

# Thu-Van Tran

## Write as the Beasts Cry at Night

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Thu-Van Tran draws on literature, history, and nature to explore the question of exile and the mutation of beings and languages in the wake of colonial narratives. *Write as the Beasts Cry at Night* unfolds in La Loge like an open book, a palimpsest where Marguerite Duras' aura intersects with legendary, intimate writings. Through tracing, imprinting, and fragmenting, the artist focuses on what her chosen materials represent, searching for recollections she can extract. Thu-Van Tran scrutinises contaminated memories, the processes of disappearance and reappearance, and buried violence to sketch out a new imaginary—a possible liberation.

Dear Thu-Van,

I'm at the temple's threshold, like an outsider searching for beauty.

You once told me that memory is our medium and that we live inside its material. A material, a language ready to drag us into the movement of images; a material conducive to absolute transformation—writing—as Duras says, she who has kept you company in your work over the years. With you I share an interest in this complex and essential character. She who places the difficulties of evoking colonial Indochina in France at the heart of her work. She who says that writing is also not speaking; writing is howling without noise. She who says that to read is also to write. Working on and crafting one's texts is also, I believe, the creation of a language.

You told me that history was built by contamination, occupation, and domination. You and Duras give injustice a materiality. She, first and foremost driven by the desire for revenge coupled with anger as her prime motivation, you, using language as resistance; you say that "Language [is] a spoil of war". You unravel feelings through the very gestures of writing. I've read Duras's words, and here I move with them, they drift in the air. In the unholy temple that I now see, you have torn them from their bindings to offer the reading body a wealth of knowledge unfolding for each and every one of us. Are you worried about the loss of knowledge? What would the world be without books? There's a whole economy captured in indelible ink on these pages, not to mention your thoughts on the fragile nature of words.

From dawn to dusk, I walk in circles. Wandering around Hanoi alongside Hoa-Mi is the symbolic equivalent of an earthly cycle. The silence of contemplation leads me to follow the traces of an intimate history in a country where censorship and corruption reign. Between past and present, spaces converge: "Why have myths turned into desire?" (1).

On the white sheet of paper, blue splashes draw mountains, halos merging visions of Hanoi. In a theatre of eternal resurrection and duality, creatures of knowledge and tranquillity live side by side. They remind me of Bachelard, who saw imagination as a faculty for distorting images rather than inventing them (2). Time spent with Hoa-Mi is like a dream in Vietnamese, learning new human, animal, and vegetal languages. Hoa-Mi does not speak with the accent of the wise turtles. I wasn't sure I understood correctly, so I followed the footsteps of your bootleg translations, stripped of their author's linguistic authority (3). Guided by my subjectivity, I tried, like you, to turn the past into the present, creating the impression of déjà-vu, in order to start speaking the other's language. "*Ni l'eau, ni le ciel ne peuvent se distinguer. Ils s'unissent, s'abolissent de toute matérialité*" (4).

The horizon tilts, and I come to a standstill in front of the great veil bathed in the projection's light. The narrative fragments do not only perpetuate radiant memories of Confucius (5). How can we reenact and understand the days of colonisation, exploitation, and plantations that we will never know? As I look at the rubber trees, the grey cloud, and the birds cloaked in mourning white above, I read the violent chapters of a crucial history. It could be that your meticulously dyed, ground, and fired materials offer a temporary remedy, a moment of respite from unhealable grief.

The day falls silent. Deliverance, like when night sets in, says Duras. Hoa-Mi is leaving, like others before her, but I don't think her back is turned on Vietnam. This other temple I have entered is perhaps a portrait, one representing the accumulated memory of the country left behind.

Kind regards,  
Antoinette

(1) *24 heures à Hanoi*, Thu-Van Tran, 2019.

(2) Gaston Bachelard, *L'air et les Songes, Essai sur l'imagination du mouvement* [Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement], 1943.

(3) Thu-Van Tran explores colonial narratives and hybrid identities through literature. In 2013, she published a subjective French version of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

(4) *Au plus profond du noir*, Joseph Conrad, translated from *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Thu-Van Tran, third edition, 2016, Les Abattoirs – Frac Midi-Pyrénées, France. The sentence translates back to English as "*Neither water nor sky can be separated. They unite, removing themselves from all materiality.*"

(5) The Temple Of Literature in Hanoi is a Confucian teaching temple founded in the 11th century in honour of the philosopher.