

‘Night Scene’

by Cathal Nolan

The rain pours down around him, seeping through the denim of his jeans. It’s chilly, but the rain here isn’t like at home. It falls in a shower, straight down into great puddles that coalesce in the ridges of the tarmac and the cracks in the concrete. The humidity of the previous morning is gone, washed away in the floods of the evening monsoon. Hands in his pockets and head down, he walks past the bus stop and the relative shelter of the apartment block’s overhang. The yellow glow as the white light reflects off the walls and the slick backs of rain jackets looks almost inviting as he trudges on. The synthetic chime to his left lets him know that another brave traveller has departed the warmth and light of the convenience store. Grey and black figures stand under the awning, huddling as they watch the bus stop in the vain hope the rain will cease for just a moment to let them slip by.

He steps to the left, careful to avoid the flooding drain on the corner of the street as he heads up hill. People hurry by, umbrellas and the slick sheen of down coats forming dark shapes of muted colour that swirl around him. Steam pours out of the subway vent in the street, undeterred by the chilling rain. Deep beneath, in the bowels of the city, the rattle and roar of the train can be made out as he walks past the station, commuters pouring in and out. He passes all of this by and takes

another left, down a small side street. The lane is narrow and cobbled, and he can feel the burning heat of air conditioning units on the backs of restaurants in the main street. The air is filled with the clatter of kitchens with doors out into the alley but as he passes these by, the noise shifts. There is a night club on his left, the thrum of the bass traveling up the stairs of the entrance. The red neon sign by the door bathes the space in an eerie glow, the light reflected off the puddles and casting itself across the shutters. This too he passes, continuing down the alley as the rain falls intermittently between the balconies and awnings. He passes by two men leaning against a wall, hard faces illuminated by their cigarettes. They stare him down, but his head remains level and his pace even as he walks by. He is no stranger around here and these men know it by his relaxed gait.

Finally, he reaches his destination, a small noodle bar with the best pho in the city. He walks into the tiny wood panelled space, greeted by the welcoming warmth and scent of spiced soup. He nods to the large man resting his arms on the high stainless-steel counter. The man nods back, already knowing his regular order. He turns and plods up the tight wooden staircase, the top opening up into a comfortable and homely dining space. The other regulars notice him but pay him no heed, each absorbed in the steamy heat of their broths. He sits down in his usual seat, his soaking jacket slung over the back of his seat as he relaxes into the plush cushion on the hard wood. The young waitress brings him his bowl and glass, smiling as she recognises him. He gives her a tired smile and a generous tip. He knows this girl, she's the boss's daughter

who works the evening shifts. She'll be moving on to university soon and her job will go to someone else. These thoughts slip from his mind as he picks up his chopsticks and spoon, plunging them into the soup and fishing out a helping of rice noodles. The tension in his shoulders dissipates; he feels his woes melt away as the first taste of the pho hits his tongue.