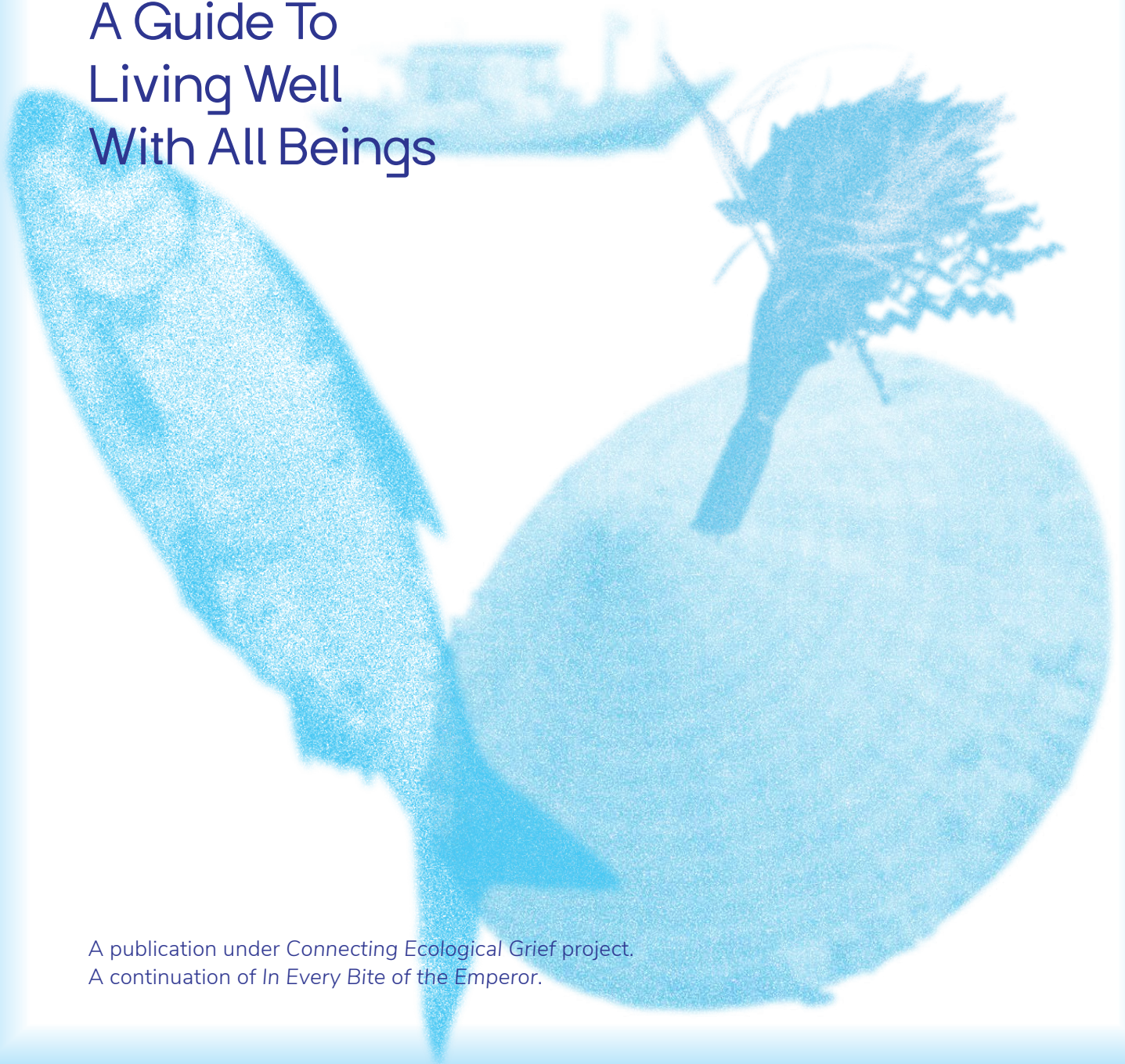


A Guide To Living Well With All Beings

A publication under Connecting Ecological Grief project.
A continuation of *In Every Bite of the Emperor*.





Connecting Ecological Grief

Connecting Ecological Grief is a collaborative project between Heart of Glass (UK), Á Space (Vietnam) and Gerimis Art (Malaysia), weaving artistic research practices, transnational narratives, and community knowledge between Vietnam, Malaysia, and the UK. This work forms a part of *In Every Bite of the Emperor*, initiated and led by Youngsook Choi and Heart of Glass. This growing long-term collaborative project explores the climate crisis through the experience of individual and collective grief in connection to environmental damage and community destruction within the UK, Malaysia, South Korea, and Vietnam.

Central to *Connecting Ecological Grief* is a shared enquiry exploring ecological damage, focusing on the meeting points of land and water—coastlines and rivers. The project hopes to highlight how the process of gathering, storytelling, collective reflection, and solidarity could in part reconcile the human-ecological divide, act as witnesses to the changes to our environments and our ecological relationships, and at the same time call for possible action towards climate change, environmental degradation, and species displacement.

This publication contains the wonderings, dreamings, rememberings and, occasionally, knowings of the team who held this project as well as those of the artists, community members, water bodies, and other beings we were privileged to meet through our work. It represents the traces of time spent together, connecting across distances or situated in time and place.



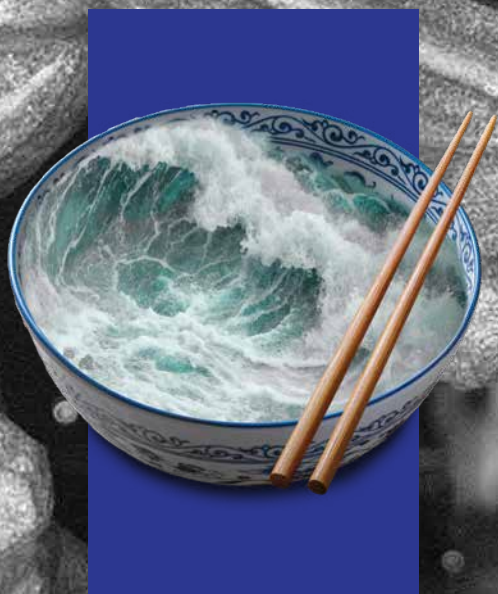


To be in the river flow of collaboration is to feel out the current, the pulls and draws, the many sources which feed into the collective body bringing with them the memories of cloudforms and rocky outcrops, and their desires to move towards, through, into. It is a process which requires a trusting stepping into and we are grateful to the whole project team for having done so with us, for the continuation of an invaluable ongoing relationship with Gerimis Art Project and the community of Kampung Barreh Barrah and Kampung Rakoh to whom we offer our deepest gratitude and respect, and for the new relationship with Á Space and the joy of connections with individuals in Huế and Hà Tĩnh made possible through their being within this project.

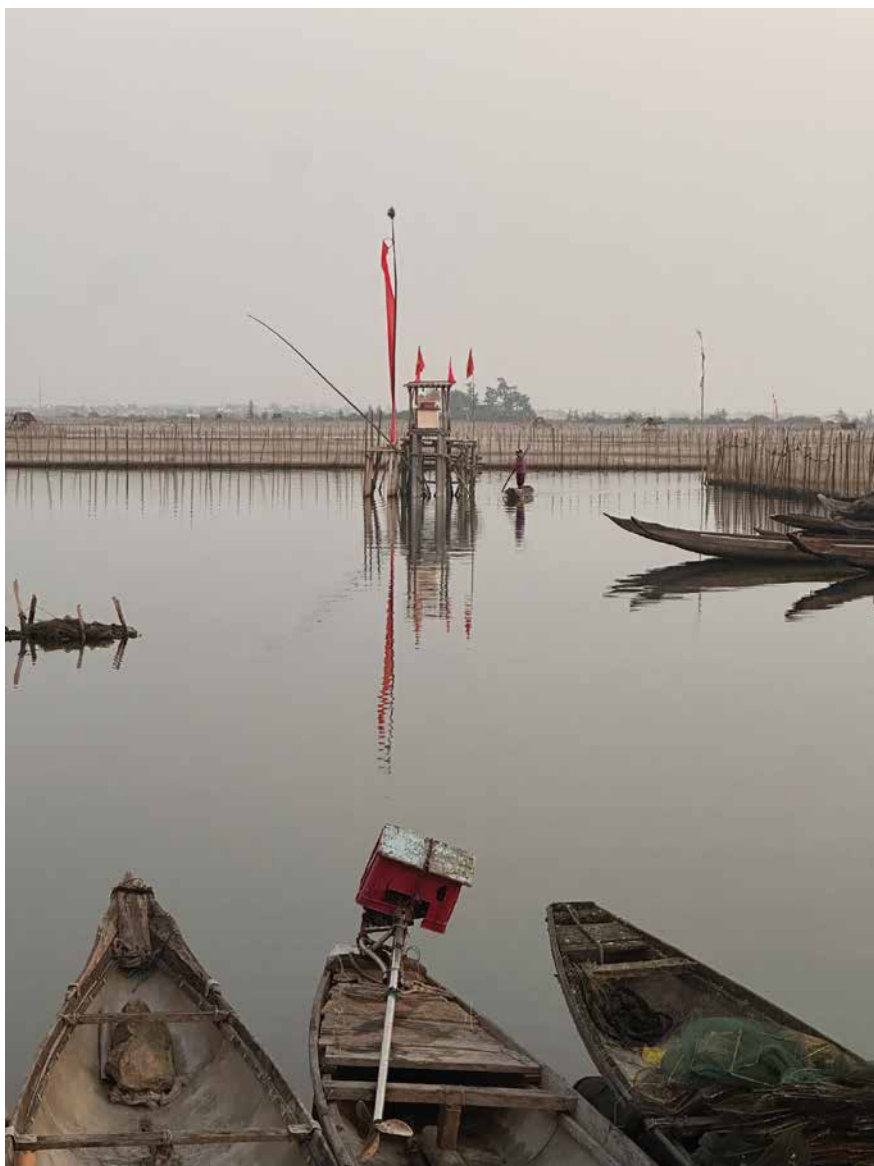
This publication could not have happened without the support, wisdom, and generosity of many people. We particularly thank: Bùi Ánh and Giang Nguyễn for joining us for an exploratory residency in Huế and Hà Tĩnh and for sharing your water relationships; Hoang Thao for their sensitive documentation and additional translation support in Hà Tĩnh; Thanh Nu Mai, Nguyễn Minh Ngọc, Nguyễn Bảo Ngân, and the wider AirHue team for their gentle, caring hosting of us and our activities during our time in Huế; Tuấn Mami for his encouragement and hosting in Hanoi; Fikri Husin for his documentation and companionship in Pahang.

Finally we thank all of the more-than-human communities who made this project possible and who continue to will us to witness; Vịnh Vững Áng in Hà Tĩnh, and Phá Tam Giang in Huế, Vietnam, Colliers Moss Common in St Helens, England, and Ulu Jelai in Pahang, Malaysia.





Larut's Tears



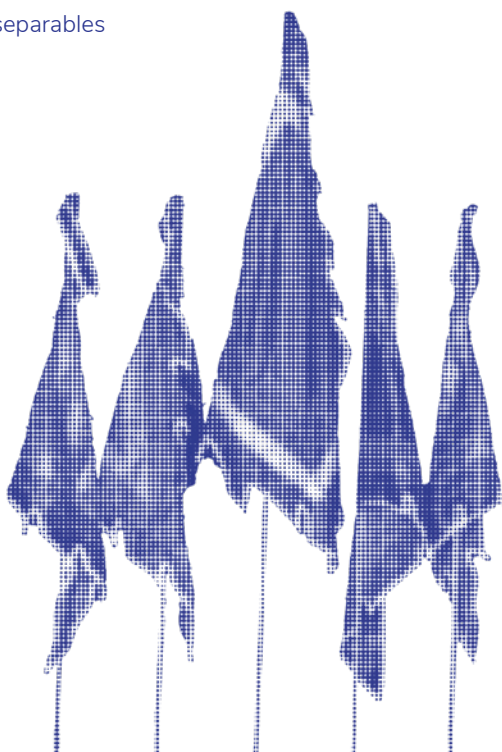
PART I

When Franz Fanon says, 'I entered the list'
I immediately think of death, death of all kinds
especially the ones at the bottom of the list
as well as the ones outside
And, of course, the death of stories

No pause in this world, only moving on, and on
grief is the highest luxury, even the rich cannot afford
ignition for burning out, burning down
bodies into numbers into investment
for more bodies into numbers
how many times did I wake up, feeling
I don't belong here

The field is open, letting silence in
the most precise common language
madness and protection coexist here
permeable paths, guarded dreams
the world of 'hearing' takes place
all the whispering, indeterminant murmuring
imbuing spirits between air particles
abyssal hissing from the Earth's belly

Pop-ups of ancestral temples in rice paddies
death composted for living mouths
overtly invested memorials
Feng Shui altered landscape
worshipping life and death all at once
no separation of the inseparables
simple but forgotten



Plots of shrimp farming in Tam Giang Lagoon
 incarceration, a key method for the modern economy
 erection of four walls, locked gates
 no way out until ready for the market
 ins and outs of waterflow, the only messenger
 no one ever pays enough attention to
 hungry fishing boats even before sunrise
 rattling engines break the calm at the rim of dawn
 sleepy eyes, hardy routines, a daily yield
 tired bodies, tired sea, fading memory of
 the vivacity of being on this planet

warm water, maybe too warm
 floating dead bodies of fish
 litters of litters, ruins of ruins
 collective amnesia, a surrender to harmers
 all stinks in extracted landscapes
 we convene to crack a handsome water coconut
 the excitement of communal snacking
 only to find out geometric shells bear no nut
 mother with no seed to nurture
 like fire flames with no smoke
 life seems to be departing quietly
 long lost equilibrium
 he says crisis, I say curse
 he calls for solutions, I call for mournings
 red polyester strippy flags in the lagoon altars
 fluttering vulnerable dreams with no direction
 even ancestral spirits are confused, what
 all these prayers are for, if there is no love
 the sun is rising, as promised
 iridescent waves, a witness





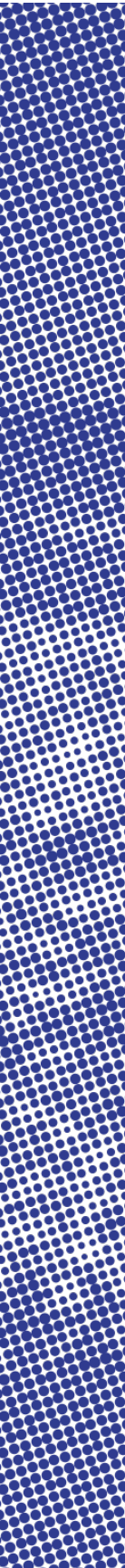
6 miles away from Huế City, part of central Vietnam,
is the infamous abandoned water park
in Thuy Tien Lake, nicknamed Axe
too much yang, too much yin
broken balance of the ROI spreadsheet
failed tourism project, a heavenly curse
invincible survival of the Dragon Dome
covered by graffiti, with cracks all over
new settlement for all those untamable
ferns, potent pioneers, making
everything porous
YouTubers' dramatic backdrop
spellbounding aura, millions of likes
majestic reflection on the water
waving, rippling, spirited away

Land dispute nearby
between the church and the state
the highest priests in the Vatican Church
their victory toast with orange wines
produced from the Thien An monastery
No one knows how it tastes
heavenly divide or same old story

We reconvene, again at dawn
this time, by the weeping sea in Ha Tĩnh
it's for the ritual, a release of thirty-nine fish bodies
commemoration of the Essex 39 incident in 2019
death in the UK, rooted in the Formosa Disaster
70 tons of dead fish washed up on the shore
throwing up out of inconceivable agony
the infertile sea, like a water coconut
so are the livelihoods dependent on it
smuggler's vile whispering, pink promise of
quick money, thirty-nine desperate souls
falling into a life-worth gamble

The young fisherman waits for us
drenched in the stormy rain
unforgiving waves, a face full of doubt
only insanity would take you out to the sea, he says
if not today, there will be no other day, I think
the old fisherman detects desperacy, commending
his son to take the mission for extra family income
the sea, still fierce and furious
if his youngest grandchild wasn't on board
we wouldn't dare to make our way

We gather at the fisherman's house
breakfast first, hungry bellies before anything
the tender logic, mouthful comfort of warm phở
as if we had many meals together before
meanwhile, thirty-nine dried cods, all
stacked up carefully in the courtyard
not for the stomach but for the sea
so are the moon-like rice papers
hand-made by the family in Huế
three generations of mastery
a law student descendant won't inherit
the lukewarm water for rehydration
grandma of the house quietly joins
survivor of ovarian cancer, she says
a godsend for ritual making
water-bathed rice papers become swampy
ready for guiding hands to play shapes
without a word of exchange, grandma and I
become a born pair for ceremonial fish wrapping
turning one by one into an offering to the sea



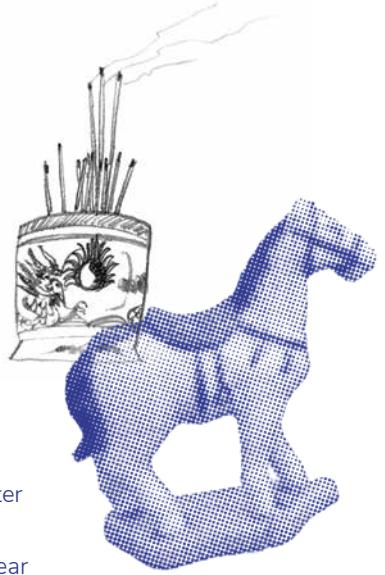


Standby in red plastic basket
 rice-paper blanketed fish bodies
 the engine-powered wheelie machine
 pulls our boat, gauging the water level
 deep enough for the motor to swim away
 finally making a way into inner sea
 totally against the incoming waves
 rocky boat, shaky bodies, anxiety and fear
 the fisherman in charge falls into the water
 all scream, GO BACK! GO BACK!
 threat of near-death, a regret
 we cannot go back without going further
 the recuperated fisherman says
 waterway, a circular with tidal pull and push
 no straight back and forth like a road
 a truce with sea waves first
 a sea hostage, we carry on, until
 the fisherman picks the spot to release the fish
 deep breaths with closed eyes, aligning
 my vibration to the rhythm of the water
 I offer the fish, one by one, to the sea
 the first offering for our safe return home, thinking
 millions of the same prayer somewhere else
 second for all victims by Formosa Marine Disaster
 the rest for those lives dependent on the sea



On the shore, grandpa waits for us
 giving his hands to each off-boarding
 the fire is being made in his house
 comforting wet and tense bodies
 the fisherman gives me a Dragon fruit
 a gift with red-purple flesh, pierced
 with countless seeds, such a contrast
 surging exhaustion, yet
 unmeasurable gratitude

*Bùi Ánh's commemorative performance
at the Hà Tĩnh seashore*



A visit to Den Mau Thoai
temple of the Mother Goddess of Water
a pure-hearted deity in a white robe
innocence is meant for patriarchal smear
too many counts of false accusations
she rarely incarnates in a ritual
her sobbing, not for temples but for mothers
mothers who let the children
cross the dangerous borders
mothers who underdress themselves
in unbearably steamy underground mines
mothers who protest against the state
for opening another nuclear power plant
mothers who fail to comfort elephants
in ever-shrinking rainforest
mothers on the seashore
moving hundreds of rocks every day
searching for crabs and clams
back-breaking labour for never enough earnings
mothers who chant Buddhist mantras
for remembrance, for letting go
mothers who visit the temple, posing
next to elephant, horse, tiger and dragon
for the record of a lone journey
songs of deepest sorrow by
all dear immoral mothers

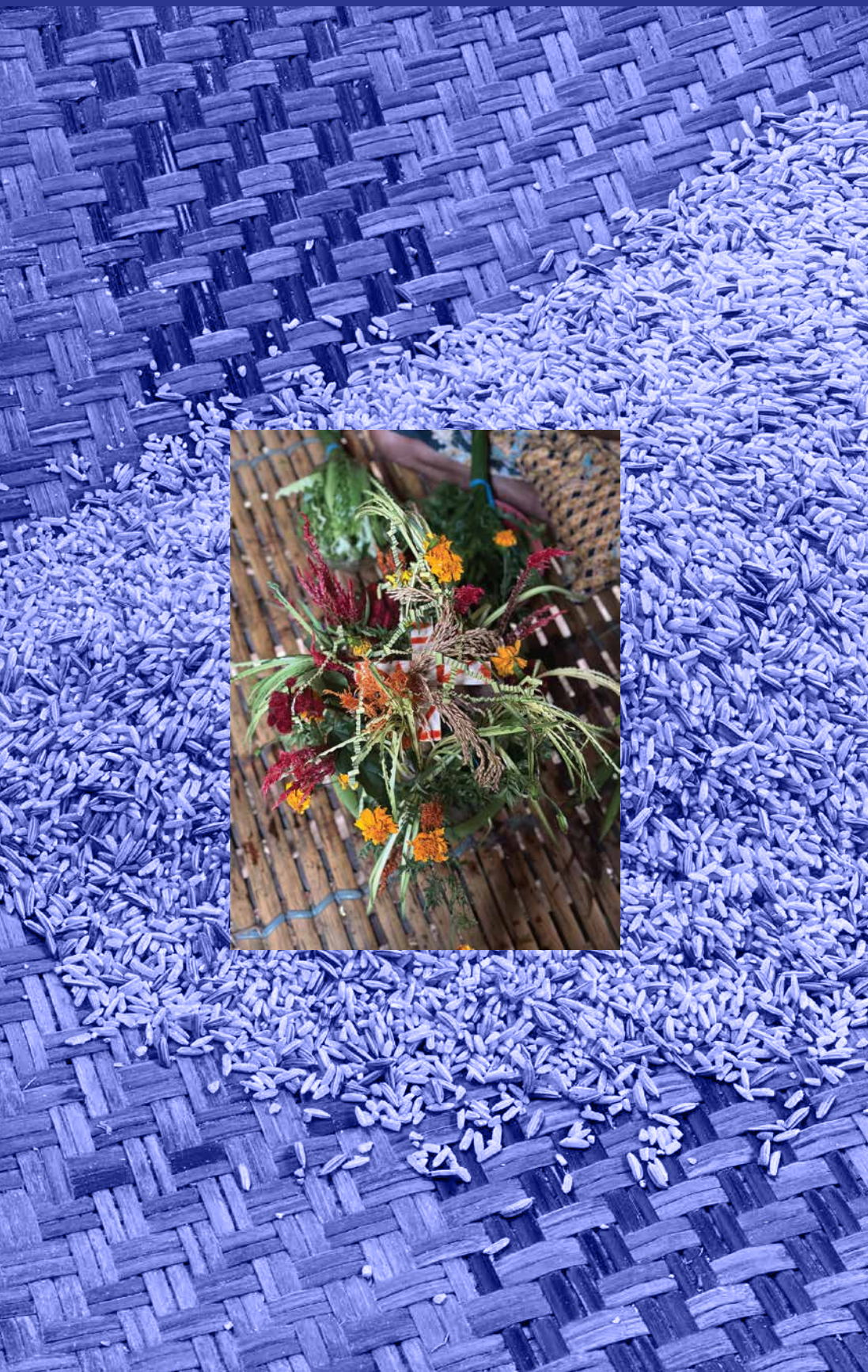
The sky in the black mirror of the well
wall paintings of prospective utopias
night prayer by a priest and a temple guardian
the gift of four blessed mandarins joins
Dragon fruit in my bag

Part II

The road has been paved
 one fatal accident already
 nervous honking at every corner
 of snaky paths, a development nuisance
 felled Pu Long trees in a night storm
 a wealthy man's pond, filled with otters
 refugees from dying rivers
 a rattan ring broken into crumbles
 four cut fingers, packed up as
 a coded secret, demanding
 further interrogation

Whilst slow death is in progress
 we gather at the shaman's house for
 the next cycle of growth, life goes on
 harvest ritual in Kampung Rakoh
 a rice garden, the size of a fruit basket
 a central prayer piece, decorated with
 flowers and plants, honouring forest friendship
 long, round, bright stone, a rice representative
 Tiger milk mushroom for potent nutrition
 tiny egg, symbol of life and growth
 an ancient manual for ecotopia
 rice flours, mixed with sacred plants in the water
 addition of 60-cent value coins, ceremonial money
 wet blessing towards the sky, towards the ground
 and towards everyone in the room
 the shaman retreats to a long prayer
 the list to commemorate only gets
 longer and longer every year
 elders quietly listen and witness
 the rest prepare a communal meal
 bambook tubes, a steady offering from the forest
 filled with newly harvested rice, on fire
 rising steam with a nourishing fragrance
 appetite is building up
 the dead will get fed first
 until their graveyard is served
 hungry living mouths hold patience, knowing
 no one will go home with an empty belly





“The Sultan, Long Ja’afar, had an elephant, named Larut, as a pet. One day, Larut wandered off into the deep jungle. After missing several days, Long Ja’afar sent his men to look for Larut. They found the elephant covered with mud, containing a significant amount of tin ore. This discovery led to the establishment of Larut, a tin mining belt in Taiping, Malaysia.”

This is the story at the entrance of
Tin Mining Museum in Perak
my suspicion brews a different story

Long Ja’afar tells Larut
how his mother abandoned him and ran away
how he rescued a vulnerable baby elephant
from starvation, giving him a pet name
one night with a bright full moon
Larut dreams of his mother
standing in dead silence, crying heavily
the dream is so vivid
Larut takes it as a calling
A venture out to find the truth

The jungle Larut remembers
no longer exists, all laid out with plantations
endless, endless rows of uniform trees
all planted on the same day
motherless single generation
to be slaughtered on the same day
the towering bodies of high productivity
living ghosts, anticipatory grief
Larut’s trunk touches the soil hopelessly
cloddy and sandy, the texture of giving up
evocation of cremated bodies

Game warden in camouflage garments
conservation, rescue, translocation, rehabilitation
and release, brutal lies named beautifully
with the smell of gunpowder and tranquilliser
the same hands that wipe out forest homes
conduct salvation missions, with elephants
trained to be emotional support workers
empathetic trunks soothe a horrified captive

A sanctuary, made of cages and chains
separation between young and old
matriarchal care, handed over to mahouts
eight-month-long persuasion, can I ride on you
a vow to the master, a chained neck
a surrender as no other feasible choice
a life for the eyes of paid entrances
but bodies won't forget how it all started
electric fences, wire traps, and abandonment
three-legged young giant, pacing back and forth
in the cell of a concretised rectangular ground
feeding on tourists' entertainment.
3 ringgits for sugarcanes
5 ringgits for monkey bananas
how much is the amputated leg
how much is the lost mother
how much is home

After days of searching
Larut reaches the shimmering mud field, overjoyed
Larut jumps in, rolls around and splashes
soon, feeling nauseous, disoriented
Larut faints, to find himself back in captivity
humans around him, bustling and buzzing
number talks in adrenaline-induced voices
figures and graphs, in the shape of future corpses
felled trees, displacement, refugees, orphans,
tranquilisers, incarceration and a sea of tears
like monsoon rains, all the voodooes of capitalism
Larut starts sobbing in silence
just like his mother in the dream

Following monoculture plantations such as oil palm and rubber trees, mining is the second leading cause of deforestation in Malaysia. It threatens 78% of species inhabiting only the rainforest. In 1883, during British colonial rule, Malaysia was the largest tin producer in the world. In the 1920s, dredging machines were introduced to elevate production. They were manufactured in the UK for the Malayan Tin companies with heavy foreign investment holdings, leading to mass destruction, damaging biophysical environments permanently, purely for profit



A map of Kinta Valley made of blue punctures
hundreds of lakes around the Kinta River
they did not arrive by geological time
not by tectonic shifts and cracks
not by glacial erosion or sweet river flows
the consequential geography of
aggressive tin dredging, resemblance
of Larut's tears

A tragic death of the mother of five children
trampled by an elephant, a warning of fury
I think to myself, it must be Larut
he wants his mother back, and the old forest
the village shaman blames relentless timber logging
hundreds of years-old ancestral trees
no mercy by electric chainsaws, metallic cry
excessive logging residue blocks the river
that sustains many lives, the shaman
worries about elephants going
hungry and thirsty, no revenge plan
for the loss of their own

All night battle to carry the baby with
a head, made of stone, of unbearable weight
I will fall, I will fall, I will fall hard and hurt this baby
anxious duty of care, tired arms, overloaded
someone starts chatting me up, a sheer distraction
the baby falls to the ground, expectedly, and unexpectedly
landing sound and safe on a pitch black blanket
no sign of damage, an innocent face with a reign
I pick up the baby, carrying it again nervously
a wake-up with relief - oh, it was just a dream!
but was it? the village sees the baby as an omen
a telling that requires collective attention
my dream becomes communal property
sensitised story, careful words, observance
a node of weaving branches of thoughts



A quiet walk to the sacred hot spring
the first tobacco break, and the second
rules reminded for not upsetting the water
guidance by the elders with machetes
careful carving of secret paths
pacing the speed the forest allows
reaching the source of water, we sit
and rest, with the shaman's permission
soaking our fingers in a hot stream
as old as the Earth, this sacred water is
home to all kinds of spirits and ghosts, amongst
thirty ignorant British soldiers died here
the next day after having a jolly picnic
their imperial search for mines and agriland
ended on the other side of the universe
the potent water also dodged all the bombings
when it was in the middle of the battlefield
elders recall deers that disappeared
one less blessing, recurring ghosts
on the way back to the village, we spot
the sign of hydro-dam development
ugly metal plate, smashed like hell
it seems the job of anger and frustration
one elder testifies it's done by a roaming elephant
I think to myself, again, it must be Larut
the broken sign, a symbol of solidarity
between Larut and the Semai communities
shared worries and love of the forest

Dream again, a short but vivid one this time
five people gather around a fire at night
all wearing animal masks and dark clothes
the middle figure wears a bright white mask with
black random strips, outstanding in the darkness
they converse about what's up in the village
one mentions a newly opening factory
with the largest investment ever known
the white mask suggests, let's burn it down
the rest seems to agree, on the exact night
my companion Emily also dreams of fire
she enters the overpopulated courtyard
followed by a dark figure who plots arson
then she realises carrying a bag with a baby inside
fire broken, flames everywhere
Emily left her bag in the building
during her escape, terrified
our incredible cross-dreaming
collective sub/consciousness, so explicit
when my ratan ring gets broken into dust
Emily predicts the pain of cutting fingers
the whole village witnesses this sisterly dreams
hours after hours for dream interpretation
going through double translation, from English
to Malay to the Orang Asli Semai dialect
no one rushes, enormous patience and care
dream connects all of us, ever so deeply
the shaman instructs to hang the white shirt
in the most visible spot, something
between a strawman and a white flag
between protection and surrender



The sun goes down
everyone gathers in the ceremonial house
green leaves, cut in pattern, flowers, arranged carefully, all for
Balei Pancur, the totem for alluring a spirit guide
hung up in the centre, filling the air with heavenly scents
the shaman starts singing, calling for a spirit guide
the midwife strikes the gong, joined by mothers
beating down the bamboo tubes in ancient old rhythms
eventually, everyone rises to dance
swaying together like tall elephant grasses
the mother of five children appear right next to Larut
she gently wipes Larut's tears with forgiveness
her soothing touch whispers motherly love
Larut remembers only vaguely
they join the swaying bodies to the healing songs
boundaries between different spirits and realms begin to dissolve
all merging and dancing to the pulse of the rainforest

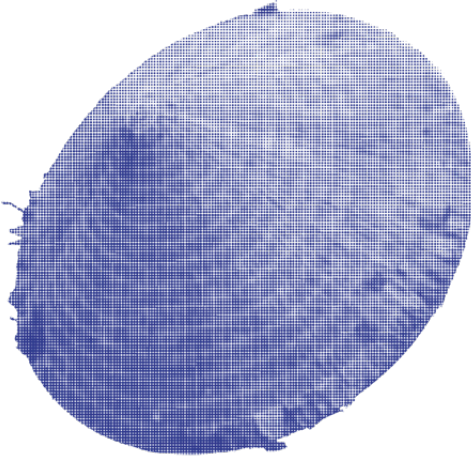
Many worlds within the world
endless interweaving of grief
a prayer, I enter the list





In memory of memories

for my mother, Diệu Tuyết



I often regard Hà Tĩnh as my parents' hometown as a roundabout way to make it clear that it is my hometown only because it was theirs. Once a year, I visit Thạch Thắng village, my paternal ancestors' home, where my mother currently resides, on the occasion of the Lunar New Year. Since the holiday often falls in January or February, the weather is usually cold and damp. The way home is not long but a little tedious. It involves a plane ride, a bus ride, and a taxi ride. As I arrive in Hà Tĩnh, I am soon greeted with a landscape whose liveliness and festivity have long been overthrown by a dreadful, greyish-white curtain made of springtime rain, fog and dew. My mother's house perches on the periphery of the village, facing a vast paddy field and, in recent years, a big tarmac road that slices through the landscape, reducing our horizon in half. During this time of year, everyone takes time off from the fields as it is too cold to grow anything, and it is the only time when their family members are in the same place at the same time after a year away.

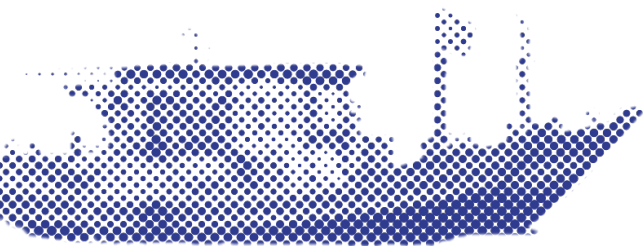
“Wherever I am, I always long for Hà Tĩnh.
I long for Hồng Lĩnh Mountain, La River,
and the vast sea of our hometown.
Those white salt fields.”

— “A ballad from Hà Tĩnh”, 1974



Vân Đỗ and I took a stroll in the field in front of my house on one rare sunny afternoon in February 2025.

This year has been an exception: I went home twice for the project. For the first time, I brought a friend and my colleagues home to visit, and my mother was overjoyed. Unlike our usual itinerary on previous visits—home, the market, and relatives' houses—this time I extended my route to other villages and towns, places I had only known through my mother's words: the songs she sings and the poems she reads. It turns out the sea she loves so much is just a 15-minute drive away; the market that is held only once or twice a month, yet had the best goods of my childhood, was 20 minutes away; and the reservoir my mother used to tell me about—how, as a teenager, she contributed to the revolution by helping build it—was 30 minutes away. Of course, things felt farther twenty years ago because people travelled on foot or by bicycle. Still, I couldn't help thinking about how much bigger I have grown, and how much smaller the landscape has become—and how my mother has, too.



I spent five years living in this town with my mother from the age of six until I was eleven, after my father's business in Gia Lai—the province in the Central Highlands to which he had moved during the post-war nation-building period in the 80s—failed. Those five years were not always full of happiness, as my mother battled her despair at losing the dream she had long been dreaming of, and tried her best to raise me with what she could glean from the village that she had tried so hard to leave in the first place. Nonetheless, those years remain tender memories in my heart. Each year when I return, the first thing my mother does is keep me updated on what has been going on in the village, who has left, who has come back, and who has gone forever. Sometimes it astonishes me how far they manage to travel, not only within Vietnam but also around the wider world. From her stories, it seems that the people in this village, and many others in Hà Tĩnh, are bound to leave their homes at some point.



A fishing village in Hà Tĩnh, February 2025.

It is simply impossible to rely solely on the land here, where resources are not abundant and the climate is rather harsh: in summer, it is so hot and dry that the soil cracks; in autumn, the land is often swept and flooded by typhoons; in winter, it is cold and rainy. The plan is to leave in order to return, even if it means family members being apart for months, if not years. Leaving the village for the big cities—from the smartest students to hopeful singers to adept woodworkers—they don factory uniforms and soften their speech so their accents are not too strong, too different.

I've heard—and have seen for myself—that my people have a strong sense of unity as “đồng hương”—“people of a shared hometown.” Words travel fast here. If one person manages to leave and find work elsewhere, they share the news or help their “đồng hương” get a job if they can. Wherever they go, they find their “đồng hương” and form communities to support one another—birds of a feather flock together. If someone succeeds, they are revered across towns as a source of collective pride. Big-city dwellers' contempt for Vingroup, Vietnam's largest conglomerate spanning technology, real estate, retail, healthcare, and education, is irrelevant here. As a “đồng hương”, Vingroup's founder, Phạm Nhật Vượng, is our provincial hero. Here in Hà Tĩnh, people do not mind if his empire collaborates with the government to acquire coveted land in Vietnam's largest cities—displacing people and raising the cost of home ownership—because he is remembered as someone who elevates the province's reputation and gives back to his people.

My people, too, are known hustlers, the hardworking and resourceful type. They jump at any opportunity to make more money, because you never know when a natural disaster strikes and wipes everything out. For this year's trips, we went to find a boat driver who could take us to the sea to film a performance. Though it appears like a simple mission, for a beach town that only relies on fishing, and tourism is not so much developed, especially during the low season, the service was almost unheard of. One day, as we walked along the rumbling coast in March, we came across an old fisherman who was willing to ask his son to take on the task. As we went to his son's house to prepare for our exciting activity ahead — exciting because finally we managed to achieve what we set out to do for the trip — to my surprise, the family is rather well off. The son works as a car driver in HCMC, while at home, they have a big chicken coop, raise many pigs and farmland. But he was still excited at a money-earning opportunity, which soon proved to be not a wise decision: his phone was damaged after he dropped it while steering the boat and was beyond repair, and the cost of getting a new phone tripled what we paid him that day.



Bắc Hoà beach, 20 minutes away from my mother's house, but I never got to visit until this year, and where we met the fisherman and his son.

Some have paid with their health, even their lives. On this trip, we met my mother's neighbour's son, who stopped by our house before his night shift at Formosa. We asked if he knew about the 2016 incident—the mass fish deaths along the coast of central Vietnam, with Hà Tĩnh among the affected provinces—and why locals still work there, knowing they face a hazardous environment. There were rumours of former employees and residents around the factory area diagnosed with cancerous diseases. He said they had no choice: opportunities here are scarce. Now in his mid-thirties with a growing family, he feels past the prime age for factory work in big cities like Ho Chi Minh City or Binh Duong province. The plan is to endure for a few more years while he still can, save up, then invest in pigs or cattle.

Despite the labour-worn bodies—the sun-darkened skin, veined arms, and calloused heels—my people, whose occupation is “làm ruộng”, “tend the field”, have long been romantics or intellectuals in the past. Hà Tĩnh is the birthplace of many illustrious figures in Vietnam's history, including Nguyễn Du, known for his epic poem “The tale of Kiều”, Hải Thượng Lãn Ông, a celebrated physician, and Nguyễn Phan Chánh, one of the renowned painters during the Indochinese period.

Recently, I've started to feel more and more connected to the hometown my parents gave me when I came into this life. Perhaps my mother's stories, songs, and poems have finally seeped through me. Or perhaps I've simply shed the ignorant, pompous self that thought I was different. I notice my people's accents—despite their efforts to disguise them—wherever I am, whether in Vietnam or abroad, and I start conversations with them. A tender warmth engulfs me each time they call me their “đồng hương”, and ask who my parents are, whether they are well. For the first time in years, I feel I belong to a place I once tried to leave.

September 2025





Remembering Hoàng Ngọc Tú



Hoàng Ngọc Tú wearing his fish mask.
Source: Hoàng Ngọc Tú's personal facebook.

I want to write about a moment that almost became the last time I saw the artist Hoàng Ngọc Tú, a friend from Huế, earlier this year. But I never saw him that last time; on July 21, he left this world, and left us due to a severe illness.

The project *Connecting Ecological Grief* was the pretext that brought us to Hà Tĩnh and Huế in Central Vietnam this past March and April. At first, I struggled to relate to the concept of ecological grief and found it equally difficult to navigate the tenuous link between two events: the tragedy of 39 Vietnamese migrants who suffocated in a lorry in Essex (UK) and the 2016 marine disaster that killed millions of fish along Vietnam's central coast, a framing proposed by artist Youngsook Choi for the project.

I later found an entry point, one that felt like a kind of collective remembering, as we reached out to Tú, Tuấn Then, and Nguyễn Văn Hè. They are amongst artists in Huế who, in 2016, had reacted urgently and vocally to the marine disaster to invite them to share their

recollections in a public conversation. Only Tuấn Then and Hè were able to join; Tú was away at the time.

The conversation took place at Air Huế, a young art space just over five years old, with a small gathering of the Huế community: young local artists, foreign artists, artists from Hè and Tuấn's generation, an environmental scholar teaching at the university, art students, and cultural and environmental activists.

Back in 2016, perhaps across the entire country, it was the artists in Huế who responded most immediately and forcefully both through their art and through direct campaigns. Tuấn and Hè brought us back to that moment. I remember marching in Hanoi myself, joining the crowd of protesters, but I cannot recall what happened after the government declared the disaster "under control", whether anyone continued speaking of its afterlives: of the environment, of collective psyche, of social consequences. Were we ever truly allowed to question, to examine, to discuss critically what had happened? Or did we all have to forget in order to

move forward, as with the COVID-19 pandemic, as with personal upheavals?

It was during this conversation that I first heard Hè recount the group's spontaneous performance on Trường Tiền Bridge and the most moving moment, when one artist, detained by the police, suddenly began to sing from inside the station, and the entire group joined their voices with him. It was also the first time I heard Tuấn Then speak of his deeply humane work: collecting knives from fish vendors whose livelihoods had vanished after the disaster, as part of his curated exhibition at his own space *Quầy II* as an immediate response to the disaster.

And there was Tú's work *Day 32*, presented in the exhibition: thirty-two masks, each painted with a fish swimming inside. It was a reference to thirty-two days of silence, thirty-two days of uncertainty, thirty-two days without knowing the truth about what had happened along the coast. What began as a quiet reminder, a gentle critique of the government's lack of

transparency, transformed into a movement: the masks were mass-produced and circulated across Vietnam, worn in environmental justice protests. The fish masks Tú created became an emblem.

Nearly a decade after the disaster, what does it mean to sit together and revisit what happened? I realized that somehow that moment brought us together through unforgetting as I must admit I, too, had let the incident fade amid the pressures of daily life. It was a shared history, a shared urgency, a shared concern for the land and the intertwined fates we all felt implicated in. And to realize, together, that what happened ten years ago is not separate from what continues to unfold today, what has changed, and what remains the same.

And so we all move forward, as we must, no matter how great our loss might be. What matters is that we move forward without forgetting. I write this brief remembrance as a tribute and as a way not to forget.



Hoàng Ngọc Tú's *32 Days* at
Quầy II exhibition at Then Cafe.
Courtesy of the artist.



Humans are not the only beings in this world



Humans are not the only *beings* in this world: On Semai rituals & remembrance, customs & care, dreams & dialogues

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Glossary of Semai words on page 7

This is a story told by Wak Sipah and below is a written retelling, drawn from my various *kebut* experiences.

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The smell of *bergn'it* plant permeates the air. I always describe it as similar to the smell of crushed termites. And upon writing this I just discovered that termites emit a pheromone known as *zingerone*, which is also a major flavour component of ginger—and *bergn'it* is from the ginger family.

Pungent, spicy, powerful.

If the scent does not overwhelm you, the scene in the healing space perhaps would.

From the rafters of the house, bunches of leaves and flowers, known as *dandat*, are suspended in evenly spaced intervals throughout. The *dandat* fills the space from above, while below, the villagers who are sitting in the ritual sit shoulder to shoulder against the four walls. In the centre, suspended as well, is the *balei pancur* with the *cenau* directly underneath it.



The villagers who had participated in decorating the space and in the making of the *balei pancur* had endeavoured to recreate the forestscape and its smellscape within this house. The various flowers and leaves, combined with the *bergn'it* leaves and *buah sumba* hand-painted *pancur*, *jalah* and *cen'derok*, not only bring the floral scent and forms from the forest, but also make the entire *balei pancur* structure polychromatic and appealing to the *gunik*.

It is *gunik* whom the *mai halaa'* had sought advice from in their dream communication in order to treat a patient who had fallen ill from losing his or her head *ruai*. In which the entire structure, arrangements, and required components for a successful *kebut balei pancur* are guided by the *gunik*.



However, in this story that Wak Sipah tells, it is the *mai halaa'* who had fallen ill. What happens then?

Mai halaa' Jais is experiencing symptoms of a lost head soul—feeling weak, tired, achy, pain, sickly, and feverish. He had sought the help of another *mai halaa'* from a nearby village, a shaman known for being the most powerful and wisest among themselves. The *kebut* held is one that I had never heard of, or read about.

In the healing space, customarily, the *dandat* lined the ceiling and the *balei pancur* hangs in the centre of the room. A familiar scene. But in this *kebut* there are six *cenaus*, each with 60 cents in the bowl. And three *mai halaa'* are performing the healing ritual.

One could only see two *mai halaa'* standing at the heart of the space. Wak Sipah tells that the third *mai halaa'* is the one whom Jais had sought help from, and had sent his *ruai* and *gunik* to the curative space instead of being physically present.

There are no *jenulak* and *jijoi*. Typically, the *mai halaa'* would sing a dream song, echoed by the *jijoi*, in enticing his *gunik* to enter the curative space. Now, only *mensat* takes place between the shamans and the spirit-guides. The entire healing ritual took six nights—where at the end of the third night, the guiding *mai halaa'*'s *gunik* advises to make bigger and more elaborate *dandat*, and to continue the ritual for another three nights.

What makes this *kebut* unique is that I had always understood communication to exclusively occur between the *mai halaa'* and their *gunik*. To become a shaman, one is chosen by the *gunik*, communicating through dreams and establishing a father-child relationship. In this *kebut*, however, communication also happens between shamans and each other's *gunik*, as well as between the *gunik* themselves.

Here we witness both humans and more-than-humans coming together to coax *mai halaa'* Jais' head soul back to him.

A multi-entity collaboration.





The flow of life, with adat at the centre of it all.



This act reflects a fundamental principle of Semai cosmology: living well requires ongoing collaboration between all beings to sustain both spiritual and ecological balance within the landscape and the cosmos.

To the Semai, the world around them is alive. The forest and the landscape they inhabit do not only comprise of themselves, the human beings, but are shared with a multitude of more-than-human beings, the *mai serak*, that reside within the other inhabitants of the place—in the animals, the plants, the rocks, rivers, hot springs, hills, mountains, and more.

There is no separation between humans and the rest of the cosmos. The world resonates with souls and spirits, each affecting one another, each integral to the wellbeing(s) of the landscape as a whole.

For the Semai, living well means taking care of the forest and the landscape—not only because it is the sustenance of their life, but mainly because it is also the home of the *mai serak*. The Semai uphold a cosmology of care through their *adat*, which binds them to a coexistence of nurture and care within a shared home.

Adat guides them in honouring and propitiating the landscape's guardians, ensuring the continued wellbeing of all beings. One example is the holding of rituals for the *jenang*—the one who watches over all souls and spirits.

To live well with all beings is to recognise that more-than-human beings are vital to human wellbeing too. It means acting in ways that maintain the stability of the cosmos, the integrity of the land, and the health of all Earth's ecosystems.

Why? Because humans are not the only beings in this world.



For further reading:

In Every Bite of the Emperor: Malaysia



The Creative & Curative Expression of Balei Pancur



Glossary

Adat	Traditions and customs that inform Orang Asli governance; customary law
Balei pancur	A curative object, often made for kebut, made of a pancur, jaloh, cen'derok, and various leaves and flowers. It normally mimics the structure of an A-frame building with a bamboo in its centre to hold the water used for healing
Bergn'it	Leaves of either <i>Elettariopsis</i> sp. or <i>Globba</i> sp. A bunch of this leaf is used as the mai halaa's main object of healing in the balei pancur ritual
Buah Sumba	<i>Bixa orellana</i> . The Semai use the orange-red pigment from the waxy arils that cover the seeds of the sumba fruit
Cenau	A plate with a concoction of flowers and water that is used for blessing the patient, audience, and participants who are present in the curative space. The bergn'it bunch is dipped into the cenau and then whisked to spray the water. It holds the silver coins as 'payment' to the gunik
Dandat	The collective term of decorative leaves and flowers
Gunik	Spirit-guide / Spirit familiar
Jenang	The Semai conception of God in their cosmology, or the caretaker of all souls
Jenulak	Singing or song
Jijoi	The singers and instrumentalists in a ritual. Translates to "following" as the singers, typically women, echo the singing of the mai halaa'
Kebut	The Semai curative ritual that is held at night in complete darkness when a person falls ill. To perform this ritual, the mai halaa' must seek advice and guidance from their gunik
Mai halaa'	Shaman / Medium
Mai serak	Mai = People Serak = Forest People of the forest in literal translation, but refers to the spirit beings of the forest. Or what Marshall Sahlins refers to as 'metapersons'
Mensat	Communicating or sending a message to the mai serak
Ruai	Soul

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