

## BREEZES OF CONTAGIOUS DEATH IN NGUYEN HUY THIEP'S "BIGGEST PREY" (1971)

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### The Forest of Ghosts

Years ago an old couple settled in the hamlet. No one knew where they came from. They moved into an isolated cabin near the edge of the woods known as the Forest of Ghosts.

The old man is a hunter by trade. His wife sells game meat to villagers. His hunting skills are almost superhuman. "The old hunter was like the spirit of death of these forests" (Thiep, 11). The other hunters fear him. They are afraid that his relentless killings, his overhunting of the woods, will bring retribution from the spirits of animals killed wastefully. Exchange pacts between hunters and animals, between the world of the living and that of the dead have been upended. The precarious balance of interconnected natural and supernatural relationships in the forests surrounding the village is upset. Chaos, famine and madness ensue.

The old man has hunted game to extinction. The woods are depleted and empty. In the distance villagers hear faint echoes. These may be distant rumblings of combat and war. Strange phenomena take place. Healthy trees suddenly lose their leaves. All is quiet in the forest. Animals have vanished. Unnamed, unknown predators began to roam in the far reaches of the woods, adding to the villagers' sense of ominous threat as they peer fearfully into the margins of the Forest of Ghosts. The old hunter and his wife are nearly starving. Killing game is their only form of sustenance. Every day, he ventures deeper into the forest, obsessively seeking the vanished animals. He disappears for days on end, sleeps in the woods and stalks in silence. He feels he is on the verge of a big kill, perhaps of one of those unknown new predators said to roam the far depths of the forest.

Other villagers who have long resided in these forested valleys fear these invisible crowds of the dead, these "spirit multitudes" (Canetti,

*Crowds and Power*, 1984, 43). They fear the errant souls of animal spirits that roam and haunt the landscape to seek redress for their unjust and violent deaths.

Retribution comes. The tale comes to its violent end.

In this early short story, "The Biggest Prey" (1971), Nguyen Huy Thiep sounds like a storyteller of old. One may be tempted to read this text as an allegory, concerned with war, death and retribution. Instead, I dwell on the potential of Thiep's storytelling techniques to question allegorical readings. This short story is part of a cycle of ten short stories, "Winds of Hua Tat" (first published in 1986). These stories form a mythical chronicle of preternatural, natural and human forces in highland valleys of northwest Vietnam. I examine notions of exchange and hospitality in relation to the figure of the stranger as developed by Georg Simmel. The violence of this alien, relentless hunter threatens the very existence of highland communities through violations of ritual exchange between tutelary spirits and humans. I conclude by revisiting the question of allegory. I ask whether Thiep's chronicle of "folk tales" could in fact open up new pathways of thought in contemporary Vietnamese literature by giving voice to anxiety-producing, destructive thresholds of violence and desire through the foil of legendary events, thus slyly undermining authoritarian political discourse in Vietnam.

### Tales told in fog-bound high valleys

In the prologue the narrator presents these remote highland valleys, and the local hospitality that leads to storytelling and the sharing of oral lore. Did Thiep "transcribe" these stories from the highlands? Not exactly.

Thiep imagines and describes a poetic act rooted in hospitality and sharing. What he shares is not solid truth, nor scientific protocols for recording folk tales and local legends passed down orally. His narrator suggests the creative role of the itinerant writer, who invents, writes, shares and re-invents some of the tales from "Winds of Hua Tat." Thiep writes that some stories in these remote regions are so old they are

half-forgotten. His versions of folk tales and local stories are poetic renditions. He gives us hints about writing and reading or interpreting these stories. Hua Tat, he begins, is located up remote valleys in the highlands of northwest Vietnam. The elevation makes travel difficult. These valleys are continuously blanketed in fog. The mists move in strange shapes over the landscapes, drifting through changing wind patterns. The narrator tells us that this eerie atmosphere permeates all encounters and conversations in Hua Tat. One rarely sees the full contours of what appears nearby. The remote valleys, the strange mists and rains give an otherworldly feel to these high places, and not simply for outsiders. Several stories relate uncanny and ominous occurrences, and fateful encounters in strange weather.

The prologue ends with an elegy. Thiep narrates how inhabitants of Hua Tat tell these tales and to whom. If hosts trust visitors as honest people, they narrate some stories of old for them. Legends and tales are shared with guests – gifts of language, magic and memory – along with dried venison and rice alcohol. The hospitality extends beyond food and shelter. It includes language, in stories, words and songs, to help strangers decipher the land and local mores. Hosts and storytellers act as cultural translators. With these tales they ferry guests across the land, and help them see more clearly the contours of highland communities. But that too is transient. When the serving dishes are empty and all bottles drunk, the contours of the stories are fuzzy like the mist outside – half remembered, partly forgotten, fragmentary and fleeting. “Like the breezes in Hua Tat,” Thiep concludes.

These stories are distant messages. They flutter in the wind, echo briefly and fall silent. But they are now located on the printed page. Who speaks here?

### **The thought from outside: toward an ethics of discomfort**

The prologue locates the remote valleys that shelter the hamlets of Hua Tat. Thiep proposes one version of how stories are shared and re-

told. It is a commentary on the emergence of stories in literature.<sup>1</sup> We are no longer hearing storytellers sharing local “folk tales” or stories of common people, extraordinary events and supernatural deities and forces. We now read these stories – as legends, as tales – written by a contemporary Vietnamese writer struggling with censorship from the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1980s Hanoi.

The Prologue indirectly presents a theory of narrative and literature. Ephemeral and transitory, breeze and mist are two key images (and metaphors) in this cycle of short stories. The narrator encourages us to think of these tales as distant echoes in the breeze, as mists rising and setting over narrow valleys. All is transitory and bound for oblivion. With time a few stories are shared and remain, rewritten and reimagined anew by succeeding generations of storytellers, by modern writers, by hosts in remote highland villages who share local fables and tales over rice alcohol and evening meals.

We witness here the inclusion of fragments of mythical themes, elements of traditional folk tales, and innovative narrative techniques by Nguyen Huy Thiep. Now we can date (1971, 1981, 1986, etc.) the time and place when these stories entered into the public sphere, and moved out of oral storytelling or diary writing and daydreaming. The mute speech<sup>2</sup> of these tales, presented as stories shared by village storytellers in upland valleys echo across the lowlands to reach bewitched readers and the scandalized Communist Party censors and literary establishment of 1980s post-war Vietnam.

The prologue ends with a meditation on historical contingency and transitory lives. Nguyen Huy Thiep undermines socialist realism, and its bland diet of heavy-handed clichés, its morality tales of nationalist fervor, righteous war and the building of a new post-war socialist society. He challenges readers to an ethics of discomfort, of movement, contemplation, awe and study. Intellectual study and a sense of the sublime are essential; they foster surprise and elaboration. Thiep dismisses current Vietnamese society and political culture for its grotesque kitsch, its

greed, hypocrisy, and intellectual laziness. It is stunted literature.

He writes of melancholic narrators who drift afar and return to villages where they grew up (“Run River Run”), of urban dwellers who awkwardly (re)visit the countryside (“Lessons from the Countryside”). Those who stay put experience temporal discontinuities and disorienting changes in daily experience, status and wealth as society undergoes radical and near-instant changes in the post-war reform era of the 1980s and 1990s (“The General Retires”, “There Is No King,” “Crime and Punishment,” etc.).

Contemplation is a corollary of movement and travel. One needs to observe to decipher new customs and ways of life, as Thiep does in new places, through conversations, encounters and the hospitality of tribal highland groups in northwestern mountains beyond Mai Chau, Dien Bien, Lao Cai and Ha Giang.

Contemplation is needed to daydream, write, and be able to see. Writers record a surfeit of details. Thiep is awed by the eerie echoes and mists of upland valleys. These stories originate from echoes carried by the breeze. It matters little if they originate from the pen of Thiep. Drifting mists of memory gifted their place of origin. We can now trace and interpret the replacement of oral tales and fables by short stories published in serial formats in the contemporary Vietnamese press of the post-reform period (from the 1980s on).

Nguyen Huy Thiep does not treat as backward or primitive those remote places where he says the stories originate. He often draws on isolated, mysterious locales in his writing. Yet these highland tribal villagers are coeval with us, readers of Thiep’s written tales. He does not seek primitive purity. This is not a doomed search for noble savages in the writings and observations of ethnographers and local chroniclers. He writes on the basis of reporting or narrating stories, for which he imagines distant and foreign origins. He writes in the Prologue that these stories originate in local tribal lore shared in family gatherings, and with strangers who

pass by on their way to highland markets and deeper reaches beyond Hua Tat.

Thiep self-consciously writes literature and often addresses readers playfully in his texts in ways reminiscent of “post-modern” writers such as Calvino, Handke, or Kundera. Literature is what he writes with this cycle of short stories, published in modern media outlets in an authoritarian communist state. Yet he maintains and stresses the link with storytelling, the sharing and disseminating of stories that form the spine of local mythologies. For Thiep these fables and tales originated in conversation, in traditional oratory and song, in epic poetry recited and old stories told again. He emphasizes the coeval nature of this exchange: words and stories, songs and poetry are shared over food and drink, as part of hospitality in remote highland villages. Listening is how these stories emerged. We read and listen to the mute speech of Thiep’s short stories as he sends us false directions through mists of time and literature.<sup>3</sup>

### **Messengers of death**

The old hunter and his wife live near the edge of the woods in an isolated area called the Forest of Ghosts. There is something uncanny in the old man’s hunting prowess. He is an extremely skillful hunter. He is also an obsessive and cruel killer. Unlike animal predators, he kills indiscriminately. “Some say they once saw him kill a peacock in full display. (...) Only love could get it to display its tail feathers this way. But – “boom” – the gun shook in his hands and a red tongue of fire shot out.” (Thiep, 12). The other hunters are jealous of his skill but fear his reckless killings. They fear retribution for the excesses of death he spreads everywhere. He creates spaces of death in his path.

His wife is silent. No one has heard her voice. She is not a ghost. She is alive, and up and about in the village and the woods, but without language. She is outside the social world of women in the village. Villagers keep their distance, and do not extend hospitality networks to the old couple, who remain nameless and mysterious. At the market the old woman does not

chat. She shares no gossip and no news. She does not participate in social life and is prevented from doing so by the fear of villagers. Her distant muteness renders her uncanny and threatening. Her features and those of her husband are monstrous and animalistic. They show signs of strangeness well-known to folk tales and myth.<sup>4</sup>

These strangers are different from the poor and strangers of Georg Simmel. For Simmel, strangers are both near and distant, simultaneously inside and outside the group. Their membership in the group is paradoxical. They are members of the group by virtue of their collective identification as strangers. This is not fully "identity": others identify you, or with you, or against you, *qua* stranger. By the same token, these collective others are strangers to you. The dual articulation of inside and outside is superseded by more complex social forms based on mutual recognition of difference and wider possibilities for interaction among groups in larger settings, such as in schools, markets and temples.

The old hunter and his wife are both inside and outside the village. As strangers, they appeared in the village unannounced. Villagers do not know where the old couple came from, and fear them. They live in the far margins of the village, near the Forest of Ghosts. They live by graves of the dead at forest edge, among rotting carcasses of their kills tossed behind the cabin.

Yet they exacerbate some of the features of Simmel's strangers, and complicate his analysis of the position of traders as strangers. The old couple are strangers who bring in radical, irreducible difference into public view. They differentiate themselves from the community by daily association with killing and violent death, and their relentless hunting. Contagious, violent death rubbed off on them, and now threatens to contaminate others by contact. They become taboo. From the perspective of other villagers, the dead spirits of animals killed by the old man risk coming back to harm the hunter and his wife, and by association, other villagers. Being haunted here means haunting by the death

power of souls of all the animals he killed. Souls of animals are potentially the reincarnated souls of humans, as all sentient beings participate equally in the cosmos. The hunter and his wife break multiple taboos at once. His reckless killing upset rules of social exchange and relationships with the forest. He does not simply hunt, he depopulates. His relentless hunts killed and scared off forest animals. The woods are silent. Other calamities flow in his wake. The forest is empty. The animals are all gone. Starvation hangs over the village.

Eventually, in a last fit of paroxysmic violence the old hunter aims his killing inward. Compulsion finds new targets closer to home. The margins of the forest of ghosts colonize the village in uncanny ways, by means of odors of death.<sup>5</sup>

The mounds of rotting carrion behind the cabin, the stench of dead animals over this disturbing place are now brought uncomfortably close to social life. Though in a liminal threshold position, the uncanny death-bound world of the old hunter contaminates and undermines social relations in the village – based on hospitality and reciprocal exchange – by foregrounding the haunting hold of violent death over life.

One explanation is that contagious deaths rubbed off on the old hunter and his wife. Their physical associations with death, with blood, viscera, and the stench of carrion burst through the threshold zone they inhabit between the village and the Forest of Ghosts. The stench from rotting carcasses reeks across from the forest margins toward the village. The old hunter and his wife are scavengers, they are animals of death. The savage, animalistic "black blood" of hunters flows in their veins.<sup>6</sup>

Are they messengers of death? Have they become death because of their ceaseless killings? Hunting is the old man's trade. We do not know if he enjoys it. But he is ruthlessly efficient at it. He cannot restrain his killing instinct. His skill with the hunting gun inspires fear. His shooting accuracy seems beyond human capacities and almost magical: "It was as if his flint rifle had

eyes. Every time he raised his rifle, birds or forest game would fall dead” (Thiep, 11).

Yet hunting is also how the old couple eat and survive. No kills means nothing to eat. They are not farmers. One imagines that in a realist story we would read more about the old hunter and his wife’s trade in game meat. There are other hunters in this highland village. We do not get explanations and context for the hunting economy of the village.

### **Contagious death, rebounding violence and retribution**

“Large predators” disturbed the forest. The trees lost all their leaves. This is a dystopian poetic image. We imagine the relentless fear of blind violence from the great predators out there in the far reaches of the forest. These phenomena can be read in various ways, including as wartime devastation, the burning chaos of bombing and artillery, and defoliation by means of Agent Orange spraying.

This results in the extinction of all life. Death, first understood as the old man’s killing to nourish his family, proliferated over time to inflict destruction on a broad scale. His relentless killing upset the balance between animals and the guardian spirits of the forest. Local guardian spirits – such as *Then*, the tutelary spirit of the forest – are said to seek retribution from humans who upset balanced relationships with the supernatural and the forest, source of all life. The distant threat of violence, a spectral ominous presence compounds the extinction of game in the Forest of Ghosts. Rebounding violence permeates the forest and creeps into the village. Death overflows and seeps into villagers’ minds.

The ghostly presence of the silent old crone at the market and in the village freezes social relations. Markets are lively places of banter, gossip, and exchange. Here, the old woman sells game meat in silence. The villagers keep their distance from the old couple and keep them isolated from social life. Exchanges are reduced to impersonal interaction, minimal contact focused on the dead meat bought and sold. Fur-

tive, fearful exchanges with the old crone point to something (from) beyond, the violent deaths of forest game.

The violent imbalance imposed by the old hunter’s gunshots leads to chaos and threatens the survival of the community. Because of the old hunter’s violations, the forest is now barren. Its emptiness is threatening and uncanny. All leaves have fallen, unnamed predators roam the woods, and the stench of carrion from killed game disrupts the boundaries between life and death. Rotting death comes into view. Odors cannot be turned off or ignored. The violence of the killings is brought home at the moment of starvation and threats of collective retribution. These anxious thoughts were previously shut out of mind, ignored by both the old crone selling forest meat and silent buyers exchanging nods over dead game.

An allegorical reading could frame this story as a reflection on the madness and terrifying consequences of mindless killing, and violated rules of hospitality and ritual exchange. The predators in the depths of the woods could be interpreted as allegorical figures of soldiers and distant war. I have foregrounded a less narrow and predictable reading of Thiep’s early text. Granted, he writes about social and supernatural disruptions from abusive violence. But the foil of “folk tales” opens up broader interpretive possibilities, while allegory as a mode of symbolizing tends to promote compulsory readings of events and characters.<sup>7</sup>

Folk tales are quick and concise. They engage with mysterious places, monstrous beings, and violent occurrences by disrupting time and space. They do not psychologize. They open up magical possibilities in the midst of humdrum lives upended by inexplicable events and strange beings.<sup>8</sup> “Folk tales” read in print indirectly suggest the frailties of human memory, the ambiguous possibilities of the hospitality of storytellers, and the work of writing. In this cycle of short stories, inaugurated by “The Biggest Prey” (an early text followed by a ten-year silent gap), Thiep began to dislodge clichés of political propaganda passed off as literature. His canny

reworking of mythological themes and Vietnamese historical figures opened up narrative possibilities in Vietnamese literary landscapes stunted by political censorship and sloganeering. This “estrangement effect” is not heavy-handed. It does not dictate a unitary, politically driven reading. Instead Thiep’s stories invite multiple, possibly unsettling interpretations, and point to no final answers – but to distant echoes of songs and tales rippling in the breeze and upland mists. One notes that Thiep’s writings never engage directly with war. Brutal combat and war deaths remain in the distance and mysterious. They are only known anxiously through after-effects that undermine notions of a glorious, sacred war of national resistance. He takes oblique side paths through highland valleys, ghostly mist-covered forests and deserted ferry crossings. He renders “typical” Vietnamese villages and towns deeply unfamiliar and strange. Echoes of storytellers of old resonate in his short stories, though in ways familiar to modernist narrative. In these “folk tales” time and place are fragmented and punctuated by death. Morality and social norms are undermined by violence – unredeemed brutality that tears through social exchange, hospitality and literary clichés of socialist realism.

This early short story by Thiep comes to a violent end. With the extinction of animal life in the forest, the old man’s compulsive drive for the hunt goes askew. Unmoored, adrift in violent and extinct emptiness, he turns his gun on his wife and on himself. He shoots and kills her. In his desperate search for one last prey, he mistook her for a large peacock. His death is mysterious. He may have killed himself. Perhaps he was shot by a villager taking revenge. Days later his crumpled body is found in the Forest of Ghosts. Their gruesome, lonely deaths suggest that they have become forest ghosts, and now haunt the village margins. He had used his wife’s corpse as bait at the forest edge. “He wanted to hunt the biggest prey of his life. (...) But Then [the guardian spirit of the forest] punished the old man. No animal came to him. Only death.” (14)

## Notes

I am using the edition of “Winds of Hua Tat” from Nguyen Huy Thiep, *Khong co vua (There Is No King)*; Hanoi: NXB Van Hoa Thong Tin, 2011). Translations from Vietnamese are mine.

1. Jean Starobinski examines how scholarly discourses of mythology displaced fables in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. His point is broader: he analyzes relations between fable, myth, and education and literature. See “Fable et mythologie au XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles” in *Le Remède dans le mal: Critique et légitimation de l’artifice à l’âge des Lumières* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

2. I borrow the term from Jacques Rancière’s reflections on literature in *La parole muette* (Paris: Hachette, 1998) and *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007).

3. Here, and throughout, I am drawing on Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968).

4. In “Qu’est-ce qu’un mythe?”, in *Le Bouc émissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1982), René Girard discusses the monstrous attributes of heroes like Heracles, and persecution and stereotypical accusations against “scapegoat” victims.

5. In this discussion of the uncanny in relation to odors of death, I am referring to James T. Siegel’s “Images and Odors in Javanese Practices Surrounding Death.”

6. See Bertrand Hell, *Sang Noir: Chasse, forêt et mythe de l’homme sauvage en Europe* (Paris: L’œil d’or, 2012), pp. 45 ff.

7. The question of allegory in literature is nearly endless. I rely here on Angus Fletcher’s *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). Walter Benjamin’s chapter “Allegory and Trauerspiel” in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London & New York: Verso, 1998) undermines received notions of allegory by insisting on its contradic-

tory nature (p. 175), a subtle restatement to which I cannot do justice here. I also wish to refer to Fredric Jameson's polemical notion of "national allegory" (in Jameson's "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* (15), 1986).

8. Italo Calvino wrote a brilliant, playful analysis of narrative characteristics of folk tales, and his interest in them. See "Quickness" in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (New York: Vintage, 1993). I am indebted to his analysis of the nimble, disruptive features of storytelling in folk tales.