Eyes

by Nam Cao (1915-1951)

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About the author: *Nam Cao is the pseudonym of Tran Huu Tri. He is acclaimed as a short story writer and novelist in early twentieth-century Vietnamese literature. Throughout his writing career, Nam Cao was very aware of the responsibility of the realist writer: a writer must exercise both dignity and morality. Some of his famous works include "Chi Pheo" (1941), "Redundant Life" (1943), "Eyes" (1948), and "Story in the Frontier" (1948).*

In this story, "Eyes," the Vietnamese title resonates metaphorically: the Vietnamese word implies differing points of view. The story contrasts the two main characters' perspectives about the August Revolution of 1945 against the French and the role of the Vietnamese peasantry in the revolution, and it highlights the responsibility of the artist in wartime Vietnam. Nam Cao's "Eyes" is considered a major statement on literary aesthetics for later Vietnamese writers, especially during the period of the Vietnam War.

A young man from the village pointed me to a small brick gate and said, "Right here. Mr. Hoang lives here."I tapped his shoulder and said, "Thanks. I'll drop by your house later." When I was about to enter the gate, he interrupted, "Hold on. Let me call Mr. Hoangto chain the dog first. It's big and mean."

I watched the young man closely. I remembered my previous visits to Hoang's home in Hanoi: after ringing the house bell, I always waited for Hoang himself to grab the leather collar of his huge dog—a Western-bred, German shepherd. Only after Hoanghad ducked its head under a staircase did I have the courage to walk behind its tail and step into the living room.

I wasvery fearful of that aggressive German shepherd. On one of my visits, I didn'tfind Hoang holding the dog as usual,and he told me sadly that that the dog had died. Although I expressed my sympathy, I actually felt

relief at the news. His dog had died during the time of famine.[2](In the year 2000, our descendents probably stillwillbe talking about thatperiod ofgreat scarcity, making listeners shudder.)The dog did not die because of Hoang's inability to provide it with enough beef every day. Hoang was a writer, but also a smart dealer on the black market. When we visited him, we looked like skeletonsholding unsellable manuscripts, but Hoang always looked comfortably well off, and his dog didn't have to suffer a day without a meal. Although human corpses were ubiquitous in the town, the dog died probably because it either had eaten rotten human flesh or had inhaled too much of the stench of the dead. Poordog!

Yet now, as I was visiting Hoang again—this time his home of relocation, which was hundreds of kilometers away from Hanoi—I was being warned of another fierce dog. How interesting! I smiled. The young villager, without knowing why I was smiling, grinned. As heyelled outHoang's name, I heard sounds of tiny wooden clogs fromthe feet of someone sweeping the brick yard swiftly. A little boy in his black beret and grey sweater answered the gate. His black eyes stared at me.

Ngu, Hoang's son, excitedly cried out, without remembering to greet me, "Daddy, it's Mr. Do! Mr. Do!" He then quickly went back into the house.

"What's going on? What's the matter?" Hoang's voice was both deep and blusterous as he questioned his son (he always used that outlandish tone whenever he talked to his child). The youngster mumbled something unintelligible; then I heard Mrs. Hoang's voice, "Ngu, chain the dog. Chain it immediately to the pillar over there."

Hoang stepped out slowly and heavily, because his body was so round. As he was walking, his arms were so enormous that the flesh under them protruded, making his arms appear abnormally short. Previously in Hanoi, his heavy physique had made him look steady and stately in his formal western suits. Now, his fat body was verynoticeable under his light blue clothes covered by a white sweater worn so tightlyover his upper body that he could hardly breathe. He remained behind the gate, extending one of his corpulent hands toward me, leaning his head back, and opening his mouthslightly—a gesture of someone in great surprise or joy. I suddenly

[2]The famine of 1945 in Northern Vietnam occurred during the Japanese occupation of French Indochina. It is estimated that almost two million Vietnamese died of starvation.

noticed a change on his round, fleshy face: he had grown a horseshoe-shaped moustache that looked like a small brush.

Speechless for a while, he afterward started to mumble in his throat, "Oh my Gosh! Welcome! It's such an honor." He then turned his head and said to his wife, "My dear, it's Mr. Do. He has travelled such a long distance to visit us."Mrs. Hoang ran toward the gate while still fastening the last button of her *aodai*,[3] which was donned in a rush to greet the guest. She gave a warm welcome: "We've been looking forward to meeting you again. When I heard my son, I thought he must have mistaken you for someone else—for someone who lived just fifteen ortwenty kilometers away…."

After he shook my hand, Hoang gently pushed me forward. His wife quickly ran into the house to arrange some chairs. Why did they welcome me with such unusual hospitality? I began to doubt my negative feelings about Hoang, which I had developed since the end of the Revolution, when Hoang suddenly began to treat me almost as a stranger. I had tried to visit him a few times to see if he had changed his opinions about crucial twists and turns in our nation's history, but he had never been home. His door had always been locked. His little boy had looked through a small hole on the door, first asking for my name carefully and then returning later,to inform me of his father's absence.

As a result, I became skeptical after a few visits. On my last visit, I heard Hoang's and his wife's voices even before I rang the doorbell, but his little son insisted that his parents had left for their farmin the countryside the night before. Undeniably, Hoang didn't want to see me. I didn't know why, but since then, I stopped visiting. Once we met in the street by accident, we coldly shook hands as a courtesy, said hello quickly, then went our separate ways. I was becoming aware of Hoang's idiosyncrasies, especially when he turnedall of a sudden into a complete stranger, for reasons only he himself knew. Sometimes, his attitude toward friends changed because a friend's literary work received positive comments from a critic, and its authorhad, in the past, criticized Hoang's work. Sometimes the change required noreal conflict. One could be very close to Hoang when one was merely a regional author who only contributed some works to be published in Hanoi magazines, but if one relocated to the capital and started to socialize with other writers, one would no longer be Hoang's friend. Hoang

[3]"The traditional dress of Vietnamese women, consisting of a long tunic that is slit on the sides and worn over loose trousers" (*The American Heritage Dictionary*).

probably knew that he had become anathema in the Hanoi literary community.

Personally, I never understood why so many people despised him until he treated me as a stranger. I later gained a better understanding of Hoang. When the Allies assisted the Vietnamese in disarming the Japanese, some prostitutes took off their western dresses and put on Chinese clothes. I didn't know on whom my friend Hoang relied, but he published a daily newspaper to denounce that sort of thing. He ranted against many people at first, then even against his former friends—who were generally kind and who had notbothered himthemselves—because the presence of their names on major National Liberation Front newspapers upset him. Out of outrage, he referred to them disparagingly as impecunious proletarian writers whose lives suddenly changed for the better thanks to blessings earned from tending their ancestors' graves;[4] he accused them of depriving people of the opportunity of advancement in order selfishly to enrich their own lives. I smirked, not because I felt uneasy with his harsh condemnations, but because I couldn't believe that there were still any Vietnamese authors using their writings to gain such underhanded, ignoble ends. But Hoangwould not change. Ihad thought thatthere were no longerany vestiges of true friendship between us—so why was he being so joyful at this *rendezvous* with me? Hadthe passage of time actually allowed him to change? Or had our nation's heroic revolution reeducated him? In all honesty, I was moved when he said:

"There is not a single day that we don't mention your name. Once I was reading a neighbor's newspaper and saw your writing, so I assumed that you had been assigned to do propaganda work in this province. When an official visited our village, I asked him to deliver a letter to you. I relied on chancebecause I wasn't sure if my letter ever would reach you. Now, we're able to meet again. You don't look like a strong man, so how could you walk for such a long distance? How could you find this village? When I first moved here, I would get lost if I was even twenty steps from my house. There are so many narrow pathways around here, and they all look the same to me. Sometimes I was only cominghome from the field and I still got lost…."

Hoang's current home was a quite clean, spacious, traditional three-section house, with a big front porch, a brick yard, and floweringvine-covered walls. There was a pretty, green vegetable garden. Fortunately, his

[4]Many Vietnamese people believe that, if one's ancestors' graves are well attended, one's family will receive good fortunes.

entire family lived together here under one roof. The actualowner of the house was a merchant from Hanoi, who had depended on Hoang and his wife's finances and clients. Now wasthe appropriate time for him to reciprocate out of gratitude. The merchant had moved to his own father's house next door and authorized Hoang to use this house as he pleased. Hoang told me that,then continued:

"I don't know how our lives would be if we hadn't been able to use his house. I see many relocated people struggling miserably. Can you imagine this: a relocated older brother moved into his younger brother's home, but thenwas forced to move out into a cottage in the garden when the older brother's wife gave birth?"

"Let me remind you," I replied, "that villagers here stick with their traditional customs to avoid bad luck ...."

"I know," he responded with an angry and disapproving tone. "I know that, but who would care in that situation? That's not yet the whole story! Although the older brother is living a lifeof poverty, his younger brother not only shows no compassion but also derides him,referring constantlyto the comfort and extravagance ofhis older brother's previous life. For example, he'll say, 'When your business was going well, I told you to send me money to purchase land in the countryside, but you stubbornly said that you didn't need it because you wanted to buy houses in the city. Why don't you go back to your city houses?' So awful! You see ...but only rarely do any of us have to experience such a terrible time in our history. Who could resist a luxurious life when one is wealthy? How many people would work as hard as water buffalos, gladly live in a slum, and never dare to spend money on good food or clothes, in order to save money to buy land and rice paddies as the younger brother did?"

Mrs. Hoang joined the conversation:

"Many people caused us to worry. Perhapsninety out of a hundred people believed that the French would not have dared to go to war with us. I once naively believed that we had evacuated our home, after the government issued its decree, just to scare them. Then all of a sudden, the war broke out. We could run, but how could we take our valuables with us? Fortunately, we were able to take some money and we had some goods stored at our suburban farm. With luck, we can survive for another year; then once everything is spent and gone, we will suffer. I'm afraid that people will deride us. That's why we don't dare to eat a chicken now, although we can afford it, because people would find out and mock us later. They're very mean-spirited here, you know!

Hoang smiled and said:

"I have no idea howthey still have time to be so nosy and inquisitive when they're supposed to be quite busy. If you killed a chicken today, the whole village would know about it tomorrow. Although you have just arrived, I have seen some people trying to figure out who you are. I am certain that the news of your visit today will spread throughout the village tomorrow. They will discuss your name, your age, your physique, how many moles you have on your face, how many holes you have in your left pant leg."

I smiled and explained to Hoang:

"Nowadays, they need to pay attention to all strange visitors to the village. Definitely, those who have tried to ask about me out there are responsible members of the self-defense force."

"Ah, those self-defense folks. They are both stupid and ridiculous. They believe that a woman who appears pregnant must be hiding a grenade in her pajamas! It takes them at least fifteen minutes to peruse a small document, but they ask any passer-by to present identification. They stop and question anyone leaving the village; when one returns, they question again and again. If you yourself just left the village and realized that you had forgotten your hat at my house and came back to get it, they would stop you first before they let you reenter the village. Then when you left, they would interrogate you again. It seems to me that they take great pleasure in inquiring about identification papers."

He gave a muffled laugh and looked me over from head to toe, asking:

"You have lived in the countryside and you must understand these people'speculiarities very well. Why don't you explain their silly behavior to me? I actually had livedonly in Hanoi; so, I knew of these folks only through your short stories. Now that I am living among them, I can't stand them. I just can't stand them!"

Hoang's disdain became more obvious as his lips pouted and his nose shrank, as if he had smelled a rotten corpse. He and his wife excitedly took turns ridiculing these country people. He said, for instance, that today's country youngsters and women have become quite ludicrous. They're all stupid, rude, selfish, greedy, and stingy. There is no mutual kindness between fathers and their children, or among siblings. These country folks can't even spell Vietnamese wordscorrectly, but they love to discuss politics. Whenever they open their mouths, all you hear are propositions, petitions, criticisms,

admonitions, and terms like *colonial fascism*, *reactionism*, *socialism*, *democracy*, and even*new democracy*! If these folks apprehend a stranger, that person shouldentertainno thought of escape. They willsubjecthimto propagandizing for hours. They think, no doubt, that people relocated from Hanoi, like Hoang and his wife,must hold regressive opinions and be unenlightened; therefore, these folks wouldn't waste any opportunity to do their duty as propagandists. But how should they propagandize?

Hoang glowered and continued:

"Let me tell you this story; you probably will think I am making it up, but if there is any fabrication, mayGod kill me. Once I went to the town market. Although I had asked for directions carefully, I forgot them when I reached a three-way intersection and didn't know which direction to take. I stood there, awaiting a passer-by. After quite a while, there came a young,lanky man carrying bamboo limbs on his shoulders. I greeted him and asked, "Please show me which road leads to the town market." He, without saying a word, stared at me, as if I were an alien from Mars. This signaled that I first should present to him my identification paper. Then he responded, 'Go that way until you see a huge banyan tree, then make a right, go for a short distance, make a left, pass a field, and follow the path leading to the Ngo Village, go around the village shrine, turn right, and the market is not too far from there.' Something like that; I can't remember the exact details. All I knew was that his directions were complicated— so many left and right turns that confused me. Then he told me, 'Wait right here until you see a peddler, and just follow him.' I thought his last suggestion was sensible. He smiled and said, "Goodbye. Excuse me I have to go now; I am in a rush. I have to take this bamboo to the Upper Hamlet for security purposes, to stop the enemy's advanced mobilized unit. Our long war is divided into three stages: defense,active resistance and counter offensive. The defense stage means …." He then explained to me what it was, as he had learned his lines by heart; his explanation was about five pages long.

Mrs. Hoang laughed out loud. I smiled, but I was not quite pleased. Hoang noticed this and vowedagain:

"May God strike me dead if I'm making it up! At that moment, I was so surprised that I couldn't laugh, and I didn't dare to anyway, because the man could have injured me. Since then, I've told my wife to lock the gate, and we will just stay here."

I smiled reluctantly. What I wanted to tell Hoang was never said. Hoang never would listen to me, because to him I was merely another insignificant propaganda official. Even if I were able to talk him into doing

what I was doing—carrying a rucksack and travelling to different villages in order to gain a better understanding of the countryside and its people—it would be useless anyway. All Hoang could see in the incident that he recounted was that young man who was carrying bamboojoyfully, but Hoang failed to realize the young man's purpose for the bamboo—to stop the enemy. The young man had explained the three stages like a parrot, so Hoang saw only the young man's uncouth behavior without perceiving the noble cause behind his explanation. If Hoang were to maintain that perspective about life, the more he traveled and observed, the more bitter and upset he would become.I was aware of this. In Hoang's eyes as a writer, I was merely an inexperienced novice. That's why I dared not share with him my opinions. I hesitated but made some conciliatory comments:

"Lots of things are unusual. Country people always remain a mystery to us. I have lived among them. I used to get upset because the majority of them were uneducated, fearful, cowardly, and submissive. I became very skeptical when people talked about 'the strength of the people.' Our country's population consists primarily of peasants who never would be able to make a revolution. The times when Le Loi and QuangTrung[5] ruled were long gone and would never return. However, I was flabbergasted when the counter offensive occurred. Surprisingly, it is these peasants who are the enthusiastic revolutionaries. I have joined them in their attacks onstate office buildings. I have interacted with them in the South-Central Front. Lots of men with blackened teeth and big eyes even mispronounced the word *grenade*, calling it *gredate*, and sang the song "Go Fight" likea tired chant, but when they fight, they're very brave and courageous. They set their families and properties aside. If you meet them, you will be astonished. It is these folks that make the revolution, while a few months ago, they might have been be too timid to react to thesoldiers' flirtatious behavior toward their wives, only grumbling a few curse words after walking away. Then they would go home and vent all of their anger on their wives' cheeks."

Hoang smirked sardonically:

"But you can't deny that their behavior is silly. I've seen some men in the self-defense force or even somenational soldiers playing with guns or grenades, which easily could take away someone's life. Some can't even hold a gun properly and don't know how to use it. That's where our country stands. If the defenders have never touched a gun in their lives, how can they shoot?

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[5]Le Loi: Emperor of Vietnam from 1428-43
QuangTrung (a.k.a. Nguyen Hue): Emperor of Vietnam from 1788-92

But they can learn as they go into the war. Let them fight the Westerners! But the most dangerous part is that they are appointed as officials in this association, or that organization. For example, the president of my district in Hanoi had been, before the war, a pig's blood-soup seller, so he can make pig's blood soup, but how can you expect him toadminister a district? The president of my village here, after looking at my wife's identification, read her name as Nguyen ThucHien, and he insisted that she hadborrowed her identification from a male. According to him, all women must bear the middle name 'Thi.'" Mrs. Hoang laughed so hard that she started to cough, and tears came to her eyes. She wiped them with a handkerchief, shook her head, and said to me: "If you lived here, you would laugh every day. Ironically, the village president insisted that my husband teach literacy classes or help with propaganda."

Hoang joined in: "I have nothing to do, and sometimes get bored. But how could I work with those people? So, I have to accept being labeled as 'reactionary.'"

To change the topic, I asked, "Since you have so much free time, have you written anything interesting?"

"Not yet, because I don't even have a proper desk. But eventually we need to write something for the next generation. If we have talent, we might even write something better than Vu TrongPhung's*Dumb Luck*.[6] If Phung were still alive, he might be surprised.

After early dinner, about 4:00 pm, Hoang invited me to accompany him and his wife to visit some friends who had relocated here from the cities. There was a retired village guard, a former teacher who was fired because he had raped a student, and an old judge who used to deal with legal issues andbribery.Hoang disliked them because they knew nothing about literature; they were only good at playing cards. Talking with them was boring, but if Hoang did not socialize with them, he would have no one with whom tospend time. He said that to me as we were walking together, and he talked quietly to meabout the evil,the stupidity andthe ludicrousness of each person, while we walked slowly, waiting for Mrs. Hoang.

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[6]Vu TrongPhung (1912-1939) is a famous Vietnamese novelist and short story writer. He uses literature to satirize Western-influenced lifestyles and immoral, decadent, and ludicrous behavior of urban Vietnamese people during the late French colonial decades of the 1930s. *Dumb Luck*, his well-acclaimed novel, was translated into English in 2002 by Nguyen Nguyet Cam and Peter Zinoman (University of Michigan Press).

Mrs. Hoang walked fast to catch up with us. Her cheeks had become flushed from being near the kitchen fires. She apologized and said: "I just wanted to take a look at the pot of simmering sweet potatoes, so that we'll have some to eat later. There are no delicacies in this village, but something to eat for fun is always available. During your visit, I'll buy some large sugar cane stalks tomorrow and soak them in grapefruit juice to scent them; they taste really good."

When we reached a big brick gate covered with vines, Hoang rang the bell. A little boy answered the gate and greeted himrespectfully, "Yes, sir."

"Is Mr. Pham home?

"He has gone to the teacher's house, sir."

"Really? I heard that the teacher was here all morning."
"No, sir. He didn't come here this morning."

We turned back and followed a few zigzag paths. We reached another vine-covered brick gate. A nursemaid holding a baby was standing at the gate; she greeted us, "Good evening, sirs. Good evening, madam."

"Is the teacher home?"

"No, sir. He has gone to the village guard's house."

"I was told earlier that the village guard was here."

"No, sir. That isn't true."

Hoang turned back. After a few steps, he said to his wife, "They must be playing cards again. Mrs. Yen Ky, I bet, isn't home either, is she? She is addicted to the game. They must be gathered either here or at Mr. Pham's home and have posted someone to attend the gate."

On this, Mrs. Hoang said nothing. Hoang tapped my shoulder and said, "Isn't that sad? Those educated people are all like that, while the common folks… Well, you already know."

It was onlyby coincidence that Hoang moved here and lived among theseunscrupulous members of the educated class. Why didn't he become a soldier, or participate in propaganda plays, or join other cultural revolutionary groups andlearn how students and officers volunteering for the military, how doctors working in research institutions or military hospitals, and how his friends (other writers and artists) were engaging themselves in the lives of the common people—to learn from and teach these working, country people, while gaininginspiration fortheir art?

I gave a slight smile. "Listening to you disappoints me. So do you think our revolution eventually will fail?"

He answered my question immediately: "Yes, I do. I've lost hope. If you observe carefully, you will see. However, I haven'tlost *all*hope because I still have trust in Uncle Ho. Both the August Revolution[7] and the current war[8] rely on a talented leader. How Ho Chi Minh can save a country defines his talents, but it will be extremely difficult for him to save our country, especially in this situation. You see, the representative of the liberation of France, the fourth greatest nation,was [Charles] de Gaulle."

I mentioned a few names in the liberation of Francewho were even more important thanCharles de Gaulle. Hoang shook his head and said, "Even they can't compare to Ho Chi Minh." He continued, "Uncle Ho has done many things *so* admirably. Even if our people were worthless, Uncle Ho could manage situations to help our country gain its independence. For instance, the *convention préléminaire* of June 3causedthe Americans to realize that they couldn't deceive him.[9] The French are nobody! If the French hadn't been urged on by the Americans, the French would not have dared to violate the *convention préléminaire* of June 3. The French should have beensatisfied withthe concessions they received and treasured them."

After eating the sweet potatoes and drinking several cups of tea, I went to bed. Hoang was afraid that I wouldn't be able to sit and talk after having walked ten kilometers and having conversed with him since I arrived. Although I wasn't really sleepy, it felt good to lie under a thick blanket inside a mosquito net. Two twin beds were placed in parallel with a narrow aisle between them. The net was bleached white. Just looking at them made me feel comfortable.
Hoang and I went to bed first. A pack of cigarettes and a box of matches next to an ashtray were placed on the head of the bed. I wore my street clothes to bed and was concerned thatsome bugs might jump from my shirt and infect thefresh-scented blanket. Often times, I shared my own blanket with workers in a printing plant, and I could not guarantee I didn't have their bugs on my body.

Mrs. Hoang arranged a few things in the house, closed the door, and brought a large oil lamp and a bottle to our beds. Hoang asked, "Are you going to light the big lamp?"

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[7]The August Revolution of 1945
[8]The French war
[9]*convention préléminaire* of June 3, 1946

"Yes, but I need to add some oil first."

Hoang asked me, "Do you like to read *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*?"

I admitted I had not read the whole thing.

"What a pity! Among all Eastern and Western novels, I love *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*and*Romance of the Eastern Chou*, but regardless nobody can surpass the Chinese when it comes to the novel. Those two are my favorites. *Water Margin*is as good as *Three Kingdoms* and*Eastern Chou*.[10] Regardless of how good a novel is, you read it only once. The second time you read it, you start to lose interest, but*Three Kingdoms* and*Eastern Chou*are the exceptions. I never get bored reading those two."

"Do you have those two books?"

"I left*Eastern Chou*in Hanoi because I couldn't bring it with me when I was relocated here. Very sad! Fortunately, I had kept *Three Kingdoms*at my suburban farm, so I could bring it here with me. If not, I would die of boredom.

He used the ashtray and continued, "I asked if you read *Three Kingdoms*because my wife and I often read a few episodes before we sleep. But since you are visiting, maybe we shouldn't do it tonight? If you want to talk, I'm perfectly okay with not reading for one night."

I, of course, insisted that Hoang and his wife follow their habit. He seemed very happy and said, "If you don't mind, we'll read then. We will listen together and fall asleep. You look kind of tired and should get some sleep soon. Does the light bother you?"

I told him that I often slept in the printing plant, with the bright lights on and amid loud noise from running machines. Here, I would sleep well under the warm blanket, even if there were a shooting nearby. Hoang's laughter sounded like a rooster's crow. He said, "Sounds good. We're going to read now. My dear, get the book."

Mrs. Hoang ran to get the hardcover, leather-bound book. She asked, "Do you want to read, or do you want me to read?"

"You read it, please."

She put the lamp back at the head of the bed, took off her *aodai*, and lay next to her son, who had lain down there first. She asked, "Where were we last night? Did we…?"

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[10]These are famous classic Chinese novels.

"No need to worry about it. Reread the section in which Cao Cao cajoles Dong Zhuo. Do you think Cao Cao is talented, Do?"

I answered perfunctorily, "He is, indeed."

"Yes. He's very smart—the smartest character in *Three Kingdoms*. How in the world did he get that smart?"

Mrs. Hoang found the episode and began to read it aloud. Hoang smoked while listening. He slapped his thighs whenever he heard a good passage and uttered, "So clever! So clever! Damn! Only Cao Cao can do that."