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The Present's Past: On Phong Nguyen's *Memory Sickness*

Memory Sickness and Other Stories, by Phong Nguyen. Denver, CO: Elixir Press, 2011.

The word 'grit' comes up quite often in written descriptions of Phong Nguyen's first collection of short stories, *Memory Sickness*. But if this book is gritty, I have to admit I'm not sure I know what that means. I don't see these stories and characters as filled with an indomitable nature. I see them as already worn down by the gritty, the bareness of the self revealed. The book wastes no time in taking the conventions that often give us comfort, (like home, family, love,) and inverting them. The title itself does this. At its root, memory—the claim we make to our pasts and therefore the tool we use to shape our current selves—is ill. Or, as Roth Chay, the narrator of the first and title story, puts it, "Comfort kills." This book resides in the vulnerable and the raw, where strength lies not in hope or perseverance, but in the abject resignation of this fact.

"Memory Sickness" and its young protagonist, Roth Chay, are prime examples of this. Set in the 1970s, the story follows Roth after he has escaped from Cambodia and fled to the U.S. Here he is free to spend his days measuring the banalities of middle school life against the horrors of war he has both witnessed and propagated as part of his forced service in the Red Army. Certainly *Lord of the Flies*, which he reads for his English class, loses much of its metaphorical weight when pitted against a past that is, among other things, its own metaphor—the violent sundering of a nation that divides a people against each other, their history, and themselves. This fracturing is echoed in the form of the story, which jumps between Roth's memories of his family and the war, and his current life as an American teen-ager.

Roth never laments his experiences in his home country; he states plainly, "None of my sisters lived through the purges. . . ." Nor does he overtly condemn the seeming naiveté of his new American peers; "In Providence, I learned the virtue of standing out. . . . In my home

country, you would never want to be picked out of a line." Instead, he simply makes his observations and forestalls any true reflection. The section breaks further bury the things that cannot or will not be said. Foreboding lines like, "All I know is that no one is guiltless. We make mistakes," hint at Roth's own sins and suggest that even in the land of Providence, survival techniques are still a necessity.

However, not all of Nguyen's stories involve such a dramatic backdrop. One of the author's talents lies in locating this same tension within the mundane, suggesting that this is not just a product of historical circumstances, but a result of individual will. The story titled "Manhunt," for instance, follows a slumber party from the point of view of various characters—the girls, a mother, an older sister, and, finally, the two teenage boys who chase the girls after they have snuck out during the night. A scene that could be cast in a playful light becomes one of looming predatory violence when set in the context of this collection. After hearing Roth Chay recount the crusades of the Khmer Rouge or Chuck Wonicki, in "The Opposite of Gray," describe the murder that lands him in prison, it is easy to imagine the dangers of the world can penetrate anywhere, even a New England Suburb. Rather, it is easier to imagine that each world comes complete with its own set of dangers, whose potency is lodged in the heart of the individual who fears them. As one of the girls at the party reflects while fleeing their pursuers, "I have to run. I don't care. There's an obligation to my body deeper than what I feel towards those girls.... For a moment, I actually convince myself that they deserve to be hunted." Like Roth, the survival of her body is deeply connected to her mind's ability to sever ties.

This theme, like the characters, is woven throughout the collection, sometimes directly and sometimes as an echo. For instance, another reason readers cannot dismiss the slumber-party chase as frivolous is that we know one of the boys, Angell Ramon, is the abusive boyfriend whose murder we've witnessed in a previous story. We come to the story already afraid of him. This is made disconcerting when we finally hear his voice. He sounds less like an enraged monster, (the last time we saw him he was bursting through a door, ready to attack,) and more like a defiant braggadocio, careless of the fear he can inflict on others. He acts surprised when the girls flee after he and his friend speed their car towards them, crashing over the curb and landing in neighbor's front lawn; "I thought they'd freeze up, 'like a deer in headlights,' because a twelve-year-old girl is the closest thing you'll get to a deer in the suburbs." Although, later in the timeline but earlier in the book, it is Angell who is shot. In Nguyen's world, there are

always hunters and always prey, that much is clear, but who they are depends on the circumstances.

As mentioned before, this is the second time we see Angel, although in the previous tale Angel is spelled with only one "l". At first I thought this was a typo, or just something missed by the editor. Then I realized, the story "Manhunt" contains Angell's first person perspective, while in "The Opposite of Gray," his rival, Chuck Wonicki, is the narrator. If I were Chuck, I too would assume Angell was spelt with only one "l". More importantly, this slight of hand is indicative of a larger trend in the book. The stories are connected through characters and storylines, and yet even as we get more information, the narratives are not filled in but the holes are exposed. What's revealed is the impossibility of telling an entire story, especially when that story relies on multiple perspectives. Each new piece of information complicates rather than clarifies. As Leslie Scalapino has put it, "Events, (always the "past"), are a process," and each step in that process reshapes what has come before.

This is what creates the drama of the book. At first glance it seems as if most stories leave off right before their climaxes or at the most challenging moment in the story, as if the author had written himself into a corner and can answer with nothing but silence. The conflict between the girls and the boys who chased them is left unresolved. Nor do we ever see what happens after a father flies across the country to punch his son in the face, or after a husband leaves his wife and then returns, or after a bum comes into possession of a gun and thinks about visiting his old boss. But this might be the point—dramatic moments are just that, moments, and after the rush of them resides, they're reabsorbed into the commonplaces of everyday existence. What should be life-changing events are just part of the process, and the spike of a climax becomes less severe as the timeline stretches out through the stories and across the gaps of time between them.

Memory Sickness investigates this challenge of constructing any single story on a micro-level as well. Words too are separated from their meanings through this violent history. As Chuck Wonicki observes from the penitentiary:

One guy here started a newsletter, "Prose and Cons," and he got every literate dick on A-block to pitch in a piece. Mine started out being about understaffing in the warden's office, but then the ranks got hold of it and it turned out to be about the prison work ethic. Funny how you thing you've said one thing, and it turns out that isn't what you said at all. My mistake. That's why it's called the corrections facility.

No one's meaning is left alone to exist unscarred. The inevitable continuation of life, and of these stories, makes imperative the ability to reverse and revise one's role when the circumstances demand it. Otherwise, as Nguyen shows us in his collection, modern life requires that we resign ourselves to the crash, the moment meaning is flung from us and the only thing left to repair the fractures is the painful and imperfect suture of memory.