

He still wouldn't stop.

So, reasoning didn't work. Frightened, I tried to think of a way to get rid of him without having to fight, afraid that I might fall on my son. Suddenly, he let go of me, exclaiming, "Period indeed!" [*kinh thật*]. And he got up. I immediately got up.

He disappeared from my house before I knew what was happening. Reality or dream? What saved me?

Did he just realize that I was menstruating, had a "period indeed," and that I was not lying? Or was he terrified to rape a menstruating woman? Anyway, he stopped. Now, writing these lines again, I'm trembling, unable to determine the meaning of the two words "period indeed" that came out of my classmate's mouth. (Do readers have any ideas?)

I escaped. Menstruation, which makes me so tired all the time, saved me that night.

Twenty-five years passed. I only met An once again, when my poetry book was released. In Hà Nội. He came to receive the poetry book and immediately left.

9. PHẠM THỊ HOÀI

Translated by Nguyễn Nguyệt Cẩm and Peter Zinoman

When the Poet Did Not Rape Completely

Originally published by *Trẻ Weekly*. Republished on Phạm Thị Hoài's blog, ProContra, on April 14, 2022, <http://www.procontra.asia/?p=6477>.

The poet recently accused of rape by a female colleague responded in a newspaper interview: "I do not have an opinion on the matter, because I do not know where the case will lead and don't yet know how to act." "In my personal view," he continued, "the accusations are not completely accurate." But at the same time, he "[doesn't] want to speak too hastily to characterize what had happened." Sometimes a clear portrait is etched in a few sentences. Language reveals everything.

He did not have an opinion because he does “not know where the case will lead.” He would wait and see. Delay the evil hour! He would only provide an opinion in accordance with the situation. Where “the case will lead” determines where his opinion will land.

(By the way, spare me the banal cliché “the punishment should fit the crime,” a popular legal formula much beloved in Vietnam. It implies a crude lockstep between crime and punishment and stupidly tries to concretize abstract principles of law in a modern society. It comforts those who like their justice described in colloquial and easy-to-remember language, and it obscures the systemic incompetence of Vietnam’s legal system. “Punish the right person for the right crime” is only the first step in the journey of justice. There are many complicated steps that remain if we are to answer the difficult question “What is an appropriate punishment?”)

But this case cannot move forward legally because the statute of limitations has expired. We are left only with the serious accusation of a woman who, unlike Lương Ngọc An, has spoken up about this matter in the face of considerable pain. We are left only with a public debate that eagerly awaits hot breaking news to titillate and absorb our attention. This case will lead nowhere. As the proverb states: over time, buffalo shit turns to mud.

Of course, you have the right to remain silent. And you even have the right to remain silent about your silence. But it’s pathetic to not have an opinion because you “don’t yet know how to act.” There is no real alternative outside of two choices: either deny the accusation or publicly admit guilt, issue an apology, and resign from your position. There can be no “third path” involving a calculation about “how to act.” This is not a trial in a fairy tale designed to impart some trivial wisdom for future generations.

We are also not in an office meeting at *Văn Nghệ* newspaper where you currently serve as deputy editor in chief. This position brings little real fame and even less power, but it does link you to a style of language that I call the language of state cadres. It is difficult to miss the stink of a state cadre on anyone who sinks into this life even for a few months. This stink comes across from the way you sit or stand, the way you position your face, the way you point your finger, the way you twiddle your hair, the way you choose outfits that never deviate from official aesthetic guidelines. Most importantly, it comes across in a specific language—not only the content of

language but also the choice of vocabulary, the use of formulaic expressions, even the style of starting a sentence and adjusting its tempo.

State cadres have a specific set of chromosomes that curl in or spread out in a manner completely different from the rest of mankind. As soon as a state cadre opens his mouth, I know that it would be easier for me to speak with an alien from another planet. State cadres can fluently utter sentences like the following: “According to my personal view, I personally do not have a personal view.” They can say this without a sense of satire or without suffering from multiple personality disorder. “Your mouth smells bad,” the cadre’s wife says. The cadre replies, “According to my personal view, my smell is not completely bad.” Mr. Cadre Poet of *Văn Nghệ* newspaper also used “his personal opinion” to issue a judgment on a scandal about himself.

According to him, the accusation of rape was “not completely accurate,” as if in addition to the possibility that he committed a rape or didn’t commit a rape, there is a third option that he did not commit a rape completely. Perhaps the victim of this incomplete rape was not completely pregnant. In the mode typical of poetry, reason does not play a significant role here. Most Vietnamese poets hold that reason hinders feeling which is of utmost importance to them. They believe that feelings need to be abundant, torrential, passionate, intense; they must either gently squeeze or violently tear at our hearts.

No one praised the great poet Nguyễn Du for being intelligent or for having clear and solid arguments. I am not the only person to endow poetry with a kind of special status. This respect, although a little bit dumb, is generally harmless. After all, human beings often throw themselves into much more horrible and wasteful activities than poetry.

But when faced with a poet who does not rape completely, society should probably cordon poetry off behind a fence since the lack of basic logic here has become dangerous. This poet is also a product or a victim of an environment in which a citizen may commit a crime but a cadre can only “make an error” due to “a lack of responsibility”—meaning the cadre is neither irresponsible nor completely responsible. Alternatively, his error may be due to “lax management,” meaning he managed, but not completely. I suggest that this not-completely-rapeist-cadre-poet committed the “error” of lacking responsibility in the supervision of his sexual desire while relaxing the

management of his zipper. But the executive committee of the Vietnam Writers' Association—on which Mr. Poet serves as an executive member!—just issued a statement of nonintervention, claiming that it does not have authority to address this matter.

I could hardly restrain a smile when I read that Mr. Poet does “not have an opinion.” But when I read his vague statement that he doesn’t “want to speak hastily to characterize what had happened,” I stopped smiling and a chill shot up my spine. It was as if he had all the time in the world to relax and wait for the appropriate moment to deliver a fatal blow that would win over public opinion and silence his opponent. We’ll see about that! Just you wait and see!

Vietnamese language is indeed marvelous. Three simple words—“don’t speak hastily” [*chưa nói vội*]—can conjure a portrait, an atmosphere, and a scenario completely different from “don’t speak yet,” “can’t say yet,” or even “don’t hastily speak.” The word “hastily” placed in a precise position in a sentence can reveal the true nature of a personality. These kinds of men will do anything and everything to demoralize their victims.

10. HUY ĐỨC (TRƯƠNG HUY SANG)

Translated by Vũ Ngọc Kiều Khanh

Lương Ngọc An Should Step Down

Originally posted on Facebook by Huy Đức (Trương Huy Sang) on April 15, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/Osinhuyduc/posts/4876330482402094>.

I believe Bùi Mai Hạnh and Dạ Thảo Phương.

By deciding to make their accusations after “the statute of limitations for criminal prosecution” has expired, Bùi Mai Hạnh and Dạ Thảo Phương have knowingly subjected themselves to greater legal risk than the accused. This indicates to me that both women believe in themselves and possess a strong sense of social responsibility.