

Lee Tyler Williams

Rebels of a Neon God

The train from Taoyuan was so bright that all you could see outside the window were flashes of neon and the outlined traces of some office tower or overpass. My flight back to Seoul had a layover, and the people at the gate finally admitted over the speaker (after almost all day of hassling from some other passengers) that the flight was delayed till the next day, so I had a few hours to walk around a city that I only knew from the movies of Tsai Ming Lang and Hou Hsiao Hsien, movies I got from the library or video stores and watched during summer breaks in high school.

In Hou's movies, it seems like every other scene began with trains wrapping around bends or pulling through tunnels or into some isolated station somewhere in the middle of the island, and you had to wonder what this obsession with trains was, why in almost every scene you got characters going to the capital for work or chasing an ex-girlfriend down at Kaoshiung or returning from school for the holidays. On the platforms in lush jungle valleys, a high whistle and a puff of smoke and always overcast, permanent monsoon. The characters were always on the run like every place was temporary. The peaceful village gets abandoned in the end. They were floating between empires, and someone at the death dial would flinch eventually, an itchy finger

and your island would be the first pawn to fall, so it made sense that most of the characters either wanted to return to the mainland (which was impossible) or escape into another future altogether.

The moment you got too comfortable watching those movies, some event would barge in—a death in the family, the loss of a job, a son’s arrest for sedition. The characters had to be on their toes or else the White Terror would come for them too.

There was this constant agitation—the kid has to study at his desk, but really he wants to run to the pond and catch frogs with his friends, the old men play mahjong in the square, but soon a shopkeeper will chase a thief with a big stick and trip over the table, the office worker plays with a letter opener at her desk and slips and cuts her finger, the old woman seems to be sleeping on the floor, but when you get closer, you see ants crawling over her hand. Or the mother and son eat while the rain behind them pours down like a waterfall from the roof. It’s anti-Newtonian. Nothing is at rest behind the stillness, and watching them as a kid in high school, I was on that island too, wanting to escape with them, but I wasn’t ready yet, so I sat in the living room in the dark and daydreamed until the end credits.

One good thing about not planning to come here is that I can get lost without feeling like I’m supposed to go to someplace in particular, and other than what I remember from those movies, I didn’t know anything about the city so there was no way it could disappoint me. A day was long enough for me to pretend like I lived there without ever having to actually stay. I could be one of those extras in *A Time to Live*, *A Time to Die* or *Dust in the Wind*, waiting on the platform or pacing around the square, trapped inside the frame, nameless, faceless, a body in space, someone flashing by on a bicycle while you watch the main character running to school in the morning.

Ever since the border control at the airport, I recognize the agitation from Hou's images. Look into this camera. Walk to this gate. Now grab your bag and go to the escalator. Sit down. No, not there. Here. Ok, now stand. The main station is on the Red Line. Can you remember that? That's like the system's artery. Start walking from there in any direction, let's say southeastern, or trust your instincts and choose a street based on how the name of it sounds, or how the archways over the sidewalk collapse into the shadows. How close the banyan trees drop their tears onto the roots that are strong enough to burst right through the concrete and grapple with the walls.

You turn down Qingdao and immediately there's that melody from Tsai's *Rebels of the Neon God* in your head. The theme song. The brooding synth that plods along through the opening shot while one of the main characters, this young guy who robs pinball machines with his buddy, rides a scooter through the streets at night. Just the bass keys and a cymbal and then after you go through the melody a few times, you get the full string accompaniment. The first time I heard it, it seemed so familiar, but there was no way I could've seen the movie before. This was a pretty obscure piece of celluloid. Still not digitally altered. Analog nostalgia.

Passing through neon, maybe down Qingdao Rd, pixelated arcades and billboards with diamond rings, phone booths, old diesel buses. Like it is now, my nostalgia was incurable back then. Except this wasn't a place I'd been to before, or a language that I understood. What other disease alleviates its own symptoms like nostalgia? Is the solace of it really that empty? Is it nothing more than flickering pictures on a wall in a dark room? I was surprised the city didn't look that different than it did in those films, and walking through Zhongsheng, I didn't want to stay or leave. I wasn't a visitor or a resident. The fantasy is what you know, so you choose it and tell yourself that it's true.

Those apartments in concrete with the water stains and clotheslines strung across the balcony with sprawling plants hanging down. And all the neon. They thought it would be the light of the future except now it's a vision of the past—the water stains and rusted metal bars on the windows only make it more obvious. Where else was there to go except leaping ahead and stumbling into the next goodbye, where else if you didn't have an excuse to keep moving? But those aren't the right questions. How did I get here is the better question, or how could I expect to get back on a plane when I finally found a place that I've been to before, if only in movies?

Here I'd arrived at the end of restlessness, in a past that belonged to no one, in a city seen in flashes, or in the mist, without any direct light, a restaurant down a sidestreet that had a green neon sign and fish tanks in the window and big plants between the tables. I think I saw it in one of those movies, maybe it was where the other main character, the student, works bussing tables later on, with all the motorcycles out front, and steam from the gutters, and the rain just passing through. You can't escape through fantasy, you just get to set the limits of your own prison, and maybe it stretches out and seems like it's endless, but everything in front of you is drenched in rain, with the colors constantly changing, and the people and motorcycles and rain move at a faster tempo than you ever thought they would.

Where's the shame in being a nostalgist? The future always looks like the past eventually so even those who look ahead will be trapped by it soon enough. A lot of those characters from the Taiwanese New Wave movies acted like they didn't want to be here, and why would they? It was either here or a firing squad and besides, it was where their leader had gone, the rival refuge, a place of escape that keeps echoing back to its

origin. How could they be anything but nostalgic when the future was stuck between this lost origin and a doomed empire across the ocean?

Outside the restaurant a group is looking at their phones like think they'll transport them to the mainland, to the home they were promised, but only when it's different from the one that exists now, and that's what the nostalgist wants, for their home to become a place that never existed, the motherland before Mao, but after no one, or maybe the Ghost Leader lit up in neon, flashing in the rain, a totem for this impossible return. Neon was the fantasy of a generation that always came up short, the last of the raw, the last who would remember a time before the digital age, like we would be some repository of ancient lore that no one else would ever care about hearing.

Neon was around before the digital, but also evokes a future beyond it. The cities would be draped in tangles and gridwork of it, and it would stretch into the clouds, and each home would be decorated with it, but here we were in an alley with only one sign that had already short-circuited with a glow that was dulled by rain. The artisans who specialized in its design don't number in the thousands like we once thought they would, and back home, whenever you see it, it's used as an ironic relic, some quaint hipsterism, but here it's been around for decades, grimy but still somehow bright enough to pierce through the haze, a transcendent glow that moves faster than light (like in that story by another nostalgist) and contains every conceivable possibility of experience within it, not just of this moment, standing under the flickering sign, but of every other moment, every NOW that could've ever taken place.

I see more of it down the alley and take a picture. Another restaurant. This one also with blinking characters, the same piercing light, and up ahead is a hotel with one sign, and a medical clinic with a red cross

like the one on the spires in Daegu except smaller. Sometimes I see a sign at the top of stairways too and stand there for awhile, looking up, but then I have to remind myself that I only have a few hours left, and what I wanted to do was wander through the little streets, all numbered and leading into smaller ones until they get so narrow that only a rat could pass through.

Ventilation ducts and pipes sticking out make them even smaller, and from one window you can see directly into the building next door. This is the kind of place where that kid in *Rebels of a Neon God* lives with his parents, in a lane like this that curls inward, coiled up on itself like a mollusk, eating noodles in silence with his mom and dad while it rains outside. There should be a new name for the movement Tsai, and Hou, and the maestro Ed Yang belonged to, not the Taiwanese New Wave—there's nothing interesting about that name—but the Neon Wave because after all they made their movies during the boom times, and they still had hope that they could ride the crest of neon into a greater autonomy, but over the last thirty years, the boom flatlined, and their sovereign neighbor only reclaimed more of the island.

Maybe that's also what the agitation was behind the images, this sneaking dread that they were primed for a vicious confrontation. The kids in Yang's *Brighter Summer Day* hazing each other in the hallway after school instead of studying for the national exams like they knew that learning how to fight was more important than getting good grades because soon the empire next door would come to liquidate its holdings, turn their little island into a prison colony or a giant theme park with golf courses on the coast.

Or (and maybe this is the best-case scenario) they could leave it the way it is, preserve its nostalgia, straight from the decade of my birth, preserve the tiled apartment buildings along the train tracks with their water stains and rusted cages in front of the plants overflowing from the window and the white laundry strung

up between the bars, freeze it there in its generosity and utopianism and grime, but why did it matter if the city was preserved like that? I probably wouldn't ever come here again, and by the time I did, it would probably be a part of somewhere else.

I also had to follow that line in the wanderer's credo about never going back the same way you came and if you have the option to go somewhere you've never been to, choose that one first. I repeat the credo as if I actually follow it, but I was about to go back to Korea, while there were so many other places I hadn't been to yet, to revisit a woman who doesn't expect me to stay there. Or I could stay where I was, with 89 more days left to my name. I could overstay too, dwell here forever illegally, rent a room at the top of some stairs where neon flickers and couples who rent by the hour wake you up with their laughter at 4 in the morning, when you forget where you are for a few minutes and believe that the fan is soothing you back to sleep, and that when you turn it off, the comfort of its sound will still be there. I could walk under the dripping banyans every night, try to jump over the puddles, open my umbrella when I step out from the archways and close it again when I take cover.

I must've been here before. It's the extension of another city, another section of the wall between a past that doesn't exist and a more brutal goodbye, one that I was repeating to myself just to get the word right, get that sincere inflection that sometimes even convinces you that you'll end the story right where it started, on a dark lane with puddles between the awnings and a porcelain dog that stands beside one of those staircases with the rooms inside where you'll stay for years, decorating it like you actually want to be there, and you made some kind of decision to stop moving, to stay in the one place where you never expected to end up, a place just as good as any other, and that's the only reason to stay anywhere. Not because it preserved the decade of my birth or because it was already cast in movies as a pseudo-noir jungle backdrop, but because I was already here. I

could reconcile my restlessness, wander in my mind, imagine every conceivable possibility of experience, or I could wander the island, where Shen Fu probably dreamed about visiting, maybe go down towards Kaoshiung or somewhere in the interior, to a town surrounded by mountains, or over to Keelung and the village of Jiufen from *A City of Sadness*, and maybe Jiye could visit once her doctor reduced her therapy sessions, but then I'd be expecting her to visit, waiting for her, and then I wouldn't be reconciled with where I was, quarantined on this island from a world I renounced without any resentment, but with a joyful shedding away of any need to hesitate about where to go or what to do next, because it was already decided, there was no chance to stray, here I'd been sent and stranded and the city was so familiar that I could already pretend it was the place where I grew up, the only place I could go back to when everywhere else had disappeared into the future, but I must've still planned to leave the next morning because I was wandering around Zhongsheng whereas if I really wanted to stay, I would've gone back to the airport hotel and then looked for another place and also for a job and cancelled my ticket and tried to check out before they saw all the booze in the tiny refrigerator was pillaged.

I didn't see a station anywhere, only a tangled bunch of alleys with one big road up ahead past some market stalls that were opened but without any customers. What was the day? Thursday? And it was right after work. You'd think the stalls would be packed, but the rain was picking up, and I got under the awning of a shoe store and tried to decide if I should go inside this temple I saw across the street or to keep walking until I found a station. What harm could one prayer do? Would Joe hold it against me? What would a few more minutes be when it was already raining hard, and I didn't know which street I was on, and besides, its doors were wide open, and it looked warm inside with the smoke rising from it, and I'd been walking for a couple of hours, and the rain wasn't going to stop for awhile anyways, so I ran across the street and had to step over this little

threshold that looked like it was there just to remind me that I was crossing from one side to the next, like the crossing had to be acknowledged somehow or else the unlucky spirits from the outside would follow you in, and I wish I knew a few words of Fan to say while I passed through the gate instead of stumbling under the lanterns and up to the wide gold altar with its packets of cookies and oranges and framed photos of the dead, and then down a hall where there's a tree dangling with ribbons and dragons carved around the door, their tongues sticking out and in the whites of their eyes you can see these little flames.

No one could honestly call this place some kind of refuge, like it would protect you from the city outside, and that's why the hall in the middle of it doesn't have a roof. The building itself and the prayers and the statues dwelling in its shrines won't help you either. Maybe the gate's not there to protect what's outside from entering in, but the other way around, and the statue standing in front of you, neither a man or woman, human or god or animal, it won't protect you either and with so many hands outstretched it makes you dizzy, and you lose count of them and dupe yourself into thinking that one of those hands could save you, so fearless in its pose, and if you bow to it and brings alms to shatter on the stone, you could be lifted up, guided, protected by the sword in its grip, but do you come here for answers, or to remind yourself that the questions are what led you here and like those cats you saw slinking against the wall, you thought you were hunting for something, but the rats have already been chased away, and the cats are already gone too, and whoever was a sinner before is still a sinner, and whoever harbored impure thoughts is still a paraphiliac at heart.

Maybe because there's no refuge here explains why besides the monk only a few other people are next to you. No one wants to remind themselves how trapped they are, how whatever they thought they escaped from is still there, straight ahead, staring straight at them, and the sword stays right where it is, and the empty hand,

the one held highest, you think it's going to reach down and lift you up, save you when they kick you out of your room at the top of the stairs, and throw your suitcase out the window, and then you have to decide whether you should try to catch it or let it hit the ground?

In a split second, is it better to choose the least resistant path? Will the empty hand even catch the suitcase before it bursts open in the street, no, probably not, but it might still be the one hand that lifts you up, but only after you admit that the future won't deliver you anywhere else or give you another name or another origin, and you still might try to run because you think the guards are after you, but it's an island, so all you can do is shatter your alms and remember that here lies the wreckage of any escape you could hope to have from this city.

Another statue stands behind a glass case of a woman in robes wearing a tiara of gold. The other people close their eyes except for the monk who still watches us. She's some kind of mother to us all, but she's not asking you to do anything for her. You also can't expect her to do anything for you but listen—you invite the trouble, you always have, by not telling her what's really going on.

Can you even formulate the words to yourself? You think trouble is a part of the game you're playing, but really the game is playing you, and if you play a game or two, then okay, maybe you'll miss the war, spar with the foxes to spare the wolf, and if you really want her compassion, then take it, but first understand what it is you're asking for, and what you're going to do when she asks for it back, because it's not one-sided, and your stinginess will cost you, but where else is there to go, in the smoke you start stumbling even more and someone somewhere is offering you compassion at an absurdly high yet surprisingly reasonable price, and what's the price of a few prayers? Your attention. What's the price of a few more minutes?

If I knew the answer to that, I wouldn't be here. None of us would. We're here because we don't have a minute to spare. Not the guy who's paralyzed on one side or the woman wearing hospital slippers or the other woman with her little kid or the monk who lowers his head because this lady will not be ignored, not because we're scared of her, how could we be, look at her smile, there's no malice in it, she smiles like she's never had an impure thought in her endless life, like she understands, but she doesn't ever acknowledge it, a knowing smile stretched thin, sculpted in gold, and instead of turning from the world that hushes before her, she faces it head-on with her shimmering robe, the reflection of the lamps that surround her in the glass, some kind of halo on top of the tiara, shimmering also, neither asking you to look at her or warding you away either, and the gift she offers is one that can't be forgotten or spent or wasted, and once you accept it—and by looking at her, you've accepted it—you can never look away.

What is her love but the thrill of not asking for more? Every possible life has already been lived, and there is nowhere else to go, she's the gatekeeper, not Joe or the Word or the dharma—and she may never let you pass, no more wandering or wanting, all you can do for now is sit here and wait—not even wait, because waiting implies some expectation, some end. Even if the island budes an inch, it's not drifting back to a lost homeland. This isn't some Pangea-in-the-making we're a part of here, the territory only drifts farther out to sea, becoming more distant, some wavering shadows on the line, an orphan castaway, and I was never here, and I was never born, and I keep remembering my life before I ever arrived on this island, and the path back is helpless to uncover, and the lights along it, inescapable, but she's heard all your stories and questions, your hunting, your meandering, the sound of you snoring, of you scratching yourself in the morning, the most pristine dialogical reasoning you could ever muster, which is no more convincing than when you get on your

knees and beg, the desperation is even there in your sleep, and she hears it all, and nothing changes that smile, like she's about to draw the gate and sever you in half and later feed you to the dogs that guard the gates stretching behind her, each one also with another gatekeeper waiting for you to pass, and in the folds of her robe you can see the gold sheen getting brighter to a polished blue and red and yellow neon, the tiara crumbling in front of her face that's drawing farther away, or getting closer, it's hard to tell, and the glass fogs up and melts down across the banister protecting you from her or her from you, and in the stillness of her command you retreat farther, knowing that if you could see the gate that belonged to you for what it was, you'd be able to step right through it.