

Foreword

The Turtle

Sometimes it feels as if one thousand years goes by in a single day. Perhaps it's just me, slowing down in my old age. But from what I can tell, everyone else is also moving faster, trying to squeeze more into every second, eager to get from one point to the next without ever wondering what might be in between or beyond.

Often I watch people go by with their ears pressed up against their phones or staring into those shiny little screens. I gather that they are liking, messaging, tweeting, posting, following and tagging. I don't pretend to know what any of this means exactly, but suspect they are connecting with people down the road, across the city, or on the other side of the world. Being connected doesn't mean what it used to mean in Vietnam, but it seems to be more important than ever.

I'm old fashioned – more concerned with the quality of connections than the speed or number of them. If I had my way, we would all apply the brakes ever so slightly so that we could be with one another and be in the moment.

Don't get me wrong. Slowing down is not the same as being lazy.

In fact, if you pay close attention you'll see that I am never idle. In the mornings I paddle to the side of my lake where the marsh lands used to be, or to the spot where there was once a stream that ran all the way to the Red River. Even though my lake was closed off to the world more than a century ago, these are still my favourite places to search for worms, plants and algae.

Once the sun has risen I like to swim up to the surface to see who's about and let others see me. Visitors and children often gather to gawk and take pictures.

'Is that really him? He's even bigger than I thought he was. Why's he swimming so slowly? Is he okay?'

'How many turtles are there, anyway? Just one? He must get lonely.'

'Is he really real? How can anything live in that?'

'He's real, all right! Really old and really ugly.'

The locals walk by, do their exercises and go about their day. They've seen me before and have no reason to see me again. I know that many people find me odd, perhaps even gruesome. But I'm too slow, my shell is too soft and my claws are too worn to threaten anyone. I suppose I'm a spectacle, but one that's easy to grow accustomed to and then ignore.

In the afternoons I sink down to the bottom of the lake to escape the heat and noise. It's there in the silent darkness that I find myself thinking back to all the turtles who came before me and who passed on that yolk of wisdom that allowed me to emerge from my egg ready to watch over a nation.

Constantly, I taste the silt that settles down from the air and through the green water. My lake is not like it used to be. Strange morsels and substances are always being deposited. Most of them I tolerate – even if they are not to my liking they do not turn my stomach. You don't get to my age without being able to adapt.

So I'm comfortable with Vietnamese moving from rice paddies to apartment blocks and flying far from these shores. And I have no problem with outsiders coming to Vietnam. When I hear people speaking in alien tongues I rarely feel frightened or out of sorts. I've witnessed Chinese, French, Japanese, Russians, Americans and many others march into this land and stay for a while before moving on. All of these visitors have challenged us to change and yet somehow remain Vietnamese.

And then there's that perpetual struggle between youth who are intent on making their own way and older folk who are determined to preserve their legacies. I'm in step with both, having seen many of the former turn into the

latter. Change and struggle sit well with me. They ensure that every day in Vietnam is different. It's just the speed of that change and the ferocity of the struggle that I'm inclined to question.

One thing about moving so slowly is that I don't need to sleep very much. And so, after the sun has set, I do gentle circles of the lake, clockwise and then anti-clockwise, leaving plenty of time to stop and float. When I look up, I can't see the blanket of stars anymore. Instead for hours at a time I gaze in wonderment at the city lights flickering like so many synapses in a mighty brain.

So now you know how I fill my days. You know that I'm relaxed but never at rest. Whether swimming, diving or floating, I am always connecting with people, networking you might even call it. The oxygen that fills my lungs and the water in which I'm immersed allow me to keep in touch with people all over the country, people who breathe the same air and are born of the same fluid. My spirit enchants them. And I, in turn, am enchanted by their spirits. As if in a dream, I see what they see, feel what they feel, while watching and assessing them from the outside. I am at once master and slave to their stories.

But because I can't be in more than one place at a time, I must be selective. I tend to connect with youth. Not just any youth, but those 100 or so hatchlings of each generation who help me to fathom the character of the nation and divine its destiny. They are not like everyone else. You could call them heroes, figures worthy of glowing swords, magical bows and riding atop elephants. Whether they fulfil their potential is a matter of resolve, judgement and fortune, and remains uncertain to me even after all these centuries.

Ultimately, I keep moving because my time, like everyone else's, is short. Nowadays it is nice to get a little help from others. I'm grateful to the scientists who treat my earthly ailments, who build me special cages to protect me from the elements and who encourage me to slow down that little bit more. And I appreciate those who dote on me as if I was a great grandfather or some creature that's suddenly deemed rare and therefore precious. What I really need, however, is for people to believe in each other and in me. Belief is what gives me substance and purpose. While the nature of that belief is bound to vary and its level ebb and flow, the thought of it dwindling away is one change that I find hard to swallow.

With respect,
The Turtle of Hoan Kiem Lake

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