

Three Vietnamese Poets

Translated by Linh Dinh

Tinfoil Press

Introduction

The two Vietnams became one in 1975. The years that followed turned out to be some of the darkest in Vietnamese history. A quarter of a million people, soldiers, intellectuals, clergymen, were sent to prison; tens of thousands were kicked out of their own homes; more than a million people escaped overseas—a startling phenomenon, considering that Vietnamese had never emigrated in substantial numbers before. The term “boat people” entered the English language (to be translated into Vietnamese as “thuyen nhan”). Books were banned and confiscated.

Food shortages became a daily fact of life. Sorghum and cassavas were often substituted for rice in people’s diet. Salt, sugar, and MSG were rationed. Fish sauce turned into salt water. Wine was made by fermenting the core of a pineapple. Phan Nhien Hao recalls his student days in the late 80’s: “I was hungry all the time. All the students living in the dormitories were really walking skeletons. Most of the time you could think of nothing but food.”

Nguyen Quoc Chanh remembers: “Before 1975, our family grew sugarcane. Then my father was intimidated into giving much of his land to the government. They would have taken it away from him anyway. It didn’t

take long for the entire country to become destitute. We would eat this yellow sorghum, imported from India, which tasted really rubbery, for months at a time. And once a week we had to hear some idiot stuttering and lisping his way through an incoherent lecture on the glories of Marxism.”

In the face of such dire realities, the literature that was disseminated by the state was, unbelievably enough, cheerful. As Maxim Gorky wrote, the job of socialist realist literature is to provide an optimistic outlook on life. Literature must also educate. Hanoi’s chief ideologue, Truong Chinh (whose name means “Long March”) defined “correct” literature as: “Artistic creations which portray the truth in a society evolving towards socialism according to objective laws.” But the “truth” was whatever the state said it was. The catchword was “typical” [dien hinh]. In literature, the truth meant the presentation of typical characters in typical situations behaving typically. A corrupt Party official is certainly not typical because he is a gross aberration, an evil rumor, a freak; to portray him is to slander the Party. A frightened Revolutionary soldier, a caring priest, boat people, and homosexuals, etc., are also aberrations. Gorky: “Socialist realism is a programmatic

literature that affirms something.” That something, of course, is socialism.

It was imperative that writers be clear about their intentions. Ambiguity and ambivalence were no-nos, a sign of fuzzy ideology, or worse, subversiveness. But living in such a stifling environment, a person had to become subversive to be nourished intellectually. He had to find the banned books. Hao explains: “It was very hard to find good books in Vietnam after 1975. Fortunately, I had an uncle who managed to keep a very good library. I grew up reading a lot of translated literature, especially French, and, later on, Russian. I enjoyed the French Existentialists very much, Camus in particular. At a very deep level, Existentialism has influenced the way I look at life. Existentialism showed me the beauty of man’s loneliness and made me rely on my own inner strength.”

This inner strength not only allowed Hao to endure life in Vietnam, it also helped him to survive the US, where he emigrated in 1991. Collective suffering is now replaced by solitary enjoyment. Hao writes: “This strong belief in the essential isolation of man has helped me cope with the isolated life of an immigrant in the US. Without this philosophical foundation, I must have

already killed myself just by living here.”

One of Hao’s early influences, while he was still in Vietnam, was poet Thanh Tam Tuyen (b. 1936). Tuyen’s crisp, clear language provided Hao with an alternative to the Romantic tendencies gushing from many other Vietnamese poets. Arriving in America, Hao then encountered what he calls “low key” literature: “Being educated in Vietnam, where the highly cultivated literature of the French had been the model for so long, it was difficult for me to accept, at first, the ‘no ideas but in things,’ plain-speech writing style of much of American literature. Over the years, however, I’ve developed a passion for this “low key” literature. I feel much more healthy as a writer now, although the isolation of life in this country is unbearable at times.”

It should be added that the bombast of Mayakovski was held up as a model in Vietnam. The emphasis was on his late, hate-filled work, however, and not on the seminal, Futurist poems.

Surrealism is also an ingredient in Hao’s work. Although Surrealism has nothing in common with Socialist Realism, the government allowed the Surrealists to be translated into Vietnamese because most of them were Communist sympathizers. Marquez,

another Communist sympathizer, also has a huge influence in Vietnam, although the steamier sex scenes in *ONE HUNDRED YEAR OF SOLITUDE* have been expunged in the Vietnamese version.

It’s also true that poetry is monitored much less tightly than fiction. “These censors can’t really read poems,” Nguyen Quoc Chanh explains; “they will comb through a poem for ‘reactionary’ words. If they can’t find them, then they have a very hard time making an argument that the poem is reactionary.”

Before any literary work can reach the censors, however, it has to pass through an editor at a government-owned publishing house. It is this editor who may lose his job, or worse, if the wrong work is published. I’ll give you a concrete (and personal) example of how this works: Some of my friends were trying to get a poem of mine published. They told all these different editors, “He’s not an overseas Vietnamese writer, he’s an American writer,” but these editors didn’t buy it. They were afraid they would get in trouble if they published a Vietnamese-American poet. There were three different translations of this poem floating around. All were rejected. One editor told me through an intermediary that he couldn’t publish the poem

because it wasn’t clear which army the injured soldier in the poem belonged to [!].

Chanh, who lives in Saigon, recounts his beginning: “I was drafted into the Army in 1979, but I faked an illness and wasn’t sent to Cambodia. While in the military hospital, however, I was diagnosed with a (real) ulcer in my stomach. After I was honorably discharged, I enrolled at the university as a literature major. Many of the banned books, published before 1975 in Saigon, were kept at the school library, but only certain people were allowed to go into the stacks. I managed to be one of them. It was thanks to this access that I was able to read translations of Rimbaud, Kafka, Freud, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and especially the Existentialists: Kierkegaard, Sartre and Camus.”

The disintegration of the Soviet Union had major repercussions in Vietnam. A series of policy reforms was finally introduced by the government. Vietnam became a budding Capitalist society ruled by an oligarchy of Communist bosses who don’t even believe in their own ideology. Any change is welcomed, however. In the cultural arena, it meant a degree of liberalization that allowed many writers to emerge, including two of the poets included here: Nguyen Quoc Chanh and Van

introduction

Cam Hai. (Phan Nhien Hao, as an oversea Vietnamese, remains unpublished inside Vietnam.) Chanh's first collection, *NIGHT OF THE RISING SUN*, came out in 1990 and was greeted by a degree of hostility almost comic in its intensity. In an article titled "*The Bizarre in Night Of The Rising Sun*," the newspaper *YOUTH* compared Chanh's work to "a cemetery of the spirit and of the body. There is nothing left for a person to look for or to lean on. [...] This work can only lead man towards madness, irresponsibility, obliviousness towards the present, humans and objects, the lofty and the abject, the real and the fake, right and wrong, virtues and cruelties are here mixed together in a slimy disgusting gob." In an article titled "*An Unhealthy Book*," the newspaper *THE PEOPLE* began by complaining of the "somewhat murky and entirely irrational title." Then it evoked Chanh's poem "*Prometheus*" to predict that both the poet's life and career will perish in a flame he's "toying with."

So what's all this brouhaha about? Aside from a few missteps, common in any first book of poems, in any book of poems, period, Chanh's volume is made up of fine lines such as these:

*A bill of money
Reeks of gunpowder
And your wage
Is a war casualty
You have to hold the past in your hand each month
Blood from the head
Drains to the feet*

And:

*Your belly
Is stuffed with my empty belly*

*My belly
Is swollen with your flat belly*

And:

*A ladder like a toothpick
Floundering
Poking at the sky, a mouth without teeth.*

But Chanh really hit his stride with his second book, *INANIMATE WEATHER*, which came out in 1997. That book is represented here by the sequence "*Seven Untitled Poems*." The other poems by Chanh are translated straight from manuscripts, of works unpublished, or unpublishable, in Vietnam.

Van Cam Hai debuted with his 1995 collection *MAN WHO TENDS THE WAVES*. The poet wrote these poems before he was twenty years old. Hai's jamming together of incongruous words owed something to Le Dat (b. 1922), but the younger man's language was more tactile, more concrete, his verbal collisions more violent, than in the work of the older poet. Hai's music was also more varied. It was clear that a fierce imagination was at work, as is evident from "*Death and Sister*," the first of Hai's poems presented here. The rest come from his even more astonishing second manuscript, which has yet to find a publisher in Vietnam. Hai relates: "The editors are telling me to lighten up. Most of these poems are too heavy." That is common, cliché advice. Vietnamese writers are constantly told by editors to lighten up.

Hai admits to sending \$14 a month to a senior official in the government-sponsored Vietnamese Writers Union. This is no chump change in a country

where a college professor makes about \$100 a month (excluding bribes for fixing grades). Hai is convinced that this monthly tithing will help him to publish poems in the future. The fact that a young poet has to think this way says everything about the politics of poetry in contemporary Vietnam.

Slandered and excluded from all anthologies, the three poets in this volume represent the fringe and vanguard of Vietnamese poetry. In a less corrupt environment, they would surely be seen as the best, and the most courageous, of their generation.

Linh Dinh
Saigon 2/26/01

NGUYEN QUOC CHANH

NGUYEN QUOC CHANH was born in 1958 in Bac Lieu. He is the author of two collections of poems, *Night of the Rising Sun* (1990) and *Inanimate Weather* (1997). English translations of his poems have been published in the journals *The Literary Review* and *Filling Station*, and in “*Vietnam Inside Out: Dialogues*” (St Martin’s Press 2001), and on the website www.vietnamesepoetry.com

SEVEN UNTITLED POEMS

The sun lunges forward crossing a boundary puncturing a late sleep.
An egg hatches a sound.
I grip my own hand holding a shadow and releasing it into a glass of water.
On the silent shore the sea of memories spares two shells odorless and empty.

★

Evening holding back a burnt mark a pictogram the pit of an eye the sun
immolated,
Evening burning the memory bank arms held in prayer the night heron calling
into space,
Night extinguished with one man left behind lunging forward turning into a
shadow...
Evening Who?

★

*Nguyen
Quoc
Chanh*

*10
11*

Feet without lamp street without lamp the shadow is black.
Feet without lamp street with lamp black is the shadow.
Beneath two lamps two shadows both are black.

★

You ran contrariwise from the crown of your head to the soles of your feet, a mad
woman, a primitive egg dashed against scrap metal.
You collided then reverted to a rubbery condition a series of warped circles.
The endlessly jarring road with its bad intentioned collisions and drowned rivers.
You ran in panic from the woods onto a tidy stage then smiled and talked in a
bisexual manner.
Beneath the conceptual hammer you boldly split in two rhythmically trembling on
the resilient mattress.
You chased after a fit of excess and fell into the HIV pit.
A strange wind poured into the fire.
You a gray smoke gathering into clouds metamorphosing into a female bug like
the woman in the dunes adapting to a man robbed of freedom without his
day on the cross.
You a woman about to be stoned.

★

My eyes do not register the presence of trees animals men or even the arrogant
horizon.
Inside my eyes are only distances hierarchies dark holes black boxes zigzags
and
Disquiets.

★

Daybreak frolics with the flowers the night smile disappearing on the street.
Each person a curfew face inside the clock the pendulum oscillates.
The briefest day I throw away as you save the thin pleased body.
Daybreak swallows you in stages nibbles me to bits.

★

Tic toc tic toc
The horn beak pecks at the night drum,
Two secret revealing eyes are sliding along time's greasy surface.
The wall displays dead holes variously connected to the inmate.
And only the tic toc sounds remain to count the rolling aspirins.
Night flashes its cold teeth the mouth opens its precipices.
Shadows from cul-de-sacs stretch and stagnate on the brick floor.
Still the tic tac sounds pecking the dense night.
Still the rolling aspirins.

LOW PRESSURE SYSTEM

The thumb stops breathing.
There is a sound of a dropped glass.
Needles piercing the ear.

I see water gushing from hollows in the wall.
(The house's artery is broken.)

Water is drowning the word mouth.
A character cannot escape the death of a wet book.
Our character is tattooed: Small. Weak. Wicked. Shell.

Words stepping on each other trying to remove themselves from literariness.
They float blue on the water.
Individual corpses sink to compete with bricks and shards of glass.

The remaining fingers have headaches and runny noses.
Memory stands then sits stringing pieces of intestines around a hole.

I hear cries of a newborn.
A fish crawls out from a bloody hollow.
The woman closes her thighs and a corpse is covered up.

A laugh crawls in wiggly lines across a cheek.
Look into the thumb.
Sperm reborn in the flow of sap animating the wild grass and flowers.

After the bee season the flowers and grass are plowed up shredded and burnt.
The grass regrows and the sperm open their eyes.
(Even if the land is mortgaged joint ventured or sold to another.)

The hunt is a thousand years old.
A distance only blind eyes can perceive.
Its concentrated flavor cannot be tasted by anyone besides the moss covered
tongues of turtles.

I hear wild laughs from a circus mixed with the rhythmic prayer for the release of
the souls of many female nuns.
(They are performing a circus for another world?)

A low pressure system on the hill seeps into the body.
Termites dig up dirt inside bones.
Nests grow from the ground to resemble artistic graves.

I carry a cemetery inside my body.
A fist missing a finger.

*Nguyen
Quoc
Chanh*

*14
15*

MARSH DREAM

I

Broken fuse
From things the night oozes out eyes and all are infected.
The taunt threads on the face of criminal justice.
Escaping heat loses abilities to ejaculate.
One's aura is glazed over with a spreading yellow film spilling onto the
demarcation line and entering the forbidden zone.
Annoying eye.
Sedimentary mouth sucks on pride a soapberry lava ceases at the border of real
and fake weathers.
Exhausted senses.
Life stops flowing.
Everything rots to pieces only the echoes of a linga and a yoni impassive statues
gloomily reverberating.

II

Broken fuse.
Things declare themselves royalty.
The faithful let down their guards.
It's a legal opportunity for a disorderly appearance.
Order is restored by a red malice.
An inflected voice suffers rising blood pressure dreaming of nux vomica and
empty wine bottles.
The cerebrum enacted a benign female theatrical.
The hand of monopoly nudges the god-given rights of living things.
Skin color loses its reflex and the spool of the past weaves a fabric to cover holes
incapable of passing on the ambition to raise the count of air-hating
insects.
Staring eyes having lost their keys open and shut at will.
Annoying air.
Staggering mad manikins.
Each manikin hides a pig tail in Macondo (the village in ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF
SOLITUDE) and animal-shaped clouds jump on each other's backs without distinguishing
between predators and prey lions rabbits cats dogs or horses...
The human body opens up.
The pressures of surpluses and deficits ooze out beyond the range of sight and
sense.
The face of lava is not in the book of divination.
The protuberance is sharp and pliable.
The hollow has a black hole element its shape changes according to the weather
of a half yawn.

*Nguyen
Quoc
Chanh*

*16
17*

III

Broken fuse.
Night smooths out protuberances and fills in hollows.
Disparity aches the entire line in back of the ears throat navel tail bone groin
and an open toilet.
The savior sits.
Concepts are a constraining helmet insects catching prey by a system of
shutting tight.
Imagination and thoughts eternally nourished.
Man with a thick shadow does not hear the air break to clear a road to the
cemetery
Look into one spot.
Staring and contemplating is to enter a train car without passengers.
Imagination thrown into a blinding interval everything rises.
A straight movement eliminates dampness and dries out the viscera.
A shadow creakily swinging a hammock.
The sound of darkness moving drenched in lubricating oil.
Kinship is declared through hastily carved bas relief where air-hating insects
worship.

Gnawing epoch.
Suck marrow.
Product of cohabitation disobedient shard of instinct pressures of an offshoot
forest.

A curt hand.
Memory opens its compass and a train car without passengers.
The past has extra tickets.
Centuries not transported.

IV

Broken fuse.
A fluorescent screen from a dark corner displays in wiggly lines manikins from
the century before silent films.
A vanguard manikin sticks out his slimy tongue dun colored stinking and oozing
from intermittent cracks the eternal conspiracy to infiltrate.
No images no smells no nothing.
Tipped equilibrium.
Insects compete to sing in chorus the swamp refrain.
Rain is.
Can't duck inside.
Outside still the process of train cars carrying nothing.
Two oversized thigh bones incarcerating the desert.
Dip everything into the dish-washing tub.
Eliminate the lead.
Cover up the-system-to-prevent-fire-to-the-senses.
The past is bonfires of memory, an on duty death notice.

Two overlong ditties emit a haunting melody like a prayer.
A door opens
The secret spills out onto the street.
Insects drone and crackle.
The swamp sleeps deeply.
Run, run and run...
A bottle filled with words.
Dirty.
An expressive hand over-pours the glass because rats and cockroaches have
splashed onto the wall slanting shadows and squares.
Interred bricks.
A disquieting word strikes.
Recovering viscera.
Those of the same skin color emit timelessly.

A LEGEND

A vacation on top of a stove.
Smoke preserves the shoots.
Warmth maintains the timbres.

The seed I store inside the tropical forest's vagina.
A woman born from a fever and two eyes not gouged out by the color yellow.
They are reminiscences soundly asleep inside a legendary skirt.

Every situation in the story has cats, rabbits and some fruits.
Aside from barks and the sounds of cats and dogs, there are also cormorants, guavas, mangoes, and a bottle
of fish sauce.

One among them said if stuck on a desert island he would only need two things: Mozart and fish sauce.

I am a bear who does not know how to perform mountain cave tricks, only lucky to survive the uprooted
forest.

I was born from a tree's hollow and my umbilical cord was cut with a potsherd and my music is that of a
woodpecker.

My smell is that of the saliva of bees mating with the honey of flowers.

My road is to climb to the trifurcated crotch of a tree to be full and drunk and to ponder for a minute then
letting go and falling down.

After each fall my flesh becomes elastic and expands.
After each fall my plants grow boundlessly.
After each fall my animals multiply.

I'm tattered, I'm porous, I'm smooth, I'm bitter. And I'm...

Although I'm only an uninsured seed and without wings,
In a dense moment of idle bullets, I take off and land.

In the legend I'm the survivor who has seen the head at the bottom of a jar of fermented paste.

WIDE OPEN EYES

A day of dark glasses
Detective eyes look into a crevice.

The ocean surface calm, to hear the sunken ships break apart.
Rotting bodies inside the memory of wide-open eyes.
Centuries of typhoons, the sunken ships become ghostly waves, become voices of matchsticks.
To light a candle for cold fingers.

The candle flame wipes dust off a secret smudge.

Only the wind knows of sea birds sinking and dissolving inside wide-open eyes.
And ships of sounds not spotted with rust.
Adventures stored inside children's dreams.
Dreams bulging and overburdened to become sudden accidents.

A beauty only time is violent enough to indict.

And all the judges will be children.
And all will be acquitted.

A WORLD OF SAND

The day lies face down on top of night, he and things
Lie in voluptuousness. Time is many bats

Cutting the night's darkness into irregular bits, each bit
A live rhythm to splash into the crowd

*Nguyen
Quoc
Chanh*

And from this crowd, another empty space
Slams down the door. The room

*22
23*

Swells and flexes. Shuddering and leaving a runway, opening up the body
Two sympathetic systems mix heat through the night. On the day

The hedge collapses, he dreams and is afraid of age, although
The shadow flows and suddenly, homogenizes

All shapes. He and blocks of monochromatic
Colors cover the wall, play the morning game

Of an imagination avoiding shapes, ejecting each thing from its spoken name
A figure is dropped into a bottomless sensation... Have intercourse

With savages. With the sheep Dolly, a mountain peak capable
Of reproducing, rides each other, sculpts symbols

Of debauchery, unformed, unstamped, and
Manifesting predictions of balance

In a book of fortunes. As a prediction of imbalance, he shows
A means to survive by ejecting the sadness of teeth and hair,

The sadness of sap oozing. As a stutterer
In the world criss-crossed with directives, and in a wretched

Coincidence, he became lost and found himself in a deluge.
(The seasons supplant each other, until the season of

Disintegration.) A sun ray crosses through, he hears
Reverberating in the blood. He longs to wraps his arms

Around the neck of a cow and to frolic with children. He carries
A fresh fear, the fear of a woman imprisoned

Inside a birthmark finished with menstruation, turning back
To a lost stretch of the road, counting the fallen eggs on top of the vault

Of the thirtieth. A night of the alphabet, of intonations,
Of an hour flowering, of white enthusiasm. And the breasts

Of the earth are always shifting into puberty, so the well-worn roads
Will grow lush, and the body will retreat into the swamp reeds, and the memory

Will detach itself from all things. Drop a thought into the water
To reach a world of sand...

REVOLVING STAGE

I

The life column twists, sucks the sea swallow into the eye. The stage spread its legs and spins. A light remaining from puberty plucks a woman from someone else's look.

Mixed among the pebbles, an eye says: "Owls fly out from the vagina." A dog runs after a bone's caress. "Let's keep it," a hand reaches out.

A burning smell from last night's dream. The morning is stuck in a calcium-deficient yawn of a mandible. A finger lets go of faith. A complicated emotion fans out. A blue fly bends down into the pit of a bottle inside the trash can of repentance.

I dream of a one stringed violin. The past stores up a fishy smell. The sudden death image of a bird in flight. Hundreds of terracotta masks drop. The electric fan is addicted to the wind. An old thought is remade by a set of false teeth.

Swimming inside an intestine, a man drowning in words chase after the phrase: "Savage homes." A crippled child from the Central region selling lottery tickets says morosely: "Mrs. Huyen goes up the Tranverse pass on a Mink motorcycle sitting behind a driver with artificial hands." Beer bottles snap their caps and scream excitedly; 1,2,3... go. Idiocy ferments and foams.

Growing from the asshole a herd of traditional domestic animals, vines with soft thorns, climbing on a metal fence of a viscous city with a million inhabitants afflicted with night blindness. A history of shadows with no faith in words. A damp poet makes poetry with images.

A morning exercise with six breaths for one movement. On a bed Without Character, a light metal ring left behind by a little Chinese circus girl.

Shimmering satellite disks sending and receiving signals. From an empty bottle. From an old book. From a rotten tooth. From prayer beads. From a curse. A string of monosyllabic news tumbles from the vocabulary of run-on sentences.

II

A cat catches an elephant and puts him inside a bamboo basket. Neither sadness nor happiness exist. An awakened feeling of indigestion towards a death before a chance for a haircut. Water leaks from the sense to the root of a hair of a stuffed animal standing in the Straw Warrior Square.

Night with the blue color of the weather turning into Summer. A fading woman, the seasoned face of a tropical fish having had intercourse with a 110-volt light gives birth to a dance/theater/underwater palace tune causing a funhouse effect to retarded children.

*Nguyen
Quoc
Chanh*

Two listless eyes behind an urn. Incense sticks jostling each other to play the fog game. Fireflies on a dry branch sprinkle flames on dead leaves. A snail meets disaster on the North-South rail line. The tropics scoop out a deep cave. A fistful of mildew countenances a Coke logo.

Inside a dirty shoe, the toes breathe with difficulty. The rhythmic gas of carbon dioxide from the past smothers. A book opens, words decompose. An attentive look yields no meanings. Inside a thought: a short woman, continuously shaking bright colored rings.

In the year 2544 of the Buddhist calendar, two lizards intertwine on the stomach of the Goddess of Mercy. A kid plays with insect noises made by an organ. My child is afraid her teeth are yellowing. I gargle three times a day with Listerine. Rent is going up.

The man who collects human bones says: "A Black person cannot become more black by humping up. A White person cannot become more white by arching his back. A Yellow person cannot become more yellow by doubling over. A Red person cannot become more red by going under."

A painting renounces colors on its own but the eye at the museum still retains them. A dog from a poor household barks into the daydream of white spots on the back of a cat inside an empty house. The Blue King points his ass upwards and with his hands together dreams of cannons and cars. Female Storm 7 finishes first at Phu Tho racecourse. Huynh Phan Anh loses forever one third of a blue bill.

III

With the eyes closed every sound is white. Last night's dream hasn't escaped from the smell of the dirty shoe. In the valley a herder raises his artificial leg to jab into the past.

War of the genitals is replaced by a synthesized elastic. Music without windows. On the festival of death, women are inflated by bombs into enormous wombs, the sources of violent bloodlines.

A land of museums holds the deformed and the strangely alive. The crawling reptilian strength of a damp culture. And the homosexuals like to tattoo onto the regenerative organs images of bugs and venomous creatures.

Nightly news of a low pressure system, and flood, overflow the TV stations. A belief from the river's source shatters dykes packed with pasty earth lumpy inside many heads nodding off to sleep. The ancestors are underwater. Faith and filial piety wait for emergency food. The ghosts are demanding Miliket instant noodles. The kinds of death not found in dictionaries, and life shits and pisses on concepts.

IV

Drowsy eyes waiting for sleep. There is a man hanging from the roof. A death with the beauty of a small waterfall pouring down a jagged peak. A comedy is performed by an old monkey. His image has been printed on postcards to sell to tourists.

Death has no gender. The entire body is bound with musical strings. Testimonies are taped all over the hallway. A few words clump their heads together, ancient characters hobnobbing with complicated constructions erected by absent minded individuals. The grammar of those who believe that, after a night's sleep, they will wake up mute.

Between the green and red signals, the streets coagulate. At the intersection of Great Vietnam, a project gives its death notice. Next to a pile of broken bricks: garbage, animal carcasses and strewn humanity.

A horn shrieks. The crowd surges, screaming: "Kill! Kill! Kill!" A saxophone soloist suffers a stroke in the middle of Castaways. The stage turns 180 degrees. The MC smiles, apologizes for the technical glitch. A jazz singer sings Spring On The Steps, ass swaying, breasts heaving.

The reason for the calamity is determined by the sharp nose of a rabid dog.

PHAN NHUEN HAO

PHAN NHIEN HAO was born in 1970 in Kontum. He immigrated to the US in 1991 and now lives in San Jose, California. He is the author of the collection *PARADISE OF PAPER BELLS* (1998). English translations of his poems have been published in the journals *THE LITERARY REVIEW* and *FILLING STATION*, and in “*VIETNAM INSIDE OUT: DIALOGUES*” (St. Martin’s Press 2001), and on the website www.vietnamesepoetry.com

NIGHT FREEDOM

Geckos are frolicking in a yellow puddle
the street lamp an awakened eye
the night has buried deeply
the tedious hammering sounds of daily life
from the silence of the womb
a child is born
and the insane fellow will begin to bellow
about life floating through dangers
and humanity’s fickleness
alienated from its five fingers
then fly upward during a blessed hour
upward
the yellow moon a ripe guava
the anguishing fruit of freedom of this ebony night
will be seeded tomorrow in the East.

*Phan
Nhien
Hao*

34
35

NIGHT'S DAWN

Those are the invited secrets
in the middle of the night towards dawn
you tap the face of the clock with a hammer
the ceiling fan rotates beneath the moon
breathing in the smells of the city the way it was

There is another way to step out of
the blinding roars
of the poisonous night
but you rejected it
the ceiling fan and the flowers shed their petals
dawn repeats:
homicide
and a child eaten by dogs

There is another way to stop
halfway between two asphyxiations
but still you swim towards the sea
towards the secrets of the kelp.

NIGHT, FISH AND CHARLIE PARKER

Night negotiating a plastic spoon
on a table littered with fish bones
all the illusions have been picked clean
Charlie Parker, a piece of bread not yet moldy
a black ocean and black notes
a few million years, a few small changes
at the bend in the road on the horizon
grows a strong type of tree
the black cat is in labor
gives birth to a few blue eggs.

NIGHT IN THE SOUTH

Phan
Nhien
Hao _____

36
37

A ringing phone on the carpet
a child is calling from the womb
night in the South
women open their doors to flirt
O spittle
the kind of germs belonging to wicked souls
returning to a cultured city
only to see ducks and chickens pecking on graves

shards of stars
encrusted in the deep dark horizon
the blue ocean and the monkish jellyfish
slackers are lining up
to buy cups of ice cream and a dripping night in the South
I walk on my hands
I drive 70 miles on the side of a mountain
the precipice is below
O the women, the jellyfish and the rosy cheeks
standing on the sidewalk with legs festively spread
all I have is jazz jazz jazz
and lots of gasoline in my bloody abyss.

LIKE THE FIRST TIME

Like the first time I walked down the subway in New York
filthy and very fast
the train like a bullet shooting forward
from the barrel of busyness
a bright looking young man stood near the stairs singing:
“you are a small snake
curled around my neck
like green pearls from the sea

please don't kill me with your whispered poison”
I smiled and threw money into the paper cup,
the truth is I despise
everything having to do with snakes

Like the first time I was swallowed whole by my clothes
a serious suit worn for an interview
on the 48th floor of an ugly log-like building
in downtown Los Angeles
standing in the elevator I saw that I resembled a matchstick
struck against each day's dampness
in the process of making a living
I pushed the door open, walked in and saw
a heavy chested and large eyed secretary
and a brown coffee cup smeared with red lipstick
I said: “Ma'am, I am here to meet Jesus.”

Phan
Nhien
Hao

38
39

Like the first time I walked into a laundromat
to bleach out the lies
I ironed out sorrows and aromatized
the arrangements of fate and luck
faith in God can also be broadcast on TV
like a chase on the freeway
“breaking news,” the announcer said,
“in the end the police had to shoot him
because of the danger he presented to others.”

AFTER SEVEN DAYS AT A HOTEL WITH T

I slept for seven days at a hotel with T
When I woke up I was a different person
I wanted to make money and I wanted to be a male bird
I wanted T to dive deep into my gullet
but she only swam back and forth like a fish
inside my mouth vault full of saliva

When I lay on T's body I thought I was paddling
a boat on sand
ELA NAVE VA
the sun was burning and our feet were buried
among worn out symbols
Ah, the sun is only a red stub
dying

Next to this woman I knew about hidden destruction
Like a person drinking endless cheap liquor
or an exhausted ropewalker who cannot sit down
normally I just cut the rope

There are too many things I cannot explain
the world is too small and conflicts are too great
I live alone near Hollywood
a nameless person among the faceless
I fight time and boredom with bouts of lovemaking

After seven days I walked out of the hotel with T
a bird in the sky suddenly grew tired
and dropped on my head like a rotten fruit
T said: it's nothing, only a case of mistaken identity
we need to go eat
The End.

Phan
Nhien
Hao

40
41

TRIVIAL DETAILS

Inside an old car a heart sat behind the wheel
To circulate along the blood avenues
Where battles and a chaotic retreat occurred
In which my father was killed

I grazed her breasts and was wondering why she did not smile
It was what I had waited for all night inside a hut lit by a lantern
Her teeth resembled the keyboard of an unplugged organ

As a carpenter Christ should have made himself a coffin beforehand
Maybe that's only a trivial detail
But we live in a practical world and trivial details are often what generate beliefs

How to jump from the stove to the pan and back without tripping
My face is a doorknob
If you turn and enter, behind is a void I have to stock with stuff to convert into a warehouse before sudden dusk

Wolves are sharing the corpse of a crow and hurling blood at the sky
There are fixed values and unnecessary rituals carried out because of instinctual fear

“Ah, in the end He has come,” the secretary says, bowing to the God of miserable fates, then throws his ink pen at the gold fish inside the glass tank

That tiny world soon has the color of the sea
By doing so he becomes a creator

I watch a film with a telescope and imagine that I am from another planet
Who has abandoned his own kind a long time ago

A fat man kneels next to a woman who has just died
Says to take some of my flesh with you
Which you will need, when your own flesh has rotted
That is a dream I often see in my evening sleep

When bored and with some money I will travel
To a country where everything is coincidental
Man is born to be satisfied with waiting
Where I was born to wait for myself

The door slams with the sound of a vague collision from the other bank of the river where fishermen are tapping their boats to chase fish into nets.

*Phan
Nhien
Hao*

INSIDE SUBMARINES

We live inside odd-shaped submarines
chasing after secrets and the darkness of the ocean
on a voyage toward plastic horizons
where vague connections can never be reached
and hopes are not deployed
before the storm arrives and the alarm command starts
to rouse the last illusions to stand up and put life jackets on
looking to each other for help

Once I was at the equator
trying to slice the earth in half along the dotted line
but someone held my hand and said:
“If you do that, friend, water will fall into the void,
and then our submarine
won’t have any place to dive.”

AUTUMN SONG

Like an inverted hat in sunlight and the uselessness of a misplaced article
I realize I don’t even resemble myself in old photographs
In newer photographs I am a color reproduction of an outdoor concert without listeners
Next to kinsmen of a different faith
That was a cloudy day and the faces were retained by flash light
I walked slowly away from the looks

Autumn is like an old immigrant in old clothes
Forlorn and complaining about changes
I am not garrulous, it’s just that I can’t keep a secret
The hopelessness of unions makes me want to hear
Sounds of leaves falling on a chest
Of a man lying under a tree
With a hand grenade inside his pants pocket

Bread made of buckwheat mixed with some garlic
I don’t like tossing food to pigeons in a plaza
They do nothing but peck and copulate
How did aristocrats make love in the past, like pigeons?
Books describe most of them as degenerates
Did they pluck feathers from birds and point at the moon?
If they raped they had to waste a lot of time undressing
People say that my country has been constantly raped!

Phan
Nhien
Hao

44
45

As a child I spat into the palm of a blind beggar
What should I do now in autumn?

IN THE SILICON VALLEY

There are climates that can wear out shoes like acid
The view out the window is always cut by rain and sunlight, and fuzzy calculations on a computer
I live in a valley where people will saw their own leg to sell to buy a house
All the sublimeness of language has died in a jar breeding an artificial fetus
There are many such artificial children in the Silicon Valley. They wear plastic name tags and colorful ties

It's not at all difficult to create an impression
Mix arsenic with wine to drink with dragon meat. Look at the sky while stuffing a hand into your pants pocket to find a morsel of bread without breaking it. Lick your own sole then stand straight up to greet a crowd attending a funeral. In the end everything needs to happen exactly according to the daily schedule

Thule is a remote settlement in the Northwest of Greenland only 450 miles from the top of the world
I want to go there and attempt a journey on dogsled
In this valley even flies can't conceive
Within ten years all the mountains in this place will be upside down triangles
The moon will be pulled to earth by a giant cable
This peninsula will be pushed out to sea by an earthquake then reattached with super glue

At night a train passes ringing a bell and a barrier is lowered
These are the last sounds of a day in a heaven made of plastic
Before dejection melts with the burning smell of a car collision.

*Phan
Nhien
Hao*

46
47

Editor's Note: All Phan Nhien Hao poems, except "Like The First Time," were first published in THIEN DUONG CHUONG GIAY (Garden Grove: Tan Thu, 1998). "Like The First Time" was first published in THO, (Fall 1999).

VAN CAM HAI

VAN CAM HAI was born in 1972 in Hue, where he still lives. A writer for HUE TELEVISION, he is the author of the collection *MAN WHO TENDS THE WAVES* (1995). English versions of his poems have been published in the journals *THE LITERARY REVIEW*, *TINFISH* and in “*VIETNAM INSIDE OUT: DIALOGUES*” (St. Martin’s Press 2001), and on the website www.vietnamesepoetry.com

DEATH AND SISTER

Evenings where the dew bulges breasts
a fervent lulling prayer from a silent mouth
has strangled my sister
while she was repenting
life is conceived from death
tears swim and dive like honeysucking bees
punctured
a statue of christ shatters and returns to the earthly void
to let my sister bend over and carry a smile piggyback
to a serene place.

REMEMBERING THE TIME WHEN MEN APPEARED AS GHOSTS

On the edge of the Pacific we rub against each other
the sandy hills are like thousands of buttocks awakened to dance
the tide rising and ebbing are stupefying a billion bodies
death is lighting a wedding candle
to walk again behind the shadows of children
and it calls to the ghosts
resuscitating a life cycle blooming every twenty centuries
sit right here and be calm in this dark house your armpits
body hairs are chasing the breast species
the lit realm
is running pell mell crisscrossing all the beds
the white blanket, the yellow blanket, the black and the red blankets
cannot cover this thirst
the fantasies of tongues
You and I fumbling to clean up this final mess.

SPATIAL RECOGNITION

The clouds are menstruating in the sky far from
the blue arch of the underpants
yet the feet of the mountains and the rivers lurk
in the evening when bullets become drops of blood
falling and illuminating your home
raindrops tumbling down your rib like a spiraling groove
 sucking in the gun barrel
suddenly as I was walking through the village
my enthusiasm asphyxiated by Mother's bamboo basket
an embryo crawled out bawling peace
the clouds are busy laundering the storm
inside the bathtub the earth is still menstruating
a bullet sits waiting
to fall on whose home

*Van
Cam
Hai*

52
53

THE RIVERS HAVE NOT ONLY ME

Vietnamese rivers are often contemplative
cloud levels of memories
slurp the sad grass a mouthful of blue river
on the body convulsed with laughter bomb craters reflect back at the sun
from high above a tongue wanders
her language is a tireless light spread evenly, in spite of the sleepwalking rain,
the roof of a church, a pier, a dry log like death leaning against your porch
my pain does not have a flowering or fruit-bearing season
night barks at a face with countless pimples
a rose holds a gun
my heart
a flame-blowing tube
a time when words fall asleep drunk next to the wood-burning stove
a hand spits out a well-chewed death expression
my brother's previous life
a blind tv
still I watch till the end of the card game
a cigarette burns a naked body
a car collapses on its knees having won the eternity prize
even if someone does howl a dirge tomorrow
O my scent don't you borrow from a deficit
To the rivers is added a little sister's waist
filled with the self-confidence to seduce the map of the world.

A MORNING PURPOSELY LAZY

My house forgets to scrub the midday hours
rain sometimes sews prayers through the mosquito netting
a dim hole
chases tinkling
you still wear an illusion you a person lining a dream
take it all off to go on the lush streets the palm of a hand
a self-pitying foetus
grass rushes into the night cage
a switch chews making hissing sounds
punctuation dissolves my life
rock toss sing and play music
the furniture emits sex voluntarily
the entire wedding the giraffe sings you a scorching song a propositioning phone call
pours down a rock cliff a trill of blue veins
a nuclear bomb moves a conference
I don't hear a hawk seduces authority
I hear myself in the morning fragrant a ladle of water
a prehistoric man limps and hums to prevent a drought
your heart is still a sidewalk for me to stroll

*Van
Cam
Hai*

ETERNAL

Alien with night
the eye of the poinciana dances
slimy
hairy tail of a cow swinging praying for a bright star
sweeping the street noisily the primordial smell aches
crime jungle
wild deer lunge a blue streak
idol
beautiful a corpse encrusted with sand from the next life
intelligent her face obscure a rice paddy made of glass
a long musical instrument hills and mountains pressing confused notes
your and my family sing at will, each melody making us feel as whole as a rice grain
in front of a house of odd geometry
Plato ogling a cathedral to mother's milk
at that moment a giant dust cloud
the black bronze face of suicide
the outer ear hovering the neuron knot eager at the root of a hair
a big city spittle flooding an artery
overflowing a blood pocket embarking on a train to all directions
smuggling a poem burying a ghost fallen on its side inside the seventh sense
love market
still new

only me tottering
a hierarchical smile
the carriage driver
ambling a horse kicks

ACADEMIC GARDEN

Colliding with libraries
the fort of Athens is stranded on a draft manuscript
the vast academic garden a copy Judas's tongue bends a computer finger
against philosophy pain intermingles with man
S.O.S. about me
poetry tastes artillery
a bowl of poison reminds the rooster to crow loudly
strums the mourning cloth
the waste land dreams
peasants overflow vegetation
leisurely drive breakfast to assist the dawn
village philosophy
does not copy anyone's harvest season

Van
Cam
Hai

56
57

JANUARY 20TH

A string plucked
hastily carries a love duet
I become my shadow's shadow
a dreamt night does not drink sweetly from a cup of wine
because the thousand-year-old figure has been parted
to guard time with a broken vigil
the one-hundred-and-first egg, the married couple forget to hatch a new legend
continuing to step from a chest, the Daily Tear River pokes its body into the sea
countless mosquitoes cling white to the shore of the eye, they crystalize in the deeps
a sky without needs for a hat
a sky without needs for an appendix
a sky bluer than your spinal column in touch with two realms
a heart with a mythical length
a labor strike
a selling of one's body without interest
a civilization
premonitions

FLOWER TEMPLE

unripe description
untamed news
a meteoric word destroys the ozone layer
a thin petal blossoms a parachute a flare
spring wears a warm scarf
tolerance
on the river a sprawled derrick transforms
summer white bamboo shoot thighs
curfew
the handkerchief drips a mulberry finger
is someone a piggy bank for you to break the saved days
autumn exposes the sun drenched itinerary
step on a shadow advertising a memory item
the humid sounds of cicadas the earlobe acts up
winter
fragrant rice crispies a late transition
scrawny blue
life already ruined you continue to live famously outside sympathies
because of hypersensitivity the earth is daily discounted
unlike you a reciprocal memory
a sole slow dying fate of man

Van
Cam
Hai

58
59

DELUGE

Rain strangles the veranda
you are infected white the flow of night is level
I harried
shrunken the kitchen
a browbeating chest fries the air
a few steps though not colorful, you sidle through the door: 5 limes/5 fire fingers
a rain alley slow to answer
the head of the storm surges forward searching for a prey
an urban nest
street intersections spill out on strike
the poet stretches
wears each phrase of loose fitting narrative
from the peak saliva and blood are jealous of each other
the calm hem of your dress the neighbors climb up to rebuild a leaky fantasy
paralyzed
you do not look at the sky through a rare crack my wound
the street looks askance and knits
a scarf turns out the light
the prying day leaves this life
clueless
a laughing round

*Van
Cam
Hai*

*60
63*

Tinfish

Susan M. Schultz 47-728 Hui Kelu Street #9, Kāne'ohe, HI 96744, schultz@hawaii.rr.com 0-9712198-3-4

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editor

address

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