

A Feast of Failures: Phạm Thị Hoài's Sunday Menu

The Reunification Express train rushing headlong from Hanoi to Saigon severs the body of a girl into three parts; an ancient matriarch holed up in an attic room greets the end of the century as maggot food; a teenage girl carries the fickle heart of her prostitute mother in her own body. It's apparent that Phạm Thị Hoài dispenses with heroic narratives and monolithic plots. *Sunday Menu* offers, instead, vignettes of dislocated bodies scattered across the urban landscape of the 1990s Renovation-era Vietnam. Like the girl with enough gall to fling herself across the rails, the collected tales throw readers squarely into a moment of incredible flux.

Stimulated by famine and a collapsed postwar economy, the communist state opens up Vietnam to foreign investment. People migrate in droves to the urban centers, eager to hitch a ride on an express train to elsewhere. Written spasmodically throughout the 1990s of Vietnam's market economy, the stories capture this moment of rupture and change, over which a miasma of decay hovers above ideas of "progress." The violence inflicted upon characters caught "in between this frame and the next" reveals a mangled body politic. If a menu lists what the establishment offers for consumption, *Sunday Menu* presents an array of provocative—but limited—choices for its subjects.

The collection opener, "Saigon Tailor," strikes the dissonant note that reverberates throughout the following stories. The first-person narrator rushes to learn yet another new trade, sewing, in hopes of catching a lift on the train of Western progress. Her desire reveals attempts to devise new identities and refashion her life through cloth and thread. But the place turns out to be a kind of sweatshop where patterns repeat themselves with few moderations, and poetry is tacked to a board behind banal sales orders and receipts. One of the other shop girls, having dispensed with her past and modesty, dons chalk-pink miniskirts and lays herself across train tracks in melodramatic tantrums. Whether she naively expects rescue, or is simply astute enough to enact the fatalism of it all, is unclear. As the train wheels on its track from Hanoi to Saigon sever her body, the story cuts to the point of the political drama. Characters clamor over new ideas, choices, electronics, clothes, and are awash in disappointment.

In the eponymous story a young girl is caught between her grandmother's imagined aristocratic culinary heritage and her mother's end-of-the-century street fare. As her mother hawks fly-blown meats and msg-diluted soups, grandma lives in illusions of lavish banquets. The granddaughter recites the delicacies she's concocted in her head to grandma every Sunday, trying to soften the jagged edges between past and present. Somewhere between culture and capitalism, keepsake and commodity, lies a reality as crude and jarring as "cyclo-driver food served on red lacquered trays." We can read jabs at the communist state in mother's culinary tricks (acquired by cooking

for the masses). Mother's food masquerades: yesterday's stocks doctored and served as the new, fresh-made broths of today. The fare she serves coincides with a today of imported electronic goods, brand names and Western hybrid mutations—a communist state going capitalist. But if the mother's form of deception is offensive, the author also rejects grandma's snobbishness, revealing her precious ideas of food to be as sad, paltry and painstaking as her illusions of tiny bean sprouts stuffed with minced meat. Grandma plays her abject role as sentry guard to relics of the past in a smoky attic room, and this dismantles any grand illusion of a great legacy to return to. The motif of consumption (whether food or electronic goods) marks an undercurrent of social critique.

Hoài sustains this tension between social development and cultural erosion along the string of stories. Nowhere is this analogy as pronounced as in "Universal Love." The narrator's mother holds two university degrees, writes poems, and is a bonafide intellectual heavyweight. Yet she sells sex in a roadside love-shack run by a retired female cadre. The story tightly links the implicit connection between the communist state, the intellectual, and organized prostitution. The woman's daughter observes with no brusque words for the tragedienne. She understands that her mother's too-open heart was faulty. Daughter is not so much bothered by her mother's sensuality or even her whoring for that matter; it is mother's troubled loving that troubles her, her wistful turning—trying on one man after the next like the new garments, cosmetics, haircuts and lifestyles that leave the young girl aged and exhausted. Her mother's "inner contemplative practice of the 20th century" leaves the girl picking up debris.

Elsewhere in the collection, Hoài treats sexuality with a rare and refreshing frankness. Women enjoy the touch of their own, each other's, or men's hands. Clandestine lovers meet in 4x4-meter rooms without any romantic pretense. In fact, the story blunts the romance of their afternoon sessions with great attention to their collectivism-shabby accommodations. Hoài's candid approach dispenses with the wistful sighs of lovers and focuses instead on the bare grunts of such matters. There are no overtures, no "platitudes and clichés" to be found anywhere in the collection. While beautiful lines do punctuate the stories, the lyricism works as juxtaposition to the dark urban wasteland they depict.

Phạm Thị Hoài's consistently disenchanted and acerbic tone cuts through decorum. She refuses to blunt the edges; characters find disappointment and remain in the same coagulated state of waiting. The author feels no need to fasten her stories loose threads and frayed hems. Endings are suspended. This is precisely what is striking about the collection: we encounter lives that are tangled, knotted and unresolved. Reality punctures the dreams at the hull of another broken day, and hopes and desires are revealed to be small and tawdry. Hoài's characters do not develop epically, nor does she provide them with easy and contrived growth and transcendence. They exist simply, flawed, imperfect and worthy of exploration.