

Memory of Autumn

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The deer that lives
On the evergreen mountain
Where there are no autumn leaves
Can know the coming of Autumn
Only by its own cry.
Onakatomi Yoshinobu (eighteenth century)

In the fall of 1939, in my native city in Vietnam, the now sadly famous imperial capital of Hue, a young poet, Luu Trong Lu, published his "Tieng Thu" ("The Sounds of Autumn"). Overnight he became our idol. He wrote of the "murmurs of autumn leaves," of a "startled golden deer walking on dry yellow leaves," of a "front-line soldier's silhouette in the heart of his lonely wife."

I was then in the last year of high school. My classmates and I were all enchanted by his verses. We copied them in our notebooks to read during our mathematics classes. We had enjoyed a relatively peaceful year and a bountiful harvest, although some among us sensed that the war in Europe might soon affect us. But we did not care. We loved our poet all the same.

This is nothing extraordinary. Our literature had been filled with words about autumn, at least since the tenth century. Most of our popular holidays are celebrated in the fall. Yet, with the exception of the North, in Hue and in what is now temporarily called South Vietnam, we do not really have four seasons, only two: a wet and a dry one. But of all peoples in the world we Vietnamese need imagination and sensitivity to enable us to sustain the glories and the burden of our history. Because we have no natural fall, we have to create one every year with our heart, our mind, and our rich, and subtle language. The

mention of *Thu* (autumn) alone is enough for us to vibrate with the cosmos.

In the fall of 1945, as a young officer in the Vietnam Liberation Army, I was operating somewhere in the jungles near the Vietnam-Laos border. An order from the Army's General Staff in Hanoi, which reached me by special messenger on a moonlit night, instructed us to make preparations for the coming *Chieu Dich Thu Dong* (Autumn-Winter Campaign). It filled my heart with determination, expectations, joy, and sadness. I have never worked so hard or fought so well.

I remember the day when I was ten years old when I had the honor, much disputed by my brothers, to serve chrysanthemum tea to my father and his friends who gathered at our home on the fifteenth of the eighth month to "welcome autumn," to discuss philosophy and to compose poems. Once my father argued that the word *Sau* (literally, sadness), which originates from the Chinese *Si*, which in turn is the association of the two words autumn and heart, does not only suggest sadness but also joy. My father's definition of "sadness" has haunted me ever since. Still, I had no biological contact with the real, natural autumn until late October, 1958, when, after having experienced, as we Vietnamese say, "many waves and winds" in my life elsewhere, I arrived in New York City to be an observer for the Vietnamese government at the United Nations. I was then a diplomat: Minister Plenipotentiary of Vietnam to the Union of Burma.

One Saturday a young American student, whose father was a friend of mine, invited me to drive with him to Massachusetts. He was visiting his girl friend at Mount Holyoke College. We left the city after a solid lunch at Café Chambord. As soon as we entered Connecticut it was like swimming in a river of Vietnamese poetry. I tried to compare mentally the glorious spectacle of colors and lights that was now unfolding in front of my eyes with what, through

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centuries, hundreds of well-known Vietnamese poets had written about autumn. I thought I heard the "sounds of autumn" ringing in my ears. Besides Luu Trong Lu, another poet and my contemporary, Cu Huy Can (now Vice Minister of Culture in Hanoi), came to my mind when our car passed a narrow bridge over a small stream. He had written in "Thu Rung" ("Autumn in the Forest"):

The colors of the sky-fading,
Flow at the bottom of the stream.
Birds depart
Leaves fall
Trees feel their solitude. . . .

I have never been so proud of our poets. Without experiencing the natural fall, they nevertheless have succeeded in capturing and expressing both its spirit and its sounds, its colors and its shades realistically and beautifully. A feeling of "joy and sadness" came over me when we arrived in Amherst, Massachusetts.

That night we stayed at an old inn in Northampton. It was sensually cold. I had never drunk so much wine in my life, but I had also never been so quiet. A gesture, a voice, would disturb and degrade the soul of autumn, I thought. My silence did not disturb my young companion at all; he himself was taciturn. He was in love and he was about to spend the night with his girl friend, whom I did not meet. I woke up at 6 A.M. Through the cream-colored curtains I saw an eyebrow-shaped "sobbing moon." I experienced a spiritual, intellectual *satori* of a sort.

I never saw my young friend again. He left me a note saying that he and his girl friend had decided "to spend a few more days in the hills." I was happy he did. I did not resent being left behind. I took a bus to return to my autumn-less New York.

In the fall of 1968 I was invited to give an address at an antiwar rally at a campus in New England. After the meeting I sat down in the deserted college cafeteria for a coffee with a young professor who had introduced me to the evening's gathering. I told her of my first encounter with autumn in this country back in 1958, of the young American, and of his Mount Holyoke girl friend I had never seen. She had tears in her eyes:

The young man you rode to Massachusetts with was my husband. I am sorry I did not meet you then, but he often mentioned you to me. We married in 1960 after my graduation. He joined the Army in 1967 and he was killed that year in a battle not far from your native city of Hue. He died in the fall in your autumn-less country.

Last year, in September, I went over old newspaper clippings in my files, something I do every year when school starts. I came across a poem, "Nguoi Mang Ky Hieu B-52" ("The Man Who Bore a B-52 Sign"), published in *Nhan Dan* (People's) daily in Hanoi, December 30, 1972. It was written by Luu Trong Lu, the 1939 author I have mentioned. The poem was dedicated to a B-52 pilot who was killed when his plane was shot down over a rice field near Hanoi on December 20, 1972. In his wallet there was a "picture of his beautiful wife, Simone, and a love letter." Luu Trong Lu, who joined the Resistance in 1945, happened to be in the area. He attended the simple burial and wrote the poem. One part of it reads:

As a poet, I promise to his wife
Simone
That I shall come back here
And for him and for him alone
I shall plant a tree
 which will spread its refreshing
 shade on his resting place
 the refreshing shade of Vietnam.
And Simone, one day when you
visit this place
You will sit under the shade of
this tree
And also bring your child
If you have one. . . .

At first I was a little surprised that Luu Trong Lu was able to write such compassionate and serene verses under the brutal B-52 carpet bombings, but remembering his "Tieng Thu" I realized that as a poet he could not be but humane. Then, watching the few red leaves falling from the maple tree in my backyard, I had a dream. I dreamed that some day American poets and writers would extend an invitation to Luu Trong Lu and all Vietnamese poets and writers to visit New England in the fall. I am sure they would "vibrate with the cosmos" as I did in 1958.

Such a gesture from this country's intellectuals, more than billions in aid, would be the best way to soften the cruel memories of the barbarous war which tore our peoples apart. America, which is fortunate enough to be provided by Nature with four seasons and with such a magnificent fall, should offer it as a tribute to the world, and first to the Vietnamese. Certainly the Vietnamese, who had for centuries dreamt of and written about autumn, would gladly accept it as a token of our mutual rehumanization and of our renewed friendship.