

“The Soil”

Nam Ha

(Translated from the Vietnamese by Quan Manh Ha and Chau Tran)

Nam Ha (1935-), whose real name is Nguyen Anh Cong, was born in Nghe An, central Vietnam. Between 1954 and 1975, he joined the national revolutions against the French and the Americans, and he was a prolific writer until 2009. Nam Ha is well-known for his fiction about camaraderie, soldiers' emotional life, the cruelties of war, and heroism and patriotism. His most famous epic war novels are Very Long Days, Land of the Eastern Region, and Inside the Iron Triangle. The English version of Nam Ha's short story "Soil" first appeared in The Ivory Comb, a collection of seven Vietnamese short stories about the American War in Vietnam (Giai Phong Publishing House, South Vietnam: 1967, pp. 125-139). Below is a re-translation of the story.

Ever since I took up a rifle to fight and started digging ditches, completing the underground shelter was the most difficult thing I have done. With my arms folded on my knees, I crouched over the damp soil and wearily leaned against a tree. Gunfire from the HQ's subsector¹ rattled at length. Once it subsided, everything became quiet again. I waited but the shelling didn't resume. I looked up at the sky and thought, *Well, they're done for.*

Above was a canopy of sparse foliage. Enemy planes dropped their last flares, the faint light blending into the pale dawn. Suddenly, there came the low and laborious droning of transport aircraft, the bulky type with a slightly curved belly we used to call "shrimp-sauce cargo plane."

Day appeared gradually, the jungle emanating a mist that lingered around the trees and thickened. *In this weather*, I thought to myself, *the planes will have to wait at least an hour before they can do anything.* I

¹Subsector: a designated defense area, usually in a combat zone, within which a particular military unit operates and for which it is responsible. (dictionary.reference.com)

yawned and took out my woodcutter's knife, then scurried into the forest to find twigs to make a roof for my shelter.

The comrades of my company, forming a horseshoe-shaped line, were busy doing the same thing. Although the soil here was hard, my shelter turned out decent. I lay branches over the entrance and covered it over with earth, camouflaging the whole thing with foliage. It took me less than half an hour. After wiping my hands on my trouser pockets—there was no water to use—I took a gas-soaked rag out of my cartridge pouch and cleaned my rifle. I loaded more bullets into the clip and meticulously polished the bayonet, thinking to myself that by doing so it would pierce more deeply into the American soldiers' bodies if I needed to use it. There was dew on the rifle; it felt cool against my cheek and the sensation delighted me immensely.

I leaned the rifle gently against the tree and opened my rucksack, taking out more cartridges to put into my pouch. I picked up some tobacco, then ripped out a strip of paper from my one-hundred-page notebook. I slipped the paper into my sleep and closed the rucksack, placing it on the trench's cover before putting the rifle on top. With only half a rice ball, some water, and a few puffs of tobacco, I was prepared to fight the enemy until nightfall.

It was broad daylight out. From the forest the mist dissipated, rising higher and higher into the sky. Dawn had come barreling down, the sun's first sharp rays forming glowing bands of light on the ground. A magpie robin perching on a branch opened its tiny beak and pecked at the droplets of morning dew. As it sang, hopping from one branch to another, its elegant tail beat up and down rhythmically. In the forbidding quiet of the battlefield, the song filled me with delight, as though returning from a bath in the clear waters of a brook. Huynh, my comrade, who was digging a trench next to me, squinted at the bird and smiled like a child. The squad leader Quang also looked up. Soon everyone in Squad No. 7 turned toward the magpie, but we didn't enjoy the music for long. Quang summoned us to a large, well-hidden tree and said, "Everything is fine except the camouflage. Did you know that other units had annihilated the enemy in our subsector? One of the squads even captured an armored vehicle and used the guns on it to fire back at the attacking planes. Today it's our turn. We must use them as an example to knock out the enemy reinforcements."

He paused, thinking what else he might recommend to us. The magpie continued singing in the tree. Quang cast a furtive glance at the bird and continued, "Camouflage the fortifications before taking your meals.

Afterward, everyone get down into your shelters. Except for the lookout, who must be careful in camouflaging himself."

Huynh and I were assigned guard duty. We returned to our trenches and covered them with more twigs, then took our meager lunch. Roaring jets disrupted the still air. Huynh wiped his hands on his trousers and mumbled, "They are coming." Then, he turned to me and said, "Who should stand guard? Let me go first. Go down to your shelter. When I throw a dirt clod at it, come up and we can switch."

I nodded and drank some water. The bombers had already circled twice over us. Farther away, at some distance above a grove, a helicopter whirred noisily, searching for a place to land. The jets swooped down and buzzed over our heads. "The same old trick," I said to myself without looking up at them.

The chopper changed directions and hovered straight toward our positions. I quickly pulled down a twig and concealed my shelter. I sat down and tried to relax, making sure to keep my rifle from getting dirty. I removed a pair of grenades and set them aside, then pricked my ears. The aircraft flew so low that I feared it might blow our cover. It sent a strong wind into my trench and violently shook the branch I had used to camouflage the entrance. Bombs exploded nearby, one after another, causing me to bounce up and down. The blasts seemed to squeeze the shelter, giving me the sensation of sitting in a small boat as it passed through a river's estuary during the high season. The earth shook beneath me, the camouflage ready to blow away at any moment. Bomb fragments whistled all around. I heard the dry sound of a tree falling behind me, the same tree on which the magpie had perched only a few minutes earlier.

After the bombs exploded, the enemy rained napalm on our position, a muffled sound heard everywhere. As fires raged outside, the smell of burnt jelly entered my trench. I took out my towel and soaked it with water from my canteen, then held it to my face to guard myself against possible gas.

The planes began to let loose their 20mm guns, riddling the air in thunderous bursts. I felt reassured, however, and leaned against the strong wall of my shelter. I rolled a cigarette. The shells could only pierce through the outer soil layer of camouflage. I took long drags from my cigarette and joyfully held the smoke in. The smoke made me feel less tired and stirred me to action. I wanted to remove the camouflage and spring out, but knew I had

to wait. The enemy was preparing their ground invasion. I knew from experience that this was how it started, followed by more intense bombing, before they could land any troops. I was impatient. I remembered the night before when I had dug and dug breathlessly, using the light from flares dropped by enemy planes to my advantage. It was an unforgettable night in my life. I had grimaced every time my spade struck the stone-like soil. Certainly, all this would make me remember this stretch of land forever.

I had been deep in meditation during my “great work.” True, I had dug without stopping for twelve hours straight. During that sleepless night, I must confess, I did feel a little dismayed and angry at the hard soil, but gunfire coming from the HQ’s subsector energized me. Finally, my work was complete, and the shelter now protected me from the bombs. I ran my hands along the wall and felt a pleasant coolness inside. I tapped the wall with my fingers and felt very secure. Light filtered down through the cover. The wall’s smooth surface looked as though it had been polished, perhaps from my clothes rubbing against it, or because I’d touched it with my sweaty palms, or both. An idea came to me and I took mental note: I carved the number 200 into the wall of the shelter with the tip of my knife.

It was true that this was the 200th I had dug. It humbled me to look back and realize that I had achieved this in an unfamiliar place, a land which was probably made from the hardest soil on earth. An indescribable feeling overwhelmed me, and I vaguely remembered the many trenches dug at encampments—or bivouacs—as many as there were people, at least one hundred on the battlefields. Only now do I remember this, although I had sat, stood, and even slept in more than one hundred different shelters in as many different places.

A succession of explosions nearby interrupted my thoughts. A fist-sized clod of dirt fell into my trench. Huynh, presumably, wanted me to take his place. I put two grenades into my trouser pockets and grabbed my rifle. I crawled through the entrance, and before getting up, I paused to judge how far the bomb splinters might reach. The sun blinded me.

Seeing me, Huynh asked, “What are you doing out here?”

“To switch places with you.”

“No, I haven’t called you yet. Maybe the ground trembled because of an explosion,” Huynh replied, taking a bandage from his belt.

I stared at him. “Did you get hit?”

Huynh nodded and held out his left hand. “It’s just a flesh wound.” He unrolled the bandage and began dressing his wound.

“You should get into the shelter and let me do this job. That was the second bomb run, wasn’t it? There will be a few more before they land,” I told him.

Huynh disappeared underground. All around I saw bomb craters filling the space where our platoon used to be positioned. Several were near our shelters, others some distance away. One bomb had narrowly missed a trench and uprooted a grove of trees nearby, but all our fortifications remained intact. I felt relieved and turned my attention to the jets circling the sky overhead; they flew higher and higher. Then, suddenly, from the direction of the rising sun, a group of fighters emerged out of the clouds. They looked black as soot.

“It’s the third bomb run,” I said aloud. It was my job as lookout to pay attention. The aircraft circled once, then swooped down and unleashed their payloads. The explosions shook the earth, and I thought the trembling might fling us from our trenches. I parted my legs and tried not to fall by pressing up against the wall. The explosions stopped. I wiped dirt from my face and neck, then ran my hands along the shelter’s walls. A large crack had opened and my camouflage had slipped to one side. Just as I turned around, something black streaked down in front of me. I only had enough time to duck when I heard the ear-splitting explosion. I was nearly thrown to the ground, and had it not been for the shelter, I would have died.

In two hundred different places I had dug two hundred trenches: in sandy coastal areas, in the plains of central Vietnam and in the muddy West, in the red soil of the rubber and coffee plantations of the East. In some of those places, my job was made easier by the clayed soil. In other lands, I came up against the rocky laterite of deforested hills. Each experience gave me memories I would never forget. In Gia Dinh Province, for instance, I had enjoyed *Tet*² with the locals and took part in a counterstrike, fighting alongside a female guerilla who, some time later, would become my fiancée. Now I found myself far from home, on lands I never dreamt of visiting. But the struggle for liberation led me here. This land became important to me overnight, as though it were part of me. It protected me from enemy bombs

² Vietnamese Lunar New Year

and bullets, like a mother protecting her child. Indeed, the soil was like a second mother and I fought for her. In a few moments, when the enemy land their troops, I should spring out of the earth's bosom and kill them, defending the soil inch by inch, for this land was ours and not theirs.

The fighter planes had scurried away, leaving behind a few helicopters circling over the open ground in front of us. Certainly they would let their troops off there. At that point, a clump of dirt was thrown at me. I turned around and saw squad leader Quang standing behind a tree. He said, "Word is that they'll be here soon. Be quiet so we can welcome them properly. When the sappers' mine goes off, hurl your grenades according to the plan. Charge them when you hear the bugle. If any of them jump into the shelters, just..." Quang swung his bayonet around and smiled broadly. He added, "Anything new since this morning, Son? Are the trenches still intact? We must be grateful for this soil. Quite a lot of bombs, eh? Now tell Huynh our plan."

I threw a clump of dirt at Huynh's trench and he popped out. I told him about the squad leader's order, and just as I finished, a squadron of fighter planes closed in and swooped down to bomb us. I ducked into the shelter, but before I could withdraw my hands, a bomb exploded on the other side. My left hand felt damp; I bent over and looked at it. A splinter had nearly severed my little finger. The finger was attached to my hand only by a bit of skin. I gazed up at the planes angrily and tried to put the finger back in its place. Nothing worked, so I got rid of it to free up mobility. After all, it couldn't heal. I argued about it with myself. I bandaged the aching stump.

The planes bombed and strafed indiscriminately in the air before pulling up. Immediately, from the direction of the rising sun, choppers grouped in threes rumbled in like a swarm of flies. There was a thunderous noise in the sky. As I stood in the shelter reporting to the squad leader and Huynh, a helicopter skimmed over the ground and dropped a red smoke grenade to mark the landing spot for others.

"We'll have a good haul for sure!" I screamed excitedly. The enemy was not aware that hundreds of men underground had spread a tight net around them. I bent down to put on my rucksack and placed two hand grenades on the shelter's edge. Then carefully loaded my rifle and unfolded the bayonet, prepared for the eventual melee. After pulling some twigs over my head, I calmly lay in wait.

In front of me appeared the first group of choppers. I could distinctly see the soldiers aboard. They were clad in green, each with a grenade in his hand. Their eyes were fixed on the ground. The helicopter was hovering only five meters off the ground. Three men slid past me, just a few meters away. The soldiers lobbed grenades before jumping down. As they hit the ground they tumbled, some flat on their faces, others on their backs, and a few landed hopping on one foot. One got as close as fifteen meters. They formed three rows, about a company in all. The American commanders tried their best to stand, swaying back and forth like drunkards. They looked aggressive, moving as though the place was deserted, probably thinking that the communists had all been killed by their bombs and bullets. Their demeanor made me nervous.

“You’ll be finished soon,” I mumbled. I was filled with eagerness and clenched my teeth, holding the grenade firmly in my hand. It was then that our sappers’ mines made three deafening explosions. I tossed the first grenade at the nearest group and, before it went off, I lobbed another one. Men fell to the ground. Without a second thought our squad, the whole company, popped out of our shelters. *Now we drag in our net*, I thought. Grenades showered on the enemy formation and they were routed in the confusion. The machine gun, manned by Chi, swept along the ground. Soldiers screamed in horror and scrambled for their lives. I raised my rifle and aimed at an American crawling in the grass. I pulled the trigger and he writhed for awhile before lying motionless. The familiar bugle charge sounded from behind our lines. I quickly jumped out of my shelter and saw the squad leader Quang, Huynh, and Hien let loose a volley with their sub-machine guns. Several enemy soldiers were hit. They stood erect as metal pokers before falling down. Only a few shot back. Others fled or raised their hands. They didn’t realize where we came from, or even what had happened. Our whole company surged forward like a tidal wave of the Mekong River during the flood season. I jumped over the fallen bodies and headed straight for the Yank. Although my bullet had gone through his thigh, he was still alive. When I was a few paces from him I screamed unintelligibly. He turned his head and aimed his pistol at me. I jerked to one side and the bullet sailed past my ear. I clenched my teeth and with all my strength I thrust the bayonet into his enormous side. His body shuddered and the pistol dropped from his hand.

The whole altercation was like a sudden and violent storm engulfing the land and lasting no longer than ten minutes. The battleground fell back

into silence. Only the moaning of wounded enemies and the roar of jet planes high overhead could be heard.

The squad leader Quang ran up to me. I gave him the American officer's pistol and pointed to the bodies of others I had knocked down. Seeing the white bandage on my left hand, he asked, "Are you wounded?"

"Yeah, a bomb splinter cut my little finger, but I can still handle a rifle."

He stepped toward the dead American and removed all the papers from the soldier's pockets, slipping them into his own.

"What about my duty for our unit?" I asked him.

"Don't worry. The squad will remain if there's another fight."

"Should I escort them up to the camp?" I asked, obviously disappointed.

"No," the squad leader said, shaking his head. "Only to the rear, where you'll hand them over to the escort team. Then you'll come back here."

I gave a wide grin, as well as Quang, who knew what I was thinking. He then urged my other comrades to collect the trophies. I walked up to the captured soldiers cluttered in the forest.

Sunlight fell on the enemy corpses. The earth seemed to be burning under my feet. My comrades and I kept the prisoners from noon until late in the day. The intermittent rattling of machine guns from the fire-line made me nervous. The escort team got lost and didn't arrive until 4:00 PM. After the prisoners were handed over, I hurried to the front lines. Because of several bombings on my way there, I didn't return until nightfall. I gave my mission report and rejoined the position. Huynh was eating his meal.

"Any more encounters since morning?" I asked.

Huynh shook his head.

"Why is there so much gunfire?"

"It's from the other units."

"Any news?"

“They wiped out two companies, and we one.” Raising his finger, Huynh added, “With one enemy battalion destroyed, I’m afraid there’ll be no more Yanks to fight.”

“Have they bombed this area since I left?”

“They did.” Huynh pointed to the new bomb craters. “They retaliated.”

I looked around and could barely recognize the place. Bombs and rockets had decimated every tree. The soil looked like a plowed field.

“Did anyone get hurt?”

Huynh shook his head.

I had a hard time finding my shelter. There were three more bomb craters, not including the three I’d noticed before I left. The layer of earth covering the shelter had been blown off. I bent over it and realized with surprise that the entrance was dangerously warped. I jumped in and discovered the bottom cluttered with clumpy earth. Using both hands, I touched the walls and found that they were still intact.

I heard the squad leader calling me. I got out and was told to prepare to move elsewhere. Before I could ask any questions, he said, “We expect them to come in larger numbers somewhere else tomorrow.”

Our unit moved on. Again we set out across the unknowable land. There I will dig my 201st shelter deep in the soil which will, overnight, become an intimate and private place, protecting me as a mother does her child. There, too, I will spring from the ground to kill anyone who dares venture across it. And this will continue without end until all of South Vietnam rids the last American aggressor.

Quan Manh Ha, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of American Literature & Ethnic Studies at the University of Montana, USA.

Chau Tran is currently an MFA student at the University of Michigan, USA.