk tea.

Did Tram have any boys in her life at the moment? Her friend wanted to know.

"No. I guess I'm too busy with work."

"You should go to university," said her friend, not for the first time. "That's where you can meet people. It's not too late. You were always good in school."

"Maybe when I have more time."

From the cafe Tram went straight to work. It was a torrid, windless, sun-drenched afternoon, the sort of day that's better spent indoors. Heat seemed to descend from the sky in thick heavy folds that lay atop the city with a terrible stagnant weight. Tram and her coworkers fanned themselves

as they sat around one of the back tables near the kitchen. In spite of the heat, business began to pick up about four and by six thirty nearly every table was occupied. Tram had her hands full—so much so that she managed to pass by his table numerous times without noticing him. It wasn't until, during a brief lull, Phuong commented on the *anh tây đẹp trai** that Tram recognized the thick waves animating the sandy hair of the young man seated at a small table along the curb. He was there with another foreigner, a man, slugging cans of Saigon Special. Her heart dipped low and an odd numbing sensation suffused her body. Then it passed and she was able to give a casual nod of agreement to Phuong who was no longer paying attention.

He stayed there through the evening and into the night, blowing his nose into tissues he took from his back pocket, the empty cans of Saigon Special spreading out at his feet. From the towering hollow trees that lined the road cicadas chanted, stopped, chanted again. Their chorus filled Tram's ears. At about nine thirty she was compelled to wait on him. He and his friend wanted more beer. Tram pulled two warmish cans from the fridge and set them on the table and, gripping metal tongs with a steady hand, dropped two more blocks of ice into their glasses. He thanked her in

* handsome westerner

Vietnamese and smiled. Tram saw that his teeth were somewhat crooked and that his eyes were a pale blue color. The eyebrows had a thin girlish quality, as though penciled on. Tram, not smiling, walked stiffly back to the kitchen area, feeling oddly exposed.

She encountered him once more as they were preparing to close. One of his friends—there were four of them now—asked if they could have one last round. Tram nodded, went and got the beers. She was sweeping around their table a few minutes later, her face smeared with dried sweat that had gathered over the course of her shift, when he suddenly called her over and, using passable Vietnamese, asked whether she spoke English. She nodded and wished she hadn't. One of his friends was observing the exchange; the other two were deep in drunken conversation. He cleared his throat and said with an American accent:

“Haven't I seen you someplace before?”

Tram frowned and shook her head.

“Do you go to B3?” That was a drinking place not far from Tram's apartment.

Tram shook her head again.

“Are you sure?” Using Vietnamese he asked whether she knew the place he meant.

She told him that she knew it but had never been there.

Grinning, his friend, believing that Tram wouldn't understand, said:

“Ain't gonna work *this* time, chum.”

“Shush,” he said, turning back to Tram. Using Vietnamese again he told her she was pretty and asked her her name.

Tram told him. Then she indicated, with a genuine desperation she couldn't have concealed if she'd tried, that she had to get back to work.

“Sure,” he said. “*Cám ơn em. Gặp lại**.”

Once they'd finally gone, Tram exhaled the breath she seemed to have been holding down in her chest all night. But a general tension remained. Phuong and Uyen teased her about her “new boyfriend” and they continued sweeping the floor and stacking the chairs and wiping down the tables until the boss told them to go home. That night Tram couldn't bring herself to look across the courtyard at his window. She lay in bed feeling slightly feverish until at length she dozed off.

*

Over the next three days Tram didn't leave her bed. The mild temperature she'd gone to sleep with that night had, by the next morning, evolved into a full-blown flu that wrenched all the strength from her muscles and left

* Thank you. See you again

her sweating and helpless and wobbling on the border between consciousness and delirium. Her mother was obliged to forget her own invalid status and attend to her. Tram said no, no, no when her mother suggested and then demanded that she see a doctor. Her febrile mind went off on wild and torturous tangents. She had seemingly endless visions of sharp interlocking fragments of metal that combined to form geometric patterns which moved erratically before bursting into flames. An acupuncturist stuck her with a thousand burning incense sticks to exorcise the malign spirits that infested her body. Disembodied voices spoke to her in rapid Korean and other languages she didn't understand.

On the fourth day Tram was well enough to sit up in bed, walk gingerly about the apartment and take a little food. She also felt well enough to glance across the courtyard, but the room was empty. On the fifth day she felt well enough to return to work.

“You look like a ghost,” Uyen said.

Tram, still limp and weary, managed a feeble smile and said that she felt like one.

“You lost weight.”

“I guess so.”

“Your boyfriend was asking after you.”

Tram shook her head which had begun to throb with a dull, cramp-like pain. They were sitting at a table next to the kitchen. There were no customers and Phuong hadn't arrived yet. Tram said:

“Who?”

“The handsome westerner. He was here two nights ago.”

“Oh, him.” Tram wasn't sure whether the detachment in her voice was authentic or put on.

“He asked where you were.”

“And what did you say?”

“I told him you were off.”

And what did he say, Tram thought, saying nothing.

“He didn't stay so long after that,” Uyen said with something like triumph in her voice.

Tram fooled with her phone and made-believe she wasn't listening. Then she stood and sauntered around the patio, absent-mindedly inspecting the polished beer glasses that stood upside down on the tables. Customers began trickling in around the usual time. Some rain fell. Tram felt better as the hours passed languidly by—her headache dissolved and she walked with a sturdy, balanced gait. It was a little before eight when, from the corner of her eye, she saw him park his bike along the curb and choose a

table and sit down.

Tram carried two plates of food to a rapidly expanding party of jabbering Vietnamese and then strolled over to his table.

“*Chào em**,” he said, smiling with those somewhat crooked teeth and those pale blue eyes and those girlish eyebrows that looked as though they were penciled on. A single dimple winked at her from his right cheek, then vanished.

“*Chào anh.*”

He regarded her curiously for a moment, the remnants of a smile lingering in his face. Then he asked for a Saigon Special.

“*Đạ,*” said Tram.

A couple hours later, when Tram delivered his sixth beer, he asked for her phone number and Tram gave it to him. Somehow there was no question of declining or even deliberating. She felt coerced, as if by some internal force unknown to her, to let him have her phone number and anything else he might want. He began sending her messages as she worked. She responded to them whenever she had a free moment. He continued drinking alone. They didn’t speak any more to each other—he ordered his beer via text message and Tram either brought it over herself

* hello

or had Uyen do it. By the time Tram got home that night they'd set a date for the following Thursday—the first day of the new lunar month.

*

Thursday was two days away. During the interval he didn't make an appearance at 867 and Tram never so much as glanced across the way at his balcony. She didn't need to suppress an impulse to look because there was no impulse to suppress. Duly and without complaint she went through the motions of her normal daily routine, the only difference being that he no longer featured in it. Tram didn't contemplate the change; to do so would be pointless, she felt, like contemplating a natural law. Whatever she'd had before—and she still didn't know what that was—was gone, was being filled in by something else. Something related but different. Or maybe not related at all.

He sent her messages a few times a day, mostly in Vietnamese, and Tram's replies were short and to the point. On Thursday afternoon he sent her a message asking where she lived so that he could pick her up that evening. Until then the problem hadn't occurred to Tram. She couldn't tell him where she lived. Of course. Not because she feared the embarrassed explanations she might be obliged to offer, but for a dimmer, shapeless reason that Tram couldn't put her finger on. She told him not to bother

about picking her up—she was at a cousin’s house and she’d drive from there to meet him.

They met at a trendy restaurant-bar that brewed its own beer. It was a hit with Vietnamese and expats alike. Tram arrived and saw that he was already there, sitting by himself at a small round table in the corner and sipping black beer from a glass that struck Tram as excessively large. He saw her and grinned, flashing his one dimple, and as she approached him through the crowded dining room Tram felt almost disembodied. The sensation she’d had the other night at work, when there was no question of not doing what he asked her to do, was back—it was as though she’d been relieved of her free will and was observing herself, objectively, from a short distance. The way one watches a stranger.

Tram sat across from him and they greeted each other using English. He was wearing glasses for some reason—they lent the pale blue of his eyes a sheen it otherwise lacked. A striped button down shirt was tucked neatly into a pair gray trousers. He gave off a faint citrusy fragrance. Tram was not wearing any fragrance.

He asked how her day had gone. She said something noncommittal. Then he asked her what she would like to drink, motioning to a blackboard on the wall which was crammed with the names of dozens of types of beer

that Tram had naturally never heard of. She looked at the board and frowned, taken aback by the prices.

“I’d recommend—” he began.

“I usually don’t drink beer.”

“Oh, I see.” He paused and grinned at her again, eyes glinting in the muted lighting of the room, and meeting his gaze Tram wondered what her own expression looked like. “I like a beer here and there,” he said. “You might’ve noticed.”

“You drink a lot,” Tram said.

Swallowing a mouthful of beer he said, “Oh, not so much, really. You should see some of my friends. Anyways, you don’t drink beer. I should of asked about that beforehand.” He shook his head. “Sorry. I’m not very bright sometimes. But I think they have soft drinks. Pepsi, that sort of thing.” He looked past Tram and held up his hand, and moments later a waitress appeared.

He began to speak but Tram interjected and said she’d have whatever he was drinking.

“Are you sure?” he said. “It’s not a regular beer. It takes some getting used to. They have ciders, or—”

“It’s fine,” Tram said.

“Alright then. Two more pints of the stout.”

While they sipped their beers he talked a lot, though not about himself. He complimented Tram on her English and asked her a lot of questions. She answered as plainly as she could, and found herself telling one lie after another for reasons that escaped her. For example, she was twenty-one years old. She was studying Business English at a university in District 7. She lived in District 4. Her family came from the north. She had an older brother. Her father, a Chinese-Vietnamese, had died when she was small. Falsehoods, all of them. The beer was going to Tram’s head and though she wasn’t drunk she sat there with what felt like a big foolish smile on her face. He took a tissue from his pocket and blew his nose.

“*Anh xin lỗi**,” he said. “Bad sinuses.”

Tram nodded, and it struck her that she didn’t know his name. She thought, Oh well.

He had taken it upon himself to order a few shared plates of food. When they arrived Tram explained that she couldn’t eat any of it because each of the dishes consisted of animal flesh and the custom in Vietnam was to abstain from eating animal flesh on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month.

* I’m sorry

“Damn, there I go again,” he said, and blew his nose. “First the beer and now the meat. The new lunar month—yes, of course. Forgot all about it. *Anh xin lỗi*. I’ll order something else for you—for us. Where’s that menu...”

Tram told him it was alright, she wasn’t so hungry, but he wouldn’t hear of it. He called the waitress over and asked what they had in the way of *món chay**. She went to retrieve the menu. He ordered onion rings, an avocado salad, grilled vegetables, a garden burger, and something else that Tram didn’t hear. Waving his hand over the table he said, “You can take all this back.” The waitress looked confused, a little miffed, and started clearing the plates away. While they waited for the new food he complimented Tram on her drinking capacity. She’d had three pints.

“Really. Most Vietnamese girls’ll sit there nursing the same watered down beer for three hours,” he said. “Not that I have to tell you. I’m sure you see it all the time at work.” Then, suddenly, “Were you surprised when I asked for your phone number?”

“No.”

“I knew it. See? That’s what I like about you. Your confidence. It’s a rare thing—to be so confident without being arrogant.” He paused, gently

* vegetarian dish

nodding his head, before adding, “Yes. There’s something about you.”

Tram recognized that she ought to say something in response to that, something to help steer the conversation in the direction he was trying to take it, but she only tilted her head to one side and blinked at him.

“Almost a carelessness,” he continued. “But it’s genuine. Sorry,” he said, “now I’m just thinking out loud. You must think I’m a terrible bore. The last thing I want to do is bore you.” He blew his nose.

“I’m not bored.”

“Good.”

“I’m the boring one.”

“No, you’re not. Look, you’re the least boring person I’ve met here. And I don’t want you to think I talk like this to everyone—I mean, every girl. Because I don’t. Honest.”

“I don’t think that.”

“I’m glad. Now for the elephant in the room. You must have a boyfriend.”

“No, I don’t.”

“*Em xạo**,” he grinned. That meant liar. “How can that be?”

Tram shrugged, a little coyly in spite of herself, and said she didn’t

* you’re lying/you liar

know.

“Well, I’m surprised. But pleased.”

Folding his arms he leaned forward on the table and, looking at the blackboard, exhaled with apparent relief. He finished his beer. After a while he said:

“Do you have plans this weekend?”

“This weekend? I work.”

“Ah, of course. I also work weekends. All day, usually. Language center, you know.”

Tram nodded.

“What about next week?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Do you have any days off?”

“Let’s see.”

“Please let me know. I mean, if you want to. I wouldn’t want ...”

He went on, but Tram had drifted away. It was approaching midnight and it seemed to her, now, that her identity was gradually and mysteriously being returned to her—slowly at first, and then more rapidly. Her personality was reemerging. She began to feel and look and act as she normally did, to exercise some degree of will and self-control, as though a

spell that had been cast was starting to wear and break of its own accord. She sensed the foolish smile melt from her face. Her muscles regained their usual languor, her mind its straightforward clarity, and she sat back in her chair, nonchalantly inspecting her nails. He was still talking.

Some food arrived. Neither of them went for it. They sat for a minute or two without speaking. They looked at each other across the table, and Tram felt relaxed and self-possessed and indeed careless. Smiling, pale eyes glinting behind his glasses, he said that he still didn't believe that business about her not having a boyfriend, and Tram said nothing, and then he announced that he had to use the restroom.

“All that beer.”

*

There were times, in the days and weeks that followed, when Tram, out of an impersonal curiosity, wondered how his face must have looked when he returned from the bathroom and found that she had gone—had slipped outside to her bike and had started it up and driven it ghostlike through a light rain that pierced the cotton of her shirt like needles back to her *hẻm*, their *hẻm*, her phone buzzing gently against her thigh. And had parked her bike in the usual space and had climbed up the lighted stairwell to her family's apartment which was all shadows and silence. And had sat down

and had let the perfect dark immerse her. Later, when her phone rang a final time, Tram stared out from the obscurity of the shadows across the courtyard at the dusky figure on the balcony, outlined vaguely against the invisible light of a new moon. It stayed there a long time, long after the ringing had stopped, motionless under that vast invisible moon, as though by moving it might betray some profound and ineffable moment.

The next morning the doors giving onto his balcony were closed, and Tram never saw them open again.

Michael Howard's writing has appeared in Mekong Review, New World Writing, Paste Magazine, Gordon Square Review, Creative Loafing, Hypertext Magazine, The Forge, and others. He lives in Vietnam.