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CULTURAL WORK

## Two Poems by Nguyễn Tiên Hoàng, Writing in Vietnamese as Thường Quán, With English Translations by Ian Campbell and Tony Chu

Nguyễn Tiên Hoàng, as Thường Quán<sup>1</sup>, Ian Campbell<sup>2</sup>, Tony Chu<sup>3</sup>

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### Abstract

Born in 1956 in Danang, Vietnam, Nguyễn Tiên Hoàng arrived in Australia in 1974 on a Colombo Plan scholarship. In writing poetry and literary essays in Vietnamese over more than thirty years he has generally used the pen name, Thường Quán. However, as Nguyễn Tiên Hoàng, his English language poems have been featured in the Poetry International Web series of Australian poets—<https://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/20689>—as well as in a number of Australian poetry book collections, the most recent being *Captive and Temporal*, published by Vagabond Press (Sydney & Tokyo, 2017) in its Australia Series—<https://vagabondpress.net/collections/australia>—which was short-listed for both the 2018 Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry and the Mary Gilmore Award in 2018.

The poems published in this issue of *PORTAL*, ‘Ngoài Giấc Ngủ’ and ‘Hiện Ra,’ were included in the book poetry collection—also titled *Ngoài Giấc Ngủ*—published in California, USA, in 1990, which featured sixty-seven poems by Melbourne-based Nguyễn Tiên Hoàng, writing under the pen name Thường Quán. In 1994 the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* (Melbourne) published the poem ‘Ngoài Giấc Ngủ,’ together with a first English language version co-translation, titled ‘Beyond,’ by Ian Campbell and Tony Chu. An adaptation of the poem was sung in Vietnamese *ngâm* style by Thu Huong Huynh, as part of ‘A Spring Evening of Poetry, Translated Verse and Music’ held in 1995 in Sydney to mark 50 years of post-war

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migration to Australia. The English language version later appeared in 1996, with the original poem in Vietnamese, in a Sydney-based Vietnamese language newspaper, and in 2002 the English language translation appeared again in *Sunlines: An Anthology of Poetry to Celebrate Australia's Harmony in Diversity*, edited by Anne Fairbairn (Canberra: Dept. of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2002). The English language co-translation of the poem appeared in Nguyễn Tiên Hoàng's collection, *Captive and Temporal* (Sydney & Tokyo: Vagabond Press, 2017). The poem, 'Ngoài Giấc Ngủ,' now appears in its Vietnamese language original form (1990), and in an English language co-translation by Chu and Campbell which varies slightly from all previous translations. An English language version of the poem, 'Hiện Ra,' has never been previously published and appears now in a co-translation as 'Becoming Visible,' together with the 1990 poem in its original Vietnamese language version.

## Keywords

**Poetry; Australia; Vietnamese Diaspora; Nguyễn Tiên Hoàng; Thường Quán; Ian Campbell; Tony Chu; *Ngoài Giấc Ngủ; Hiện Ra***

### *Ngoài Giấc Ngủ*

Những người khuất mặt  
 Đến lặng lẽ chào tôi trong đêm  
 Khoảng cách là những cuộc đời  
 Nở hoa hiên tử  
 Tím xanh tròn mắt dòng sông  
 Đồi bờ quán lữ  
 Mưa giăng  
 Tay tìm nhau  
 Chẳng thể sờ chạm  
 Giọt mưa không giọt mưa không  
 Rơi ngoài giấc ngủ  
 Trôi vào hun hút mùa đông  
 Những ao làng xám rữ  
 Núi đồi bia mộ lách lau  
 Gió bản bật bản bật  
 Trắng thổi về đâu  
 Lạc mắt câu chào  
 Trời mây thiên cổ  
 Chẳng tìm ra nhau  
 Chẳng tìm ra nhau  
 Nén thấp trong đêm  
 Những lời khan vọng.

### *Beyond*

Shades unseen, hidden  
 come silently to greet me in the night  
 Between those shades and I  
 so many lives, passed by  
 as flowers that bloom open

then wither—translucent as violets  
 Shades in the iris of a cold eye,  
 a cool stream before my eyes meandering,  
 pale blue; then the night  
 in this dark inn.  
 The gathering showers come,  
 hands seek out one another  
 unable to reach, to touch  
 empty drops, empty drops  
 Falling into a world beyond sleep  
 drifting endlessly, into winter,  
 and the bleakness of village ponds and hamlets destitute.  
 Mountains and hills, where tombstones part the sea of reeds  
 where the wind buffets and trembles  
 O white wind, where are you blowing to?  
 Lost from the night are the moments of greeting,  
 in this eternity of sky and cloud  
 they and I remain  
 Unable to seek the other  
 unable to find the other  
 A candle burns in the night  
 the beatings of the wind, hard to discern  
 still echo and reverberate...

*Translation by Ian Campbell and Tony Chu (1993, 2017)*

*Hiện Ra*

Hiện ra một giếng sâu ký thác  
 Một bờ sông chạy đầu lác lư  
 Bờm ngựa đỏ trắng hai búi cỏ  
 Nền tàn phơ phát lửa phần thư.  
 Rồi hiện ra người đen nhánh tóc  
 Đi tìm nhật nhạn giữa đêm mù  
 Những trang cháy dở hồn than khóc  
 Về gọi thơ lên đàn giải oan.  
 Hiện ra đàn trẻ thơ hồng ửng lồng đèn  
 Ôm sừng trăng non về trả đường tre ẩm lửa  
 Bầy đom đóm bay vào ở giữa  
 Hồ ao trắng ngát độ nở sen.  
 Mở cửa thôn làng mở cửa  
 Hiện ra kiềng bạc áo nâu non  
 Oan khi gột sạch lòng son  
 Hiện ra ô cửa mây lành hiện ra.

*Becoming Visible*

Becoming visible, this well into which I trustingly cast  
 my melancholy, along a river's edge, a galloping horse,  
 its fiery mane flaring up, the light of the moon is shining

upon tufts of grass, and ash of the candle turns white  
as the flame meanders across the pages.  
Becoming visible again, a woman with jet black hair flowing  
looking for what is lost in the fog-mist of the night,  
her soul weeping over the half-burnt pages  
drawing forth the muse to the task of setting all aright.  
Becoming visible, children silhouetted in red of lantern light,  
gathering up the rimmed horn of the young moon over the  
bamboo-shrouded road, warm night, fireflies dart here and there,  
between moths, aflutter upon the scented ponds  
as the lotus blooms.  
I prise open the gate of the village, I open it,  
I see the silver of the necklace worn over a brownish dress,  
my heart is made whole again, away the past,  
becoming visible, at the window, serene are the clouds.

*Translation by Ian Campbell and Tony Chu (1994, 2017)*