

## **Two Vietnamese Stories**

**Translated**

**by**

**Quan Manh Ha**

### **Carrion Eaters**

**by**

**Nguyen Cong Hoan**

*Nguyen Cong Hoan (1903-1977) was born in northern Vietnam. After the August Revolution of 1945 against the French, he held various important positions in the North, such as supervisor, editor-in-chief, and chairman of different state organizations. He is a pioneer in Vietnamese literature of critical realism, and his writings, especially short stories, often satirize the corrupt lifestyles and hypocrisies of the ruling class of the semi-feudal, semi-colonial Vietnamese society in the early twentieth century.*

Because Xich had never experienced death before, he had no specific plan for his death. Generally, if a person dies in a city, he would do well to choose his death on a Friday night so that his wife and children might have enough time to publish the obituary in the news. Then on Sunday, the funeral would take place, and elderly people, notables, friends, and relatives would attend the burial ceremony. In the countryside, however, if one dies in an accident, it is smarter to avoid Sundays or holidays so the burial will not be delayed by legal investigation.

As a twist of misfortune and irony, no one ever dies twice and learns the valuable lesson of how and when to die properly. Thus, many people die foolishly. Xich was one such person—he, an uneducated peasant, was such a fool that he inadvertently drowned last Saturday night. His father, Mr. Cuu, had rented from the village a lotus pond located near a bamboo clump. When the lotus season came, he put up a little cottage in the middle of the pond, and he and his son took turns sleeping there to watch out for thieves. That Saturday afternoon, Xich became drunk after a gathering at the village's communal building. When he got home that evening, Mr. Cuu told Xich to take his tobacco water-pipe and pillow with him and leave for the cottage immediately. Xich staggered along, and no one saw him the following morning. About eight o'clock, his body was found floating in the water near the edge of the pond.

Several theories about his death were suggested, but the two that made the most sense were either that he fell into the deep water while clumsily managing his little boat because he was so drunk, or that he rolled into the water when he unconsciously turned his body in his sleep. There was no way he could have committed suicide or been beaten to death by thugs.

Mr. Huong Ly, the village leader, asked Mr. Cuu's neighbors out of curiosity if they had heard any kind of argument between Mr. Cuu and his son the day before. Other village officials paid special attention to the corpse but were unable to find any clue that might indicate a logical cause of Xich's death. Upon hearing the news of Xich's drowning, the villagers rushed to the pond and felt pity for him—he was a nice and kind man—and no one was unmoved by the sight of his corpse in the water.

Mrs. Cuu wailed miserably over her lost son and attempted to jump into the water to embrace his body, but the villagers stopped her. In her grief and confusion, she tore into the village leader for not allowing her to bring her son's body up to the shore.

"I can't stand this any longer. It's breaking my heart," she said, bemoaning her son's death.

"We have to wait for the district coroner to investigate your son's death first. Once we have his official report on this accident, you may do whatever you want to prepare for Xich's funeral. As for now, you'd best not touch the body because we don't want it damaged. They would never let you bury him anyway if you took him to shore and claimed he drowned. His body must remain in the water," a villager said, trying to console her.

"Why wouldn't the coroner let me bury my son?" Mrs. Cuu asked loudly.

"Because he wants to have a doctor perform an autopsy, and that takes time, you know," another villager explained.

Mrs. Cuu understood, then blew her nose and wiped her tears. She sat by the empty coffin under a tree and waited, wanting to bury her son as soon as possible. Her relatives had gone to the district building to file a report on Xich's death early that morning, but no one had yet returned, even though it was not far. One hour, two hours, and three hours had passed; Mrs. Cuu became exhausted and started to lose her patience. She kept walking around, trying not to look at her son's body. Then, she sat on the ground with her head resting on her knees. She waited for the honking sounds that signaled the arrival of the coroner's car. Occasionally, she heard the squeaky sound of a nearby rice mill and thought the coroner finally arrived, but then she sighed. Her hope was crushed.

It was quite hot outside, as if the ground were burning under the roasting sun. Xich's corpse started to decompose. His limbs were curling up and his hair was becoming disheveled like the roots of Japanese water-fern. A breeze ruffled the water, and the waves rubbing his body created noises like flatulence. Xich's body bobbed around in the water. Then suddenly, the body turned upside down and he looked like a barbecued animal—his belly was filled with water, his cheeks and face were bloated, his eyes closed tightly, and his limbs were twisting. His deformed, ghostly appearance was frightening.

The villagers gradually started to avoid the fatal scene; then finally nobody dared come close to the pond. Those passing by who did not know about the corpse covered their faces, closed their mouths, and spat after they passed the pond.

Mr. Cuu stayed home and waited for the officials to carry out the investigation. His anxiety tormented him, but he still had a duty to be courteous to guests and visitors coming over to offer their condolences. He wanted to be left alone so that he could lament the death of his son. He worried about his wife, who was still at the pond, because she might do something crazy, like jump into the water. His regret would never end if there were another death in the family.

Relatives came over and helped prepare for the funeral. Some set up a small altar and placed two white candles on it. Others prepared a shroud for the deceased son and mourning head-bands for children.

Because it was a Sunday, the coroner was not in his office all morning; he had gone dancing and did not return home till three or four o'clock in the morning. His office also was closed that afternoon. Once Mr. Cuu found out about this, he screamed, and Mrs. Cuu collapsed by the bamboo clump and was unconscious for five minutes. The entire village had no choice but to keep waiting.

Relatives left after their work at Mr. Cuu's home was finished and came back the next morning. Friends and neighbors stayed around awaiting the burial, accompanied by sounds of drums and gongs. Mr. Cuu had someone bring his wife home, and the old couple lay on their bed waiting for the coroner. The corpse became even more deformed and bobbed around not too far from the open coffin into which it should be placed. Everything was quiet, and the leaves drooped in the extreme heat.

Yet amid the quiet and sorrow, there was a place full of lively activities. While the deformed corpse disgusted the villagers who were terrified when standing close by, the fish and insects found it appealing. In the water, the fish happily swam back and forth—they swam into his armpits and ears, snapped their jaws, and disappeared swiftly. In the air, flies and bugs landed on the corpse, searching for food. Every now and then, a yellow bamboo leaf suddenly fell into the pond and disturbed their feast; they flew away with a buzzing sound. After a short while, they returned and formed black patches on the gray corpse.

In the afternoon, a nauseating stench began to spread. At the top of the bamboo clump, a crow steadied itself with its claws on a branch and moved its tail feathers to try to keep its balance. Then it looked with keen interest at the floating corpse below. Another crow perched on a different branch, and both uttered low, coarse sounds as if they were calling each other. Then two or three more crows joined them. One crow flipped its wings and landed on the belly of the corpse. Noticing that there was no danger, all of the crows started attacking the dead body. Xich's body remained a feast for the fish, flies, and crows. His limbs were all curled up and his face was distorted, but his ghostly appearance did not scare them away. They seemed to enjoy the flesh of the dead man.

At nine o'clock the next morning, the honking sounds from the coroner's car filled the air. The crows were startled and flew away noisily, as did the bugs and flies, and the fish

hid themselves under rocks. On the bank of the pond the District Official of Legal Affairs finally appeared, escorted by a clerk and a policeman. They talked and spat at the same time. The policeman turned the corpse over with a stick while the other two examined it carefully and jotted down some notes. Mr. Huong Ly, Mr. and Mrs. Cuu, their relatives, and the villagers stood quietly by and swallowed their saliva as they stared at the body. Some signed; some wiped away tears.

After the investigation was complete, the coroner ordered the policeman to send the spectators away. Then he asked Mr. Cuu, "How much money do you earn from this pond, including the fish and the lotus? About five hundred piasters?"

Curious that the coroner's question had nothing to do with his son's death, Mr. Cuu still replied, "Yes, sir."

"How many *maus*\* of land do you have for cultivation?" the coroner asked.

"Twenty-two *maus*, sir," Mr. Cuu responded.

"This is just to let you know that I know about your financial situation. Based on my investigation, you may not bury your son yet because I must send a doctor here to verify a few things," the coroner said as he nodded his head.

"Sir, please have mercy on us," Mr. Cuu trembled and begged.

"Your son was murdered. We need a doctor to perform a thorough autopsy," the coroner shook his head and said.

"Oh! My poor son!" Mrs. Cuu screamed as she covered her face with her hands.

Everyone, except the coroner, was moved by the grief she showed over her drowned son. The coroner represented the law and justice, and even though he was a human being, he acted like an unfeeling, emotionless stone statue, impervious to Mrs. Cuu's grief and Mr. Cuu's begging. There was, however, one thing that could change the coroner's cold-hearted attitude: money.

Noticing that the coroner was contemplatively looking at the rotten drowned corpse, Mr. Cuu sadly proposed, "Sir, it is hot out here. Please come over to my house to rest for a while."

"Sure. It's disgusting here. Look at the dead body's bloated shape and discoloration, and the flies, bugs, fish, and crows keep attacking it. It gets worse under this hot sun. I don't know when you may bury your son because we have to wait for the doctor's report," the coroner said as he raised his hands to chase off the flies and spat.

As he was walking, he told the clerk, "It's a murder, unlike what you read in the initial report."

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\* 1 mau = 3.600 square meters

“I swear in front of my son’s spirit that I am not concealing anything from you. Punish me if I lied to you. Please allow me to bury my son. I’ll show you my eternal gratitude,” Mr. Cuu said softly as he walked closer to the coroner.

The coroner turned his face toward Mr. Cuu and looked at him sympathetically. “How much would you offer to demonstrate your gratitude?” he asked.

“Ten piasters, sir.”

“You should know that the gas alone for my trip here already costs that much,” the coroner laughed.

“Sir, this is a serious murder crime,” the clerk walked up and said to the coroner, who then grimaced and told Mr. Cuu, “Look at your land and estate. You want to bury your son immediately but you’re not offering enough. It should be a hundred piasters, at least.”

“Sir, country folks are naïve. They want to get things done but don’t want to pay,” the clerk said to the coroner.

“Please tell the coroner that I cannot afford a hundred piasters. Would he accept fifty?” Mr. Cuu frowned and whispered to the clerk.

The clerk glared and waved his hand, a clear demonstration of his disapproval. “Not a chance. How could that be possible?” he told Mr. Cuu. Then, he whispered to Mr. Cuu, “Hey, I can guarantee you I can persuade the coroner to accept your offer. How about eighty piasters for him and ten for me?”

“At the moment, I don’t have that much money,” Mr. Cuu replied softly.

“Don’t worry. You can make a promise first and pay later. I will help you. You can’t leave your son in the water like that forever.”

Mr. Cuu became quiet and sighed. He turned back and saw his wife’s suffering. He could no longer control his tears. Then he and the clerk agreed to settle for a total of seventy piasters. An hour later, the flies, bugs, crows, and fish lost their feast because the coroner deprived them of it.

1938

## A Poor Family

by

To Hoai

*To Hoai (1920-2014) was born in Hanoi and was well-versed in several genres. He started his writing career after the August Revolution of 1945 against the French. His writing style is clear, simple, and oftentimes humorous and witty. To Hoai's inspiration primarily comes from his close observation of life. The settings of his fiction are either suburban Hanoi or the mountainous northwest. He earned several prestigious awards by the Vietnamese Literature Association, and many of his stories are widely taught in Vietnamese high schools.*

It had become a habit for the Duyens to quarrel over trivial matters. Whenever they had an itch in their mouth,<sup>†</sup> they fought. Their neighbors got so sick of the Duyens' regular overheated arguments that they learned to eventually ignore them. On this particular day, as usual, Mr. and Mrs. Duyen were fighting again, loudly, over nothing. Damn it, here was how it started ....

Mr. Duyen lay down inside with his feet against a house pillar and recited a few lines from the epic poem, *The Tale of Kieu*: "A hundred years in this life span on earth / talent and destiny are bound to feud." While he was reciting these lines with great vigor, the pillar began to shake along with the movement of his feet. Mrs. Duyen was mending a torn shirt on the front porch, and it was unclear why she suddenly wanted to look for Gai, her oldest daughter. She didn't see Gai around, so she called, "Gai!" There was no response, so she called again loudly, "Damn you, your father, mother cursing, where are you?" When there was still no response, she shouted, "Gai! Where are you? Have you drowned in a pond somewhere?"

Her shouts ruined Mr. Duyen's concentration. He said irritably, "What a fuss you are making! Shut up!"

His wife did not shut up but replied, "You have no right to forbid me to call our daughter." Then, she complained, "You're good for nothing. Always lying down and singing." Her complaint angered him; she sardonically had implied that he was worthless because he didn't work today. Oh, Gosh! How ungrateful she was! He toiled all year round, and surely he could enjoy some leisure on a day like today when there was no work for him to do. He then scolded her for her impertinence: "Let me tell you, crippled woman, that if I stopped working for about ten days, this whole family would starve to death! Stop being ...." He didn't know how to finish his sentence, so he remained quiet. "The more you work, the

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<sup>†</sup> They raised their voices whenever they felt like it, for no particular reason.

more you eat. I am crippled but I do work. Here, feel your own nape of the neck,”<sup>‡</sup> Mrs. Duyen said.

They had touched a sensitive topic indirectly. Mrs. Duyen’s right leg, since her birth, had been handicapped; she couldn’t walk straight and she hobbled like a crippled duck. Her disability and poor family background meant that she couldn’t find a husband until she was thirty. Mr. Duyen was neither a local, nor was he born into a dignified family—he came to the village as a hired laborer and he had a hump on his back. He couldn’t walk straight, either, and his hump looked like a wine gourd. When they first met, they decided to marry immediately. Then, she gave birth to three children a few years after their wedding: Gai, Cang, and Chan. If their two youngest children had not died, there would be five altogether, but it was extremely hard for the Duyens to feed even their three children. Often times, they quarreled because their children ate but didn’t work. Normally, when their parents quarreled, Gai sobbed silently while Cang and Chan just stood by, watched, and listened with their hands over their buttocks.

Today, Mr. and Mrs. Duyen quarreled while their children weren’t home. But when their argument became more violent, the kids suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Gai carried Chan on her back while he was sleeping with his head leaning on her shoulder, with mucus running from his nose and saliva from his mouth. Cang walked clumsily behind her sister, and he pretended to be a mandarin, scolding his sister and spanking her arm with a rod made of leaves. But as soon as Cang stepped onto the front porch and heard his parents’ loud voices, he saw Gai stand silently and he himself didn’t know what to do. Only Chan wasn’t aware of anything—he was still sleeping. At that moment, Mr. Duyen was furious and said something quite unpleasant to his wife. Right after he finished his sentence, his wife saw the kids walking into the house, and she squalled, “Come here and witness your father scolding me.”

“Yes. I am cursing this crippled woman’s father,” Mr. Duyen replied.

Mrs. Duyen held her face with her hands and sobbed. She then said to the wall facing her: “Oh! Ancestors! We are married with children—some dead, some alive, but my husband has no respect for me—he calls my father names. Why am I so cursed? I have been frugal all my life in order to feed my children ....”

“It’s your fault. You gave births to them, now you have to feed them ....” Mr. Duyen rebuked.

“Listen to what he said, everybody! I didn’t sleep with a dog ....” she said.

Mr. Duyen ran toward his wife and was about to beat her. He cursed, “You bitch.” She then lay on her back on the floor and started to act hysterical. She yelled, “Go ahead and kill me. Kill me.”

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<sup>‡</sup> This idiomatic expression means “you should be critical of yourself,” and in this context, it means, “Look at your own defect before putting me down.”

Gai and Cang became frightened at their father's aggression, so they held each other tightly and cried loudly. Chan was awakened and cried too. Some village dogs started to bark, although they didn't know what was occurring. Mr. Duyen became angrier, and the veins on his forehead and neck protruded. He tampered his feet and yelled, "I will kill all of you, then I'll stab myself. I will first get rid of all of you, my burdens, and then your mother."

His "burdens" got frightened and ran away. Mrs. Duyen got up, held up her dress, and clumsily ran toward the gate. Duyen went into the kitchen, grasped a chopping knife, and ran into the front yard, but no one was there. He vehemently dropped the knife on the ground and said, "If I catch any of you here, I will kill you on the spot. Oh Gosh! All of you make my life so miserable. My life wouldn't be like this without you."

Then, he heard his wife say, "I neither ruin your life nor steal anything from you. Watch your tongue. God is watching."

The fact that she hid outside the gate and had talked back to him enflamed his fury. The more he chased her, the faster she ran. He became frustrated and his fingers started to tremble vehemently. He wanted to break something to alleviate his anger, but there was nothing in the house for him to break. The bed, the desk, the pillar—they would hurt his hands because they all were made of hard wood. There was the knife, but he had already vented his anger upon it.

Outside, his shrew-wife wouldn't keep her mouth shut. She kept calling Heaven and Earth to witness her plights, but her pleas were pointless. Her words were like a knife stabbing at his head. Suddenly, he shouted, "You've a big mouth. I will burn this house down."

"If you do, the neighbors will make you pay for their damages," she warned him.

"I will go to jail so that all of you can become beggars," he said.

His wife, standing outside the fence, saw her husband searching for a match to strike a fire and cried, "Please help me, the bastard Duyen wants to burn my house ... He ...."

Nobody came to rescue her. Everyone was still at work. Eventually, there was no fire because he couldn't find a match—the Duyens hadn't been able to afford a small box of matches for at least two years. Their daughter, Gai, always had to walk to the village to ask for some fire when she cooked daily meals. And the family went to bed just after the sun went down. Reassured that nothing bad would happen, Mrs. Duyen was quiet. But then, her husband threatened, "You think I won't dare to burn it, do you? I will go ask for some fire."

All of a sudden, the sky grew cloudy and grey. The winds began to blow violently and the air became cold and great sheets of water began pouring out of the dark sky followed by claps of thunder. It was the beginning of the summer, and it didn't usually rain. However, if there was a rain, it was always a torrential downpour. The sky grew dark; water was everywhere. The rain hammered the banana leaves in the garden with a relentless drumming sound. The winds blew stronger and stronger. Eventually the low areas became

flooded. After a while, the rain gradually stopped and the sun came out. Leaves were now lush; birds jumped around, chirping and singing lively. The rain had stopped completely.

Everybody in the village ran outside. Men were wearing only their loin-clothes. Women put on their camisoles and straw hats. The children were naked. Everyone held a basket and rushed toward the rice paddies, gardens, and vegetables beds. After the rain, the puddles filled with air bubbles and worms began to crawl out of the wet earth. The colorful frogs and toads jumped out of bushes and shrubs looking for the worms. The fat, older frogs moved slowly but with a stately presence. Big frogs, small frogs—each with a shiny, mercurial skin, body parts clearly defined, and eyes that darted back and forth. They hopped quickly and ate voraciously. Then the villagers went out to catch them.

The entire Duyen family joined the crowd hunting for frogs. After the rain, Mrs. Duyen ran home and grasped a basket; she realized that her husband and Gai had already taken the two baskets hung in the kitchen and left the house. Chan and Cang were secured in a crib like two puppies. Mr. Duyen had already forgotten the earlier fight with his wife and was thinking now about the delicious roasted frogs on tonight's dinner table. Mrs. Duyen ran fast because she didn't want to waste this great opportunity to catch as many frogs as she could. She met her husband, and he no longer was angry at her. He also tried to catch frogs.

She then met Gai, who proudly showed her how many frogs she had caught. Gai had about half of the basket filled with frogs; she was very happy and smiled, showing her tainted and decayed teeth. Then, Gai went back to a pond nearby while her mother walked fast toward the area where the village shrine was located.

Gai tip-toed and scoured the shrubs. The grass was tall and made her itch. Whenever she caught a frog, she broke its legs and quickly threw it into the basket, then she smiled. She walked along the pond, amid wild, thorny pineapple shrubs. She heard frogs jumping into the pond.

The frog-catching time was over, and everyone returned home. Mr. Duyen got home first, then came Mrs. Duyen. Chan and Cang cried in the crib, so Mrs. Duyen handed her basket to her husband and released the boys. As she comforted them, Mr. Duyen looked at the baskets of frogs. His face became expressionless, probably because he was imagining the delicious dinner tonight. Suddenly, Mrs. Duyen asked, "Is Gai home yet? Why don't you go and look for her?"

Her voice was soft and sweet. Mr. Duyen couldn't believe that, not long ago, they had been in a vicious squabble. He stood up and walked outside, mumbling, "Where the hell is she?" Then he called, "Gai."

From inside, his wife said, "I saw her walk toward Mr. Trang's pond earlier."

Mr. Duyen waded along Mr. Trang's pond and walked toward the wild pineapple shrubs. He saw Gai, but she seemed to faint on the grass, holding her basket. Her face was

pale, her arms and legs were curled up; she yawned a few times, and her eyes fluttered and then closed completely. Her legs and arms then stretched out. She was dead.

Mr. Duyen, seeing his daughter die right before his eyes, screamed in panic. Although he was nervous, he noticed the mark of a long, large snake about the size of a big bamboo stick on the fresh mud nearby. He bent down and picked up his daughter. He suddenly felt sorry for the miserable life Gai had lived in his family. She was so bony and malnourished that he could see all of her ribs under her skin. Poor thing! She was dead. Tears trailed down from his eyes. He could still feel some warmth from her hands, but her legs were deadly cold. He carried Gai's dead body on his back and ran home.

1942