

Title

Poems

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Note on the source texts

“Seven Untitled Poems” is from the book, *Khi hau do vat (Inanimate Weather)*, Youth Publishing House, 1997. *“Relationships”* is Mong-Lan’s translation from *“Nhưng moi quan he”* with nine of ten sections of the original published in *Cua can cuoc an du (Of Metaphorical Identity)*, photocopy, 1990. The original of *“Relationships”* (*Nhung moi quan he*), *“Marsh Dreams”* (*Con Me Dam Lay*), and *“Revolving Stage”* (*San Khau Quay*) are all available at the *tienvu* website, www.tienvu.org.

Bibliography and notes on the translators are available as Web page, Word file, and PDF at the Viet Nam Literature Project website, www.vietnamlit.org

from Relationships

I

In the legends of dry springs, there are the pebbles' intonations.
In the forest's recollections, there is the waterfalls' fable.
In resin singing, there is my mother's shade.

A carp's negative doesn't know to speak.
A relic left over from dry ponds.

Where armies and generals of the lotus and water lily dispute their beauty.
Where swords and sabers of ponds and swamps yearly fight each other.
Where aquatic corpses lie, ghosts possessed with visions of lotus and water lily.

Their beauty becomes miasma, tired and spoiled.
It is the nourishment in soil's unconsciousness.

They blossom into flowers white and yellow.
They blossom without hands or feet.
They are spices lacking in my mother's kitchen corner everyday.

She carefully puts them away, they are strong and have the smell of mud.
From tender mud, a spongy bull frog just escaped the drought.
It croaks announcing that the grandfather carp is still alive.

The old man is a Dragon.

From a reptile transformed, to the urgent moment in flight, the Dragon lets drop a
whisker.

A carp opens its mouth yawning sleepily, comes upon it, stores in stomach.
When becoming a Dragon, grandfather carp wakes up, daydreams in the reptile's venom.
A copperhead crawls onto the roof, where the Dragon resides, dancing circles a medium,
ashamed for lack of whiskers.
The Dragon is deliberate, emotionless, without headache or high blood pressure.
My mother drinks ancient and Western medicine, still cannot shake off the stomachache
caused by the Dragon's whisker's damage.

II

Looking at the world of creatures, daughter, you dream of a yellow-beaked bird.
Blue legs settle on the second hand.
Red beaks peck at each number.

1, 2, 3, the clock disappears, and time . . .

No chick sounds inside hawks' claws.
No old monkeys knuckling young monkeys' heads.
No insects wearing red bandages.
Not even the pestering of unfounded slogans of this and that . . .

Three years old, you were a white rabbit.
Nine days old, you were infected in the navel.
Rabbit, 24 days you breathed in a glass cage.

When you knew to speak, rabbit, you asked to return to the sky.
When you had diarrhea, you asked to return to the sky.

Rabbit says there, there are no adults, no red, black.
Only clouds feathery white, and ten thousand rabbit flowers under moon.

Met with nightmare at 39 degrees, Rabbit, delirious, called: Father! Snake!
Eyes unconscious stupidly opened and your face a young leaf in boiling water.

Rabbit asked, from where did I come, a man or a woman?
God created all things, who created God?
Father, you lied, you are a carrot, food with whiskers to make creatures transparent.

Carrot not nightmare.
Carrot not Scar. (The Lion King)
Carrot not red, black or hostage.

Daughter, you were imprisoned the day you entered nursery school.
Ten hours old, you suffered a seven years' sentence.

To keep strong, I often eat honey, don't go out during holidays.
And frequently go crazy, for once having lied to a white rabbit.

III

When small, I ate perch from the fields, thus my wife resembles ocean perch.

She swims between sharks and pink-tailed fish.
She breaths through airy salt, but is sensitive to the smell of fish sauce.
She doesn't determine limits between river and ocean.
She sees all objects with the slanted light of white and black.

Unluckily for the children, she sees black objects with eyes white and backwards.

IV

My brother, a horse lost in the desert.
Feet, sinking in sand.
Dies, under the camel's blazing hot load.

My younger siblings are zebras.
Some live in zoos, some on the forest's edge.
They eat grass, live by grass.

Afraid of hair changing to grass, and grass, to dragon's bones.

V

My friend turtle has ears of a rabbit.
She became a woman when thirty because of an old man.
She can hear from very far away, but when close, is slow.
She likes the word, "rather," and often sings, "Rather water-plants . . . rather clouds."

Perhaps now she sings: "Rather . . . snow, snow, snow."

VI

I meet in the newspapers, in Saigon, sometimes friends, sometimes acquaintances
They still use Hung Vuong's intonations.

But on the slippery road of words, they usually don't brake in time.
That's why their legs are lopped off, are blind, even lose their lives over doctrine.

They are mischievous in opaque light, and naïve under white light.
They dip their hands into cards, double-dealing.
They are spoiled and often capricious with the numbers 6 & 8 . . .
Numbers "clear, sage," usually spread their legs and are raped year round.

Fortune-telling sticks, they are shocked to death by old ladies' menopausal hands praying
for good luck in love.

VII

Swimming backwards, I groped into water's tail.
Saw dead bodies from the source flow by.
Saw the un-closable swollen gills of dead fish.

The tongue's source already taste-heavy and waves' lips lap false teeth.
I scrawl my tail between even sounds, every sound is already a trap.
I am caught in a net, along with long-jawed anchovies, I am thrown into a wooden barrel.

When wood veins acquire the smell of salt, I know I am still breathing at the nuoc mam jar's bottom.

I read the wanton poetry of Lady Huong, check again the feeling of teeth and tongue:
clean teeth and sharp tongue.

Someone says: Still have teeth, tongue, and taste.
My grandmother says: Keep your teeth, your hair, your roots.
She also says: the orangutan is a species that only smiles at night.

Luckily she doesn't know, it is a gift of prehistoric happiness.

VIII

In the broken-down shoes of those who meet with accident, is memory creeping into a bat's armpit.

In the past full of lice, is a meeting day in which thousands and thousands of mouths share one tongue.

In trash's indigestion, my father, is an animated cartoon situation of crabs shedding claws.

A soldier of hollows.

Increasing the hollows' depths, each soldier by turns sheds its claws.
My father's legacy is to dare creep out of the burrow.
To leave behind a dream inherited from earth a past full of holes and burrows.

The earth wakes up when the linh chi mushroom opens its eyes.
The holes and burrows know clearly from the fake old towers just built.
Nose and mouth, towers bursting from all sides, breathe and speak full of incense smell.

Pollution of teeth take away freedom of speech.
The food of flies long-lived never has bones.
(They measure their mouth's pleasure from ancient times by smell.)

Innumerable cadavers of old, young, men, women, are still green in the memory of trees and plants.

Corpses of birds, fish, mouse, pig, chicken are not buried in graves, historical mausoleums.

The truth of legends crumbles because of the innate jesting tongue of earth.

Those who survive on lies swallow the truth into their stomachs.
(The road to freedom is to learn the meditative ways of shit.)

Salt without iodine, to keep fish from spoiling,
They always say that my father's grandmother still is a virgin.

She is a fairy.

I reminisce for one thousand years in the womb.

I identify my father's grandmother's face in various beauty pageants.

I desirously look at round large breasts, at endowed buttocks.

And virginity rabbit-like, always kept between the thighs, coquettishly.

(Scavenged from an ad from the TV, 14 inches brought in from an electronic graveyard.)

translated by Mong-Lan, www.monglan.com

Seven Untitled Poems

The sun lunges forward crossing a boundary puncturing a late sleep.
An egg hatches a sound.
I grip my own hand holding a shadow and releasing it into a glass of water.
On the silent shore the sea of memories spares two shells odorless and empty.

*

Evening holding back a burnt mark a pictogram the pit of an eye the sun immolated,
Evening burning the memory bank arms held in prayer the night heron calling into space,
Night extinguished with one man left behind lunging forward turning into a shadow . . .
Evening Who?

*

Feet without lamp street without lamp the shadow is black.
Feet without lamp street with lamp black is the shadow.
Beneath two lamps two shadows both are black.

*

You ran contrariwise from the crown of your head to the soles of your feet, a mad
woman, a primitive egg dashed against scrap metal.
You collided then reverted to a rubbery condition a series of warped circles.
The endlessly jarring road with its bad intentioned collisions and drowned rivers.
You ran in panic from the woods onto a tidy stage then smiled and talked in a bisexual
manner.
Beneath the conceptual hammer you boldly split in two rhythmically trembling on the
resilient mattress.
You chased after a fit of excess and fell into the HIV pit.
A strange wind poured into the fire.
You a gray smoke gathering into clouds metamorphosing into a female bug like the
woman in the dunes adapting to a man robbed of freedom without his day on the cross.
You a woman about to be stoned.

*

My eyes do not register the presence of trees animals men or even the arrogant horizon.
Inside my eyes are only distances hierarchies dark holes black boxes zigzags and
disquiets.

*

Daybreak frolics with the flowers the night smile disappearing on the street.

Each person a curfew face inside the clock the pendulum oscillates.
The briefest day I throw away as you save the thin pleased body.
Daybreak swallows you in stages nibbles me to bits.

*

Tic toc tic toc
The horn beak pecks at the night drum,
Two secret revealing eyes are sliding along time's greasy surface.
The wall displays dead holes variously connected to the inmate.
And only the tic toc sounds remain to count the rolling aspirins.
Night flashes its cold teeth the mouth opens its precipices.
Shadows from cul-de-sacs stretch and stagnate on the brick floor.
Still the tic toc sounds pecking the dense night.
Still the rolling aspirins.

translated by Linh Dinh

Low Pressure System

The thumb stops breathing.
There is a sound of a dropped glass.
Needles piercing the ear.

I see water gushing from hollows in the wall.
(The house's artery is broken.)

Water is drowning the word mouth.
A character cannot escape the death of a wet book.
Our character is tattooed: Small. Weak. Wicked. Shell.

Words stepping on each other trying to remove themselves from literariness.
They float blue on the water.
Individual corpses sink to compete with bricks and shards of glass.

The remaining fingers have headaches and runny noses.
Memory stands then sits stringing pieces of intestines around a hole.

I hear cries of a newborn.
A fish crawls out from a bloody hollow.
The woman closes her thighs and a corpse is covered up.

A laugh crawls in wiggly lines across a cheek.
Look into the thumb.
Sperms reborn in the flow of sap animating the wild grass and flowers.

After the bee season the flowers and grass are plowed up shredded and burnt.
The grass regrows and the sperms open their eyes.
(Even if the land is mortgaged joint ventured or sold to another.)

The hunt is a thousand years old.
A distance only blind eyes can perceive.
Its concentrated flavor cannot be tasted by anyone besides the moss covered tongues of turtles.

I hear wild laughs from a circus mixed with the rhythmic prayer for the release of the souls of many female nuns.
(They are performing a circus for another world?)

A low pressure system on the hill seeps into the body.
Termites dig up dirt inside bones.
Nests grow from the ground to resemble artistic graves.

I carry a cemetery inside my body.
A fist missing a finger.

translated by Linh Dinh

Marsh Dream

I

Broken fuse.
From things the night oozes out eyes and all are infected.
The taut threads on the face of criminal justice.
Escaping heat loses abilities to ejaculate.
One's aura is glazed over with a spreading yellow film spilling onto the demarcation line
and entering the forbidden zone.
Annoying eye.
Sedimentary mouth sucks on pride a soapberry lava ceases at the border of real and fake
weathers.
Exhausted senses.
Life stops flowing.
Everything rots to pieces only the echoes of a linga and a yoni impassive statues gloomily
reverberating.

II

Broken fuse.
Things declare themselves sovereigns.
The faithful let down their guards.
It's a legal opportunity for a disorderly appearance.
Order is restored by a red malice.
An inflected voice suffers rising blood pressure dreaming of nux vomica and empty wine
bottles.
The cerebrum enacted a benign female theatrical.
The hand of monopoly nudges the god-given rights of living things.
Skin color loses its reflex and the spool of the past weaves a fabric to cover holes
incapable of passing on the ambition to raise the count of air-hating insects.
Staring eyes having lost their keys open and shut at will.
Annoying air.
Staggering mad manikins.
Each manikin hides a pig tail in Macondo (the village in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*)
and animal-shaped clouds jump on each other's backs without distinguishing between
predators and prey lions rabbits cats dogs or horses . . .
The human body opens up.
The pressures of surpluses and deficits ooze out beyond the range of sight and
sense.
The face of lava is not in the book of divination.
The protuberance is sharp and pliable.
The hollow has a black hole element its shape changes according to the weather
of a half yawn.

III

Broken fuse.
Night smoothes out protuberances and fills in hollows.
Disparity aches the entire line in back of the ears throat navel tail bone groin
and an open toilet.
The savior sits.
Concepts are a constraining helmet insects catching prey by a system of
shutting tight.
Imagination and thoughts eternally nourished.
Man with a thick shadow does not hear the air break to clear a road to the cemetery.
Look into one spot.
Staring and contemplating is to enter a train car without passengers.
Imagination thrown into a blinding interval everything rises.
A straight movement eliminates dampness and dries out the viscera.
A shadow creakily swinging a hammock.
The sound of darkness moving drenched in lubricating oil.
Kinship is declared through hastily carved bas-relief where air-hating insects worship.

Gnawing epoch.
Suck marrow.
Product of cohabitation disobedient shard of instinct pressures of an offshoot forest.
A curt hand.
Memory opens its compass and a train car without passengers.
The past has extra tickets.
Centuries not transported.

IV

Broken fuse.
A fluorescent screen from a dark corner displays in wiggly lines manikins from
the century before silent films.
A vanguard manikin sticks out his slimy tongue dun colored stinking and oozing
from intermittent cracks the eternal conspiracy to infiltrate.
No images no smells no nothing.
Tipped equilibrium.
Insects compete to sing in chorus the swamp refrain.
Rain is.
Can't duck inside.
Outside still the process of train cars carrying nothing.
Two oversized thigh bones incarcerating the desert.
Dip everything into the dish-washing tub.
Eliminate the lead.
Cover up the-system-to-prevent-fire-to-the-senses.
The past is bonfires of memory an on-duty death notice.
Two overlong ditties emit a haunting melody like a prayer.

A door opens.
The secret spills out onto the street.
Insects drone and crackle.
The swamp sleeps deeply.
Run, run and run . . .
A bottle filled with words.
Dirty.
An expressive hand over-pours the glass because rats and cockroaches have splashed
onto the wall slanting shadows and squares.
Interred bricks.
A disquieting word strikes.
Recovering viscera.
Those of the same skin color emit timelessly.

translated by Linh Dinh

Beefsteak

Cows are really the past.
Bulls were worshipped.

They seized meadows.
They taught each other how to steer themselves towards results.
They found amusement by inventing ways to ridicule corpses.

(Dead things bred daily and took turns on the throne of the sacred object.)

The cows continue to procreate and the ring has slipped.
Worm color replaces grass color.
From a purebred worm the cows maintain a throne under the auspice of the sacred
object religion.

Eyes that can only see what's behind.

From those eyes the cows procreate.
Also from those eyes the cows maintain the throne of the sacred object.
Also from those eyes the present has no more meadows.

The present is only cows consuming dishonest grass.

Their meat is starting to be displayed in supermarkets.
Their meat is bloodless and odorless.

They are preparing a beefsteak for an immortal deity.

translated by Linh Dinh

Rap Music

Hands steadily spinning.
Guarding each number for a chance to shrink into one spot.

All things peeled.
Unchanging season.

Fading paints on furniture.
Bottles and scraps of paper not becoming garbage.
Accidents remaining at sites.
Pores not excreting.
Genitals neither generating nor receiving heat.

Population growth through test tubes.

An old monk chanting with his prayer beads on this play button.
A young embittered black man playing rap on that play button.
And on my play button a bass rhythm clogged up soggy without transmigration.

In the morning the Red Guard sperms are all blind.

They are bats facing the wall.
They are heads masturbating to the point of impotence.

And the squashed little guy is lying and listening to rap.

translated by Linh Dinh

A World Of Sand

The day lies face down on top of night, he and things
Sleep in deep pleasure. Time is many bats

Cutting the night's darkness into irregular bits, each bit
A live rhythm to splash into the crowd

And from this crowd, another empty space
Slams down the door. The room

Swells and flexes. Shuddering on leaving a runway, opening the body—
Two sympathetic systems mix heat through the night. On the day

The hedge collapses, he dreams fearful of aging, let
The shadow flows and suddenly, all shapes

Are identical. He and blocks of monochromatic
Colors cover the wall, play the morning game

Of an imagination avoiding shapes, evicting all things from their spoken names,
A figure is dropped into a bottomless sensation... Have intercourse

With savages. With the sheep Dolly, a mountain peak capable
Of reproducing, rides another, sculpts symbols

Of debauchery, unformed, unstamped, and
Manifesting predictions of balance

In a divination book. As a prediction of imbalance, he shows
A means to survive by exposing the sadness of teeth and hair,

The sadness of sap oozing. As a stutterer
In a world crisscrossed with directives, and in a wretched

Coincidence, he became lost and found himself in a deluge.
(The seasons supplant each other, until the season of

Disintegration.) A sun ray crosses through, he hears it
Reverberating in his blood. He longs to wraps his arms

Around a cow's neck and to frolic with children. He carries
A fresh fear, the fear of a woman imprisoned

Inside a birthmark done with menstruation, turning back

To a lost stretch of the road, counting fallen eggs on top of the vault

Of the thirtieth. A night of the alphabet, of intonations,
Of the flowering hour, of white enthusiasm. And the breasts

Of the earth are always shifting into puberty, so the well-worn roads
Will grow lush, and the body will retreat into the swamp reeds, and memory

Will detach itself from all things. Drop a thought into water
To reach a world of sand...

translated by Linh Dinh

Revolving Stage

I

The life column twists, sucks the sea swallow into the eye. The stage spread its legs and spins. A light remaining from puberty plucks a woman from someone else's look.

Mixed among the pebbles, an eye says: "Owls fly out from the vagina." A dog runs after a bone's caress. "Let's keep it," a hand reaches out.

A burning smell from last night's dream. The morning is stuck in a calcium-deficient yawn of a mandible. A finger lets go of faith. A complicated emotion fans out. A blue fly bends down into the pit of a bottle inside the trash can of repentance.

I dream of a one stringed violin. The past stores up a fishy smell. The sudden death image of a bird in flight. Hundreds of terracotta masks drop. The electric fan is addicted to the wind. An old thought is remade by a set of false teeth.

Swimming inside an intestine, a man drowning in words chases after the phrase, "Savage homes." A crippled child from the Central region selling lottery tickets says morosely, "Mrs. Huyen goes up the Tranverse pass on a Mink motorcycle sitting behind a driver with artificial hands." Beer bottles snap their caps and scream excitedly; 1,2,3 . . . go. Idiocy ferments and foams.

Growing from the asshole a herd of traditional domestic animals, vines with soft thorns, climbing on a metal fence of a viscous city with a million inhabitants afflicted with night blindness. A history of shadows with no faith in words. A damp poet makes poetry with images.

A morning exercise with six breaths for one movement. On a bed without character, a light metal ring left behind by a little Chinese circus girl.

Shimmering satellite disks sending and receiving signals. From an empty bottle. From an old book. From a rotten tooth. From prayer beads. From a curse. A string of monosyllabic news tumble from the vocabulary of run-on sentences.

II

A cat catches an elephant and puts him inside a bamboo basket. Neither sadness nor happiness exist. An awakened feeling of indigestion towards a death before a chance for a haircut. Water leaks from the sense to the root of a hair of a stuffed animal standing in the Straw Warrior Square.

Night with the blue color of the weather turning into summer. A fading woman, the seasoned face of a tropical fish having had intercourse with a 110-volt light gives birth to a dance/theater/underwater palace tune causing a funhouse effect to retarded children.

Two listless eyes behind an urn. Incense sticks jostling each other to play the fog game. Fireflies on a dry branch sprinkle flames on dead leaves. A snail meets disaster on the North-South rail line. The tropics scoops out a deep cave. A fistful of mildew countenances a Coke logo.

Inside a dirty shoe, the toes breathe with difficulty. The rhythmic gas of carbon dioxide from the past smothers. A book opens, words decompose. An attentive look yields no meanings. Inside a thought: a short woman, continuously shaking bright colored rings.

In the year 2544 of the Buddhist calendar, two lizards intertwine on the stomach of the Goddess of Mercy. A kid plays with insect noises made by an organ. My child is afraid her teeth are yellowing. I gargle three times a day with Listerine. Rent is going up.

The man who collects human bones says, "A Black person cannot become more black by humping up. A White person cannot become more white by arching his back. A Yellow person cannot become more yellow by doubling over. A Red person cannot become more red by going under."

A painting renounces colors on its own but the eye at the museum still retains them. A dog from a poor household barks into the daydream of white spots on the back of a cat inside an empty house. The Blue King points his ass upwards and with his hands together dreams of cannons and cars. Female Storm 7 finishes first at Phu Tho racecourse. Huynh Phan Anh loses forever one third of a blue bill.

III

With the eyes closed every sound is white. Last night's dream hasn't escaped from the smell of the dirty shoe. In the valley a herder raises his artificial leg to jab into the past.

War of the genitals is replaced by a synthesized elastic. Music without windows. On the festival of death, women are inflated by bombs into enormous wombs, the sources of violent bloodlines.

A land of museums holds the deformed and the strangely alive. The crawling reptilian strength of a damp culture. And the homosexuals like to tattoo onto the generative organs images of bugs and venomous creatures.

Nightly news of a low pressure system, and flood, overflow the TV stations. A belief from the river's source shatter dykes packed with pasty earth lumpy inside many heads nodding off to sleep. The ancestors are underwater. Faith and filial piety wait for emergency food. The ghosts are demanding Miliket instant noodles. The kinds of death not found in dictionaries, and life shits and pisses on concepts.

IV

Drowsy eyes waiting for sleep. There is a man hanging from the roof. A death with the beauty of a small waterfall pouring down a jagged peak. A comedy is performed by an old monkey. His image has been printed on postcards to sell to tourists.

Death has no gender. The entire body is bound with musical strings. Testimonies are taped all over the hallway. A few words clump their heads together, ancient characters hobnobbing with complicated constructions erected by absent-minded individuals. The grammar of those who believe that, after a night's sleep, they will wake up mute.

Between the green and red signals, the streets coagulate. At the intersection of Great Vietnam, a project gives its death notice. Next to a pile of broken bricks: garbage, animal carcasses and strewn humanity.

A horn shrieks. The crowd surges, screaming: "Kill! Kill! Kill!" A saxophone soloist suffers a stroke in the middle of Castaways. The stage turns 180 degrees. The MC smiles, apologizes for the technical glitch. A jazz singer sings *Spring On The Steps*, ass swaying, breasts heaving.

The reason for the calamity is determined by the sharp nose of a rabid dog.

translated by Linh Dinh

Wide Open Eyes

A day of dark glasses
Detective eyes look into a crevice.

The ocean surface calm, to hear the sunken ships break apart.
Rotting bodies inside the memory of wide-open eyes.
Centuries of typhoons, the sunken ships become ghostly waves, become voices of
matchsticks.
To light a candle for cold fingers.

The candle flame wipes dust off a secret smudge.

Only the wind knows of sea birds sinking and dissolving inside wide-open eyes.
And ships of sounds not spotted with rust.
Adventures stored inside children's dreams.
Dreams bulging and overburdened to become sudden accidents.

A beauty only time is violent enough to indict.

And all the judges will be children.
And all will be acquitted.

translated by Linh Dinh

A Legend

A vacation on top of a stove.
Smoke preserves the shoots.
Warmth maintains the timbres.

The seed I store inside the tropical forest's vagina.
A woman born from a fever and two eyes not gouged out by the color yellow.
They are reminiscences soundly asleep inside a legendary skirt.

Every situation in the story has cats, rabbits and some fruits.
Aside from barks and the sounds of cats and dogs, there are also cormorants, guavas,
mangoes, and a bottle of fish sauce.

One among them said if stuck on a desert island he would only need two things: Mozart
and fish sauce.

I am a bear who does not know how to perform mountain cave tricks, only lucky to
survive the uprooted forest.
I was born from a tree's hollow and my umbilical cord was cut with a potsherd and my
music is that of a woodpecker.
My smell is that of the saliva of bees mating with the honey of flowers.
My road is to climb to the trifurcated crotch of a tree to be full and drunk and to ponder
for a minute then letting go and falling down.

After each fall my flesh becomes elastic and expands.
After each fall my plants grow boundlessly.
After each fall my animals multiply.

I'm tattered, I'm porous, I'm smooth, I'm bitter. And I'm . . .

Although I'm only an uninsured seed and without wings.
In a dense moment of idle bullets, I take off and land.

In the legend I'm the survivor who has seen the head at the bottom of a jar of fermented
paste.

translated by Linh Dinh