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The Creators of South Vietnam: At Home and Abroad

NGÔ THẾ VINH, *Author* / ERIC HENRY, *Translator*

## **THIRD MONTH: THE SNOWBIRD THANH TÂM TUYỀN**

### **No Choice but to Cast Away the Withered Memories**

#### ABSTRACT

Thanh Tâm Tuyền (1936–2006) was a poet and fiction writer notable for his iconoclastic approach to art and life. He was the first practitioner of *vers libre* in Vietnam, but in his later poetry returned to traditional verse forms. The present article contains many examples of his poetry and includes generous excerpts from his correspondence with the author. Thanh Tâm Tuyền endured unusually harsh conditions for seven years as a prisoner in North Vietnamese internment camps and also lost a son who apparently died in the course of his own attempt to escape Vietnam by sea. On resettling in the United States he chose to live in virtual isolation in St. Paul, Minnesota rather than joining any pre existing Vietnamese community.—Eric Henry.

#### KEYWORDS

Free verse, relinquishing the past, Henry Roth, North Vietnamese labor reform camps, Vũ Khắc Khoan

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“He cast away his memories and went on” (Hắn rũ bỏ ký ức, và đi),  
 “Prelude To Departures” (“Prélude Cho Những Chuyến Đi,” 1982).

“Cast away your memories— memories of people” (Rũ bỏ ký ức — ký ức người), “A Few Impromptu Words Presented to Intimate Friends” (“Vài Khúc Dạo Tặng Tri Âm,” 1988).

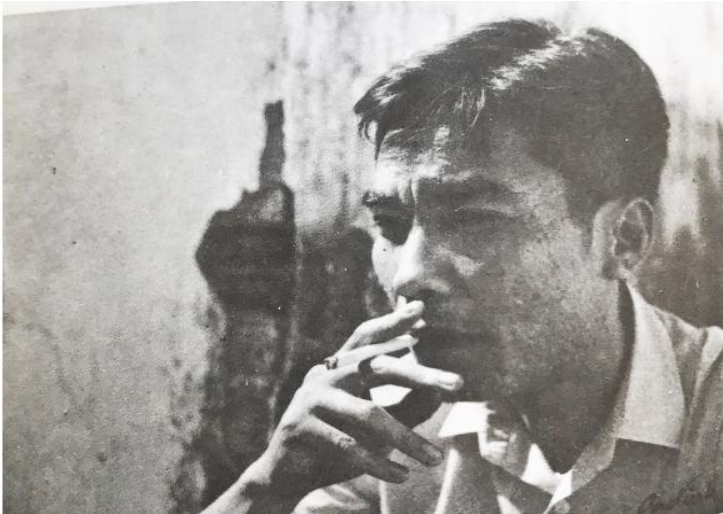


Figure 1. Thanh Tâm Tuyền. (Photo by Trần Cao Lĩnh).

**T**hanh Tâm Tuyền said: “Till the time that I must write as if nothing has occurred, as if nothing has changed. When will the time come when I can enjoy this? So that I can resume writing?”

### Biographical Data

Thanh Tâm Tuyền, was born in March (the 13th, 1936) and also died in March (the 22nd, 2006).

This short article, published in March (the 22nd, 2015), was written to remember him on the ninth anniversary of his death:

Thanh Tâm Tuyền's real name was Dzur Văn Tâm. He was born in Vinh, Nghệ An.<sup>1</sup> He lost his father very early. He started teaching at age sixteen, and published stories in the journal, *Youth* (*Thanh Niên*). He was active in the Students' Association of Hanoi (*Tổng hội Sinh Viên Hà Nội*) along with Doãn Quốc Sỹ, Nguyễn Sỹ Tế, and Trần Thanh Hiệp. He also helped found the magazine, *Việt Fire* (*Lửa Việt*). After emigrating to the South in 1954, he wrote for the weeklies, *Democracy* (*Dân Chủ*) and *The Viet People* (*Người Việt*), and was one of the principal contributors to the journal, *Creation* (*Sáng Tạo*), with Mai Thảo. He had considerable influence on Vietnamese literature from 1956 to 1975, and during the years that followed.



Figure 2. A photo from 1960: TTT's close friends in the "Creation" group: From the left: Duy Thanh, Trần Lê Nguyễn, Thanh Tâm Tuyền, and Ngọc Dũng. (Family of Thanh Tâm Tuyền, personal archives).

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<sup>1</sup> Nghệ An is a province slightly north of the central area known for its poverty, the roughness of the local dialect, and the large number of revolutionaries, such as Hồ Chí Minh, who have come from there.

Thanh Tâm Tuyên was recruited into the army in 1962, and rose eventually to the rank of captain. After 1975 he was imprisoned for seven years in various harshly-run camps in the far north of Vietnam, obtaining freedom finally in 1982. A fact that few people are aware of is that a few years after that, he lost his eldest son when the latter was attempting to make his escape from the country by ocean. From 1986 until the year of his death, he never ceased to pursue a hopeless quest for clues to his son's fate when he disappeared. He emigrated to the United States in 1990 and thereafter lived in seclusion. He died when he had just turned seventy.



Figure 3. A photo from 1964 on the occasion of TTT's marriage to Cao Thị Mai Hoa. From left: Trần Lê Nguyễn, Ngọc Dũng, Mai Thảo, Thanh Tâm Tuyên, Trần Thanh Hiệp, and Nguyễn Sỹ Tế. (Family of Thanh Tâm Tuyên, private archives).

## Published Works

Poetry: *I'm not Lonely Anymore* (*Tôi Không Còn Cô Độc*, 1956, Saigon), *Liên—Night, The Sun is Found* (*Liên—Đêm, Mặt Trời Tìm Thấy*, 1964, Saigon), and *Poems from Somewhere Far* (*Thơ ở Đâu Xa*, 1990, United States).

Fiction: *Kitchen Fire* (Bếp Lửa; 1957), *Visage* (Khuôn Mặt, 1964), *Along the Road* (Dọc Đường, 1967), *Muddy Sand* (Cát Lầy, 1966), *Ocean Mist* (Mù Khơi, 1970), and *A Sound* (Tiếng Động, 1970).

Among his unpublished works is a novel, *Cancer* (Ung Thư), many parts of which were published in *Writing* (Văn) in Saigon. It was an important work written after *Kitchen Fire* that TTT referred to in a 1993 interview.

Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng, in an article on TTT that appeared in a special issue of *Writing*, wrote:

Thanh Tâm tuyển was like the first banner announcing the “free verse” of Vietnam, the person who remade our poetry. Đặng Tiến, in a retrospective appreciation of TTT, expressed some regret that no one had inherited his way of composing poetry. Then he went on to say, “Even Thanh Tâm Tuyển himself, in his later collection, *Poems from Somewhere Far*, returned to traditional ways of writing poetry. But these were poems made with labor, in special conditions; they do not allow us to draw from them any theoretical conclusions.

### **Thanh Tâm Tuyển in a Land of Snow**

Aside from the years and months when Thanh Tâm Tuyển suffered imprisonment, I [the author, Ngô Thế Vinh] occasionally had the opportunity to meet him both before and after 1975. In his second home in the United States, there were easy means of travel, but TTT moved about very little, and never went far. I usually communicated with him by letter, and once by telephone. Sometimes TTT would send me a book that had pleased him. To allow you, reader, to understand TTT’s life in the land of snow—a writer in exile from a land that he would much prefer

not to have left behind—I will excerpt below a few letters he wrote to me, so as to share with you a few small memories of a personal nature:



Figure 4. Meeting again with friends in St. Paul, Minnesota. From left: Thanh Tâm Tuyên, Cung Tiến, Tô Thùy Yên, and Cung Trầm Tưởng. (Family of Thanh Tâm Tuyên, private archives).

St. Paul, December 31, 1992.

Dear brother Ngô Thế Vinh,

We've been invaded here by a winter storm, and the temperature is much lower than it was the two previous years. Cold below zero in the Fahrenheit range is a usual thing. A cold wind blows that sometimes brings the temperature down to forty or fifty degrees below zero. The streets are blanketed in white. Before, I always thought birds avoided the snow altogether, but having been here for three winters, I see with surprise that I was wrong. The birds still remain: crows, doves, sparrows. . . The doves and sparrows wait for the sun to come out and seek prey here and there in the public parks. Perhaps they are able to stay here in the winter



because they have resting places under the roofs of houses from which a little warm air may come. There is in particular a kind of tree here, I don't know its name, the leaves of which wither and die in the wintertime, but still stick fast to the branches. Imagine, if you will, a whole valley-full of woods, with stark and withered trees standing in the white snow. I have asked many people and done some research, but I still don't know the name of the tree. When its leaves finally drop, that is when spring has arrived.

I received the above letter in 1992, and have been obsessed ever since by the thought of that tree of unknown name, the leaves of which all wither, but remain tightly attached to the branches. It seems an image of TTT himself, dead and withered, but with a heart that still clung to his homeland in Vietnam.

St. Paul, December 14, 1993.

Dear brother Ngô Thế Vinh,

I'm sending you a translation by Australia's Phan Lạc Phúc to read. The journal *Impressions du Sud* (*Impressions of the South*) has the original article, but I haven't received it. When I have it I'll copy it all out for you to read. . . Please convey my regards and good wishes to my two friends in poetry. . . now that it's the first of the year.

The correspondent Lô-Răng (Phan Lạc Phúc) was originally the editor-in-chief of the daily, *Front Line* (*Tiền Tuyến*), and was his literary friend both before 1975 and during his many years of imprisonment in the labor camps of the North. Phan Lạc Phúc emigrated to Sydney, Australia in 1991. He was the author of two books, *Friends Near and Far* (*Bạn Bè Gần Xa*, Văn Nghệ publishing house, 2000), and *A Collection of Random*

*Jottings* (Tuyển Tập Tạp Ghi, Văn Nghệ publishing house, 2002) that contain recollections of many tragic situations that he and his friends had passed through. Under the pen name Huy Quân, Phan Lạc Phúc had translated *Thanh Tâm Tuyền: Poems Amid War and Amid Labor Camp* (Thanh Tâm Tuyền: Thơ Trong Chiến Tranh và Trong Trại Cải Tạo) with the addition of observations by the translator (author Dr. Vinh's note).

St. Paul, November 12, 1994.

Dear brother Ngô Thế Vinh,

Thank you for the audiobook you sent as a gift “to read on a distant road.” Perhaps it is only when one must “run on distant roads” that one can see how useful books like these can be. . . This Saturday morning I plan to ride out to the lake near my house, so I can open and appreciate it. . .

I'm sending you a gift in return: Henry Roth's first novel, *Call It Sleep*. It's been a very long time, several dozen years at least, that I have come across a novel that forces me to read it “all in one breath.” I say “in one breath,” but I nevertheless needed a week—reading it in the mornings, when I would wake up at 3:00 or 4:00, and in the afternoons and evenings. When I was still in Saigon, I read in the *Express* or *Nouvelle Observateur* about Henry Roth—and learned that his book had been republished after thirty years of being ignored. I remember from that time that he was making his living as a duck farmer, and as far as I knew was a writer who had cast aside his pen and gone off to raise ducks. Now he is entering his sixties. And Salinger has gone off who knows where. . . I just hope that the book will give you some pleasure. . .



The novel, *Call It Sleep*, by Henry Roth was published in 1934; it relates the experiences of a boy growing up in a ghetto community of Jewish immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century in New York. The book had next to no buyers for thirty years, it took thirty years for the original print run to be sold. But when it was republished in 1964, it became a bestseller with more than a million printed copies, and *Time* magazine in 2005 ranked it as one of the hundred best books written since 1923 (author Dr. Vinh's note).

This handwritten letter was fairly long, and reflected TTT's restlessness as he thought about the age thresholds faced by writers.

In the past, it was only when Stendhal<sup>2</sup> knew that he must enter his fifties that he wrote *Le Rouge et Le Noir*. I admire that very much. Now, on seeing that Henry Roth at the age of seventy is only now returning to writing, my admiration is even greater, but to speak scientifically, the age of fifty in Stendhal's era was like the age of seventy these days, don't you think?

Then, TTT talks delightedly about the new book by Roth:

In the new book, interspersed in the narrative are bits of introspective monologue on the part of the narrator in the form of 'one-sided conversations' between the writer and his computer. . . I am still more obsessed with *Call It Sleep* than with the new book, perhaps because the subject is not different.

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<sup>2</sup> Stendhal (Marie-Henri Beyle, 1783–1844) was a French author known especially for his two novels, *Le Rouge et Le Noir* (*The Red and the Black*) and *La Chartreuse de Parma* (*The Charterhouse of Parma*).

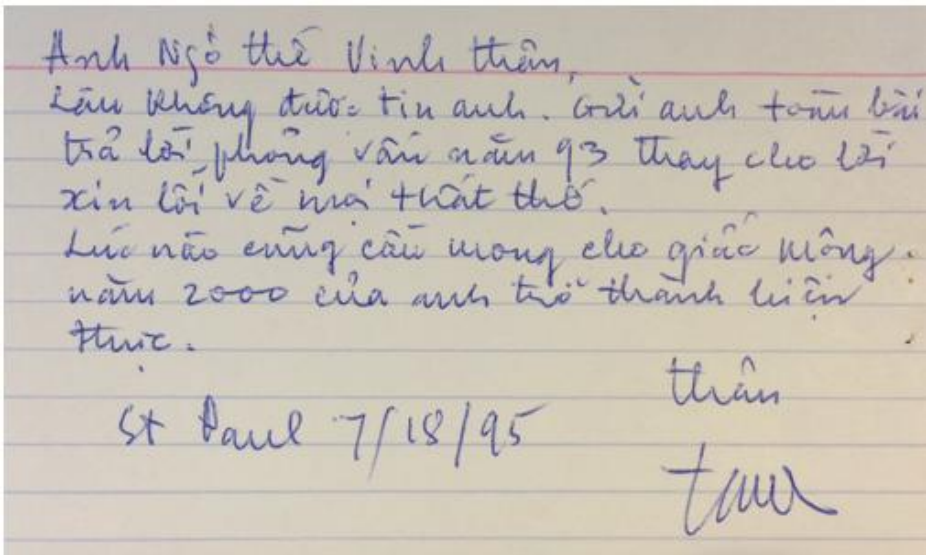
On coming to the States, TTT read and absorbed a great deal, and also, continued to engage in “the glory of labor” (*lao động là vinh quang*: a slogan prevalent in Communist labor camps), but being free to follow his own wishes,” he returned both to his studies and his work. He went on as follows in the letter:

At the end of the present month, I’ll quit my present job and work in an occupational (job-training) trade school near home. I won’t have to worry as much about driving in the winter, and the atmosphere of a school will suit me better. I write this so you can feel glad for me.

St. Paul, July 18, 1995.

Dear brother Ngô Thế Vinh,

It’s been a long time since I’ve heard from you. I’m sending the whole transcript of my replies to an interviewer in 1993. . . Yours, Tâm.



Anh Ngô thế Vinh thân,  
 Lâu không được tin anh. Gửi anh toàn bài  
 trả lời phỏng vấn năm 93 thay cho lời  
 xin lỗi về mail thất thủ.  
 Lúc nào cũng cầu mong cho giấc mộng  
 năm 2000 của anh trở thành hiện  
 thực.  
 St Paul 7/18/95  
 thân  
 Tâm

Figure 5. A handwritten note from Thanh Tâm Tuyên to Ngô Thế Vinh. (Ngô Thế Vinh, personal archives).

July 18, 1995 was twenty years ago. TTT was good at foreign languages, including French and English. Through French, he very early became widely acquainted with the literature of the world, but this interview was perhaps conducted in Vietnamese with Lê Hữu Khoá at the Université de Provence (in Aix-en-Provence) and then translated into French. After that it was printed in the collection, *Le part d'exile: littérature vietnamienne/textes réunis et traduits par Lê Hữu Khoá*, Publication de l'Université de Provence, 1995.

Not having the original in Vietnamese, I got in touch through the artist, Đinh Cường, with Lê Hữu Khoá, the author of the interview. But he had gone to teach at Université de Lille. In an email dated March 14, 2015, Lê Hữu Khoa let me know that he had gone on a trip at the behest of his university and was not in Europe; the Vietnamese copy of his interview with TTT was located in his library in Nice. He was very sorry that he was not in Nice.

While waiting to obtain the Vietnamese copy of the interview, I still want to write an article that can appear exactly on the ninth anniversary of his death, so I will include an excerpt from that interview below—but the text has followed a circular path: from the original in Vietnamese to a French translation, and then from French to Vietnamese. Though the style is not that of Thanh Tâm Tuyền, I hope that the content will convey the things that he really wished to express and perhaps help the reader to understand the circumstances that drove TTT to abandon the innovative free verse style of his work in the 1950s to the traditional forms he used at the end of his life.

## Poems Written During War and Imprisonment Excerpts from the Interview of Thanh Tâm Tuyền with Lê Hữu Khoa

(Published as: Thanh Tâm Tuyền, “La Poésie entre la guerre et le camp,”

*Propos Recueillies et Traduit par Lê Hữu Khoa*).

Thanh Tâm Tuyền is a name that looms large in modern Vietnamese literature with two striking contributions to literary life subsequent to 1945. In poetry, he has done away with traditional forms involving rhyme and rhythm and now represents the free verse movement. His first two poetry collections, *I’m Not Lonely Anymore* and *All Night the Sun is Found*, have opened up a new era in which poetry is no longer made according to the rules of verse. In prose, his first novel, *Kitchen Fire*, marked a new point of departure, if compared with classical methods of narrating stories. With Thanh Tâm Tuyền, a condensation of language contributes to an acceleration of rhythm and a mastery of esthetic effect.



Figure 6. Thanh Tâm Tuyền, 1993, by Đinh Cường. (Đinh Cường, personal archives).



Figure 7. Thanh Tâm Tuyên, line drawing by Duy Thanh, 1956.

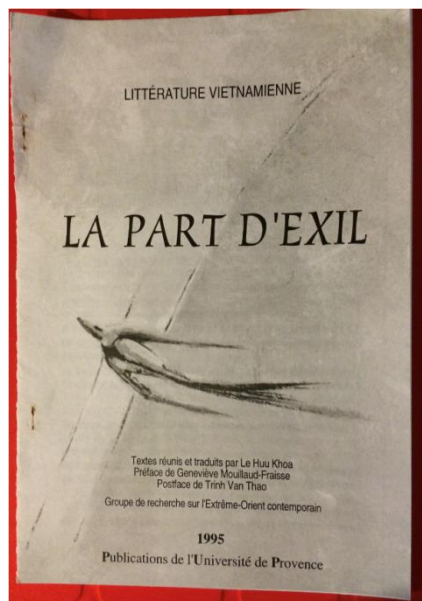


Figure 8. Monograph, *Le Part d'Exil*, of the University of Provence (1995) containing the interview between Thanh Tâm Tuyên and Lê Hữu Khoa.



Excerpt, continued:

An author known to all, he was nevertheless given little steady attention by critics during the war years of 1954 to 1975, and even today he is writer whom critics are chary of discussing, due to his complex mode of creation and his synthetic approach to literary theory. All his work is based on a new foundation involving musicality.



Figure 9. The cover of the poetry collection, *I'm Not Lonely Anymore*, Người Việt, Saigon, 1956. (Đình Cường, personal archives).

Excerpt, continued:

Thanh Tâm Tuyền is among the Vietnamese writers who possess a clear understanding of the war's destruction of Vietnam, and he was also personally exposed to the oppression of the current



dictatorship. He was imprisoned for many years in labor reform camps under the oppressive rule of the new regime from 1975 to 1990. (Author Dr. Vinh's note: Thanh Tâm Tuyền was imprisoned for seven years, being released in 1982).

## **Literary Experience During the War Years, 1954–1975**

Further excerpts:

Aside from poetry, I (Thanh Tâm Tuyền) have had two periods marked by works in prose. The first one was *Kitchen Fire* (1954), which described scenes in the life of Hanoi before 1954, when some people left for other places and some remained, both being constrained by unwilling choices, by separations, or by deaths. The book immediately aroused critical reactions among a number of “revolutionary” critics. In one review that appeared in *The Arts* (Văn Nghệ), one critic challenged me with a question: “At a time when the people of the North are expending all their strength to build socialism, where does the character in *Kitchen Fire* take his stance?” I replied, “He is heading toward historical destruction.”

The second work, *Cancer* (1970), can be regarded as a continuation of *Kitchen Fire*. *Cancer* is a phenomenon that we accept amid the fickleness of fate and the cold indifference of death. That book never got published. (Author's note: the novel, *Cancer*, appeared in parts in the journal, *Writing*, beginning in 1964. It is a second important work of TTT, after *Kitchen*).

## Literary Experience During the Years of Imprisonment in Labor Reform Camps, 1975–1982

More excerpts:

Faced with the disturbances and disorders that appeared in society in the period after 1975, I felt that I had come to the end of my life—the time remaining to me would be a mere remnant. I was no longer inclined to think about it. I was totally disillusioned. In 1975, the regime forced me and all my ‘traveling companions’ to enter labor reform camps. We left the lowlands and went to the mountainous regions, calmly and without emotion. We were devoid both of hope and of despair.

I thought of ‘disappearing’ with no hope of return; I would be like the dregs of some substance washed away by the inundation of history. But I was wrong. They took us to the North, to stretches of old forest cut off from the world outside. They cast me without supervision into nature, free, with the mission of felling trees every day. I practiced climbing and descending mountains, awaiting an opportunity to escape. But there was never a day when I could see anything but the road that returned to the camp.

Why do I say ‘returned?’ Is it because I had no hope, or was it the disillusionment of a person who had been cast aside, a person in despair? At that time, I truly lived in the hope of a state of inexistence, in some inviolable region, a state of non-relation. But these things were not clear to me. Finally, I convinced myself that I had been resuscitated, meaning that poetry had returned to me. I felt fortunate and happy. But I was still as shy as a little child; I hid my first poems, not daring to show them to anyone.



When, for day after day, you live without feeling, without thinking at all of the future, without any nostalgia for the past and without any concern for the present, what remains to you? There remains that which has existed in you, and which still exists in you, whether you wish it or not.

In order to live through the cheerless days, with the rain, with the burning hot summer days, with mist and frost, with the storms, with the changing seasons, I sought happiness in that personal thing, the thing within me, the sole thing I had brought along, that existed only within.

What remained inside? Family, friends. Poems, ones, naturally, that I had read and internalized. A moment came when my memories started to operate fast, and I began to read poems just for me. In such a place one starts to see strange lights. Times of ruin strengthen the power of poetry.

Immersing oneself in a time with no history, or to speak more correctly, a time with no external history, one finds that the days and months of one's life have no direction, no goal, and exist simply in their inherent nakedness. Absolute nakedness. The essential inexistence of life brings with it an interior peace of soul. The nature of poetry in this peaceful state resides in the silence of the universe.

Due to this, each poem exists in a closed time, cut off from the customary activity of life. Time spent in taking care suddenly turns into "condensed time"; there is no longer a difference between time that is stopped and time that flows on.



Making poetry in a labor reform camp is the same as returning to the poetry of popular tradition. The work routine in a camp is such that there are eight tense hours in each day, and no weekends. Each prisoner had his own universe; a strip of cloth to lie down on, fifty or sixty prisoners on two levels of bunk beds, a group of a hundred or so prisoners beneath a roof. Writing was a luxury, a place to sit, time to write. With the rhythm of activity imposed on the freezing, hungry prisoners . . . who could dare to think of literary creation? Even a genius, a person with abilities far beyond the usual could not rise above such oppression.

Nevertheless, in the Vietnamese language people speak of ‘making poetry,’ not of ‘writing poetry’; thus, people could make poetry anywhere, in any location, when walking, standing, lying, sitting, when unable to sleep. Poetry comes to you without prior arrangement, with no appointed day or hour. People cannot seek it because they do not know where it is. There remains only a simple task: to greet it and converse with it. Poetry demands of one just one thing: to preserve the purity of one’s words—then that speech will decide the nature of its life.

Poetry is usually reticent; it enters sometimes by the front door, and sometimes by some other small path; you have to listen attentively to it. Poetry prefers to live in secrecy, to mask itself, and therefore, if your memory is not sharp, you will not recognize it when it is there.

When you are ‘engaging’ in labor for revolutionary goals, poetry will come to you. It will come unexpectedly, in the fields, in the tangled forests. When poetry comes, it forces you to pause. You

begin to see the sky and forget the mechanical movement of your limbs. Poetry soon conducts you to a state of inner calm, a state of auto-existence that brings pleasure. Because when poetry releases you, you return to the life that you had the hardihood to cast away. You see this life evolve into the rhythms of each line of verse. Working with your two hands only, your ears chase after the rhythms, the musicality of the verse. This adjustment brings about a necessary balance between the limitations of labor and the actions of accumulated memories.

But actually, the business of making poetry in labor camps is attended by certain difficulties, as one cannot revise one's work, or indulge in an activity limited to the final stages of a composition, the pleasure of reading one's work aloud and sharing it with a group of friends. Poetry must be read and listened to. That is the final fate of a poem. It is the fate of something said and also the fate of many people's memories.

When I regained my freedom, the first thing I did, while traveling home, was to compose myself and write down all the poems remaining in my memory from my time of imprisonment. I was a person who had survived, but I no longer wished to be a writer, though that had always been a thing I longed for. As a line that I inscribed on my memory in labor camp says, "when the time comes when I must write as if nothing has happened, as if nothing has been modified."

And now I say to myself, "When will such a time arrive, so that I can return to writing?"

This concludes the excerpt from Thanh Tâm Tuyền, “La Poésie entre la guerre et le camp,” *Propos Recueillies et Traduit par Lê Hữu Khoá*.

### **Reading the Poetry of Thanh Tâm Tuyền, 1956–1990**

“Resurrection” (“Phục Sinh,” 1956) is a famous free-verse poem from the early period of the journal, *Creation* (*Sáng Tạo*):

#### **Resurrection by Thanh Tâm Tuyền**

About to weep as if swept with nausea,

I’m outside on the streets,

the sunlight crystalline

I call out my name to ease my memory

thanh tâm tuyền

why does the dying day shatter into tolling church bells

I seek some private, quiet place to kneel

for the little lad whose soul

is fearful of the fierce dog.

the dog is hungry, has no hue.

I veer toward death as if desiring sleep,

though standing upright on the bank.

The water, black and deep, is wide wake

I scream my name to calm my rage

thanh tâm tuyền

at night I stumble, fall, and whisper for a while my sins

the little child winds a bright red cloth about his head

and here’s a wolf,

the kind of wolf that roams.

I want to kill myself,

An everlasting murderer.

I shout my name in grief,



“thanh tâm tuyên.”

Strangled, I fall over dead,  
to have a resurrection.  
each string of lives, connected all,  
humans don't forgive the crime of murder  
the executioners fall to their knees,  
when resurrection comes,  
the calling voice is reading sutras,  
the centuries wait.  
I want to live; it's like a wish for death;  
between breaths of prayer  
my chest is lost in flame.  
hesitant, I call,  
dear one,  
open my heart's door.  
My heart lives again, is like a child,  
pure, like a wave of truth.  
- TTT, 1956.

Poem #7 in *Falling Down on Việt Hồng Mountain* (1979) was made by Thanh Tâm Tuyên twenty-three years later, when he was imprisoned in a labor reform camp:

**Falling Down on Việt Hồng Mountain**  
In Yên Bái carrying bamboo loads  
I tumble down the slope, the narrow path,  
My body dead from shock, long seconds pass.  
Incessant drops of rain pelt down,  
The day is growing faint amid the jungle.

My limbs relax, my head on bamboo sheaves.  
 The sky I see is overcast with steady rain  
 I feel that someone's blowing on my body  
 My soul is in illusion, free from grievance.  
 The rain spreads out a dense white net.  
 In what direction lies the mountain village?  
 The numbing, chilly wind wraps tight my face,  
 Weak and yielding, I forget my smarting wounds,  
 Seek happiness alone in secrecy,  
 My vision blurred by neverending drops,  
 I plumb the darkness seeking the way back.  
 Rivers far, deep mountains, where is home?  
 - Yên Bái, 1979.

In 1986, when he had left the labor camps of the Far North, but still had to live in the large prison that was Vietnam, Thanh Tâm Tuyền made the poem "Weeping for the Snow Ox: Vũ Khắc Khoan" (Vũ Khắc Khoan had died on September 9, 1986).

### **In Memoriam**

#### **Belated Tears for Snow Ox: Vũ Khắc Khoan**

A region glowing dark, a field that stretches white,  
 In neverending maple forests, rain descends.  
 The blossoms numb, in disarray, both day and night  
 The snow ox strives to still its trembling, fevered feet,  
 Eyes staring, gazing at the fatal, violent gusts,  
 A thousand blows descend in flashes; flowers fly.  
 A wisp of life amid the ancient glacial ice,  
 The image of the beast forsakes the barren earth.

- TTT, 1986.

Thanh Tâm Tuyền was very close to Vũ Khắc Khoan, and the two of them had one point in common; a style of writing made difficult by the great concentration and allusiveness of their language.

### The Snow Bird Thanh Tâm Tuyền: His Great Dream

I cannot forget the wasted appearance of TTT in 1982, when he was newly released from incarceration. He appeared to have grown old, and his skin had the darkened cast of a person who had suffered chronic malaria. It is hard to imagine how a man who had never looked robust, had survived seven years of imprisonment in which he suffered every day from cold and hunger in the thick forests and penetrating mists of the northern labor camps. Seven years of felling trees and stripping trunks in the mountains, of being stabbed through the thigh by bamboo, without the benefit of surgery or medicine, he still survived. While in prison he took up smoking water pipes to resist the cold, and, relying on his memory, made poems.

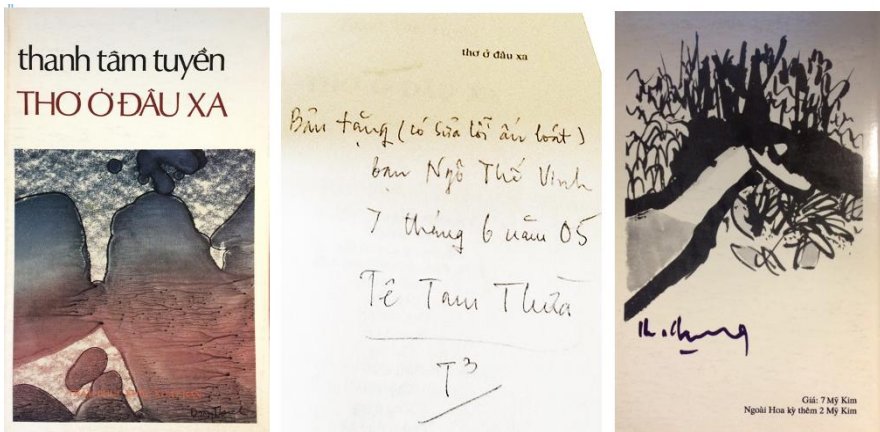


Figure 10. *Poems from Somewhere Far* (Thơ ở Đâu Xa): front cover by Duy Thanh, signed presentation by author; and back cover by Ngọc Dũng (published by Trầm Phục Khắc, United States, 1990).

It is easy to see that in the years following 1975, he was living in the “25th hour” (*La vingt-cinquième heure*; the title of a work by C.V. Gheorghiu) of his country. The content of those experiences would have been sufficient to enable him to write the “Gulag Archipelago” of Vietnam. But he was utterly opposed to such a choice. He wanted to make a clean break; he wanted to erase that entire time from his memory. In 1982, after his release, right in Saigon, he wrote the following lines:

**A Prelude to Trips of Departure, and to Trips of Return**

He casts aside his memories and goes off,  
 In dark scenes, an empty, stupid silence.  
 Just now he coldly drops the savage war  
 He casts aside his memories and goes off.  
 In plumbless forests, trees stand bare of leaves,  
 The misty wind sweeps everywhere,  
 And now the tortuous twists of history  
 Sink storm by storm into a cheerless calm,  
 At daybreak or the depths of night, who knows,  
 The harsh time kills itself in silence  
 The woodland stream flows on without a sound  
 Between the banks it swells itself till full,  
 The tribulations, spasms of the past  
 Now circle round the time's events content.  
 He leads his steps where they cannot go back,  
 On ways unknown that lead one knows not where,  
 Each feeling hides and keeps its privacy,  
 Each matter wanders aimless, with no goal,  
 And thus he goes, no other way will do.

- TTT, 1982.

In 1986, four years after his release, TTT continued his absolute refusal to acknowledge the past in another poem, also using the refrain “cast aside your memories”:

### **A Few Impromptu Words to Intimate Friends**

1.

Cast aside your memories—memories of people.  
Dreaming, drown yourself.  
Things can’t be different.  
Suppress your newborn words.  
Piteous fate,  
And cold uncertainty  
Swallow your humiliation whole  
The world is far away and near its end  
The air is limitless, the waves in agony.  
The clouds and fire are choked and still.  
Just go. Be one who wavers back and forth.  
Be insulted.  
Cut off all binding oaths,  
Break off all ties.  
Secrete them somewhere,  
Secrete them till they disappear.  
Is there another way?  
Let memories be cast beyond all records of the past.

2.

Heaven is a muddy, savage swamp,  
Each night like all preceding nights encroaching,  
Repose outside,



Dumb silence, buried.

It seems that trees are bare, deep in the woods,  
The season's wind cuts in, blows everywhere  
Cutting the chain of moments, blood veins burst;  
The embryo breaks, the dream decays,  
We vomit blood, it spurts in blackened spate.

3.

Si cette nuit est une nuit de destin,  
Bénédiction sur  
Elle jusqu'à l'apparition de l'aurore  
Chantent les chameliers tartares  
Dans la nuit du désert.

[If this be a night of destiny,  
Blessings be  
Upon it till the coming of the dawn.  
The Tartar camel drivers sing  
In the desert night.]

Like birds thrown here and there before the dawn,  
Above the waste, the last night of the cataclysm,  
A hopeless call bursts forth in the silence,  
Like a maddened stream in time of flood,  
The whiteness of the tempest hides its source,  
Falling on its wretched shores and banks.

- TTT, 1988.



(Author Dr. Vinh's note: Verse 3 may be found in *Le Temps du Mépris* by A. Malraux).<sup>3</sup>

In 1993, when TTT answered the questions put to him by Lê Hữu Khoá in his interview with him, he was still determined as ever to put memory behind him: "Till the time that I must write as if nothing has occurred, as if nothing has changed."

The choice made by TTT—cast aside your memories, memories of people—cannot but make one think by association of ECT—electroconvulsive therapy. A medical treatment in which an electric current is introduced to the brain within the skull. This causes a change in the brain chemistry of the patient, such that memories are lost. The treatment is used in certain medical circumstances, as when the patient is in deep depression that cannot be alleviated by medication. It is a painful procedure that can only be applied when the patient has been made unconscious by anesthesia. It was typical of TTT that, depressed and stoic, he chose the road of memory abandonment without the aid of anesthesia.

Those who were close to Thanh Tâm Tuyền, and understood him, felt that the reason he preferred living a retired and secluded life, rejecting contact with others, lay in the fact that he wished to transform himself, and was quietly accumulating new experiences with that end in view. He was still reading a great deal, still seeking new things without cease, with the "great dream" of being a different person when he again entered the world. He would be resurrected and would again be able to write. But, as if by predetermined fate, he ran out of time.

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<sup>3</sup> André Malraux (1901–1976), French author and statesman. His works include the novels *Les Conquérants* (*The Conquerors*, 1928), *La Voie Royale* (*The Royal Way*, 1930), *La Condition Humaine* (*Man's Fate*, 1933, winner of the Goncourt Prize), and *Les Voix du Silence* (*The Voices of Silence*, 1951).



Figure 11. A 1993 photograph of friends welcoming TTT to the United States at the Minneapolis–St. Paul airport in Minnesota. From the left: Cung Tiến, Thanh Tâm Tuyền, Tô Thùy Yên, and Cung Trầm Tưởng. (Family of TTT, private archives).



Figure 12. TTT and his wife Cao Thị Mai Hoa on a visit to Washington D.C. The Washington monument is in the background. (Family of TTT, private archives).



Twenty years after the death of Vũ Khắc Khoan in 1986, and eight years after the death of Mai Thảo in 1998, Thanh Tâm Tuyền of *I'm not Lonely Anymore* passed away at 11:30 on March 22, 2006 in St. Paul, Minnesota. Minnesota was also the place where Vũ Khắc Khoan of *The Spirit of Turtle Tower* had resettled. Among those of his friends who bore the coffin of the Snow Bird Thanh Tâm Tuyền to its resting place were Tô Thùy Yên, Cung Trầm Tưởng, Nguyễn Cao Đàm, and Cung Tiến.

“When in winter the leaf withers, dies, and leaves its branch, this also is when spring will come to Thanh Tâm Tuyền, but it will be in a different world” (~ Ngô Thê Vinh).

I am sending this article to Thanh Tâm Tuyền's family as a commemoration of him on the occasion of his ninth death anniversary. And as I write this, I cannot avoid a twinge of concern when I wonder how much relation there might be, from a medical point of view, between his seven years of smoking water pipes and his death from lung cancer just as he was stepping into his seventies.

California, March 23, 2015.