

NGUYEN QUOC CHANH

Translated from the Vietnamese by Linh Dinh

Poems

Chopping Down Trees to Plant Humans

Punished, a student must fill two sheets: I won't stir.
Punished, a student must slap himself: 56 times.
Punished, a student is forbidden to fart: for a month.
Punished, a student is banned from bleeding: during her period.
Punished, a student must drink salt water: for being rude during morality class.
Punished, a student must swallow his report card: grades below average.
Punished, a student must sit in the toilet and sing the national anthem: for buckling his knees during the national anthem.
Punished, a student must yank a thousand itchy hairs from the Principal's head:
for scratching his head, yawning and not being able to distinguish between dinosaurs and reptiles.
Punished, a student must smear soot on his classmate's forehead: for not helping his friend keep quiet.
Punished, a student must suck an eraser during history class: for not remembering all 800 names of our heroes.
Punished, a student must shut his eyes for a week for not memorizing the poem:
Tonight Uncle Ho Doesn't Sleep.

12 years later there's a student who goes limp down there.
12 years later there's a student with his left cheek puffier than his right.
12 years later there's a student addicted to foul smells.
12 years later there's a student with an ovariectomy.
12 years later there's a student with a broken larynx.
12 years later there's a student who tears every piece of paper he sees.
12 years later there's a student who doesn't dare to shit in a toilet.
12 years later there's a student who yanks at everyone's hair.
12 years later there's a student who routinely picks rice from other people's bowls.
12 years later there's a student who must piss at the sight of a statue.
12 years later there's a student who converts to Islam to look for Saddam's bones.

More than 20 years ago I was a student who could never stand straight.

Now I own an electric pole 25 meters-high although I can't control my bladder.

Disconnected Thoughts

Kids are twigs, schools an animal farm, my son's overstuffed memory a clam shell cracking open, and what's more: life dissolves inside a beautiful shell.

Saigon punctured, a corpse not yet buried, the capital sinks a few inches each day, politics should also be rationed.

Alchemy's parasite is a cluster of fly-infested words waiting for the train at the Temple of Literature station, all the beggars play at praying for another's soul deliverance: the posthumous text pierce readers spilling their guts.

Exhume the rubber band past, restore the gecko color, a trouser bottom ridicules a heel: Thang Long becomes a dirt dragon.

Spring poetry day, undigested, a public stomach, a revival of the field rat aesthetic: soon the day to repay the revolution.

The heritage has no more legs, the itinerant noodle peddling child disappears inside his clacking, the tradition of burying cajuput stakes to raise high rises: clueless aesthetics the offspring of cruelty.

Smart war, converts every form of peace into presumptuousness, the fake dog meat crowd loses an ally: why are there people fearful of peaceful changes?

The beach loses electricity, slick skinned fish with oil spilling into gills, it's impossible to drape Romanticism on sea waves: Gia Long gives a snake a piggy back ride, Ho Chi Minh bites the house chicken.

The cai luong opera boat sinks, a civil war between fleas and cockchafers, North Korea improves the Vietnamese revolution museum's secretions: Ho Chi Minh City should move to Nghe An.

An attacking tactic forces the insolent reading method into the void, inside a garden a hen gains weight, Pham Duy waits for The Nation to Repent and Nhat Linh died more beautifully than a writer should.

Disarray is the fertile fate of the bronze drum intonation, words survive thanks to crossbreeding.

Lofty aesthetics imported from Russia, converts shiftiness into a madam abusing the library.

Now art is a fake 50,000 dong bill, used at the supermarket without detection, words self neuter.

A mountain goat swallows saliva, cloud flows into mouth.

A punished child is made to eat again what he's thrown up, yet at home he waited a long time before telling his mom.

A poet searches a public trash can to approximate a bird species dead with their beaks wide open thanks to some inspired intakes, still he can't stand firm.

A national secret is the feasts derived from the fortunes of poppies, to be human is to be humiliated, to be Vietnamese is to be super humiliated.

The abused child will grow up fully nourished by a hatred of the cradle, his memory infected by a garlic stink.

Language taken hostage, a stick needed to start the morning exercise, the dirtiest word is revolution,

Someone advertises on the Web: I need a sexual partner who's a vanguard in thoughts and actions.

A metaphysical philosopher is a meteor who doesn't cause marshland residents to feel aches and pains, and "intellectual" here is the toilet paper.

Infinity sometimes extends only from thumb to pinkie, the body is eroded.

A tantric buddhist says: the evil inside the pyramid is the cause of 9/11 there's no danger.

A six-year-old kid wants to kill his mom if she doesn't hurry up and buy his teachers presents for the terrifying Teachers' Day.

From a mess of bones just found on a Truong Son mountain trail, a few candies still intact between scorched crotch bones.

If reincarnated Karl Marx will say: Microsoft is the new opium industry.

Behind the lice monument, history spreads out a mess of civil wars, the Vietnamese dictionary hasn't define the phrase escape overseas.

Occasionally even a bed can upset a person, and one's insomnia doesn't equal another's nap.

Coco York Africa makes sleeping pills unnecessary for those who listen to her after midnight.

Pleasure is nabbing images from the imagination of someone swimming against the current, because the river source is the sewer.

To protect himself from the acceleration of the red letter crowd, a poet has changed a bottle into a lover with huge breasts.

Translator's notes

Thang Long, Rising Dragon, is the former name of Hanoi, in use from 1010 until 1788.

Gia Long (1762-1820) was an emperor whose reliance on French advisors lead to France's eventual occupation of Vietnam.

Nghe An is Ho Chi Minh's birthplace.

Vietnam's foremost song composer. He was born in Hanoi in 1921, lived in Saigon from 1951 until 1975, the US from 1975 until 2005, where he returned to Saigon to live. The Nation Repents, a book by France-based Nguyen Gia Kieng, is an in-depth examination of flaws in the Vietnamese character.

Nhat Linh (1905-1963) was a pioneer of Vietnamese fiction. He committed suicide to protest the Ngo Dinh Diem government, the same year that Thich Quang Duc immolated himself.

Three Poems

1.

I'm his daddy--

Although the broad who gave birth to him isn't my wife.

He calls me father--

Although I'm not older than him.

I gave him a name,

And I can withdraw it as I wish.

I gave him a domain,

And I'll chew him out should he approach that spot.

I don't consider him a dog,
So why does he bark when I eat dog meat?

Is he trying to act like a bastard here?
Don't think the glorious era of feudalism is over!

2.

He has one head but four shadows even.
Three fourth of what's in his head is liquid.
He scorns the head but revere the shadows.
He is digusted by solids and crave liquids.
He stores the head in a plastic bag.
He dangle the shadows in his room.
He strikes the head and strokes the shadows.
He's been doing that for thirty years.

The head is all liquid now.
The head is now afraid of the shadows.
The head is all liquid now.
The shadows are his virtual destiny.

3.

He supports the dry corpse's ass with two hands.
He scrubs the feeble body with two hands.
He belabors his prick also with two hands.

But he squeezes that deep-yellow poet's breast with his right hand.

But he rubs that pitch-black prose writer's head with his left hand.
But in front of that redder than red ideologue he folds his arms.
Downing bottles, he recites: Our hands are capable of everything...

Post, Post, but not Post...

Straight on: my face's blank.

Aslant: my face's askew.

Below or above: my face's equally soiled.

Next to a Cambodian: I'm gloriously yellow.

Next to a Westerner: I flatten myself in panic.

Next to a Chinese. I timidly squint.

Previous life: my core was monkey.

This life: my community is ghostly.

Next life: my country is a commune.

Past: I tattooed myself, fought the Chinese.

Now: my granddad hawks tofu.

Past: I flexed myself against the French.

Now: my dad mends shoes on the sidewalk.

A while ago: I risked my life against the Americans.

Now: my wife is anxious to marry an American.

Sometimes I want to forget: O the ones who cry alone!

Sometimes I want to believe: O the ones who cry alone!

Sometimes I want to go mad: O the ones who cry alone!

Contemporary Prick

(To the Supreme Ho, Nong and sundry comrades)

They blather that I fool around to renew my prick. They mock that my wife has left me clearly a lame prick. They mumur that I'm with this and that broad a whorish prick. They rumor that I tussle with the enemy without being arrested likely an undercover prick. They see that I've fucked a skull open so they yell there's a terrorist prick. They sneer that I laugh out loud while outraged surely a psycho prick. They poke that I don't perform (confidence) tricks so they shout he's a humorless prick. They gather tidbits then sneering try to teach me make my prick perform. Prick is not just a word meaning limp or hard, but its contents is also the straight forward secretion of what cannot be indifferent before the obscene counterfeiting of the intellect, arts, politics and morals. Prick morality must be a hard prick after a cunt is aroused. Yet political prick is a limp prick after China threatened to become aroused. Yet artistic prick is an aroused prick in tandem with the aroused public. Yet intellectual prick is a prick swinging its main organ from limpness to arousal. And tomorrow there's yet another aroused demonstration. When the Chinese Communist Party prick is hard the Vietnamese Communist Party prick is limp. Because both parties belong to the same nutsack.

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