The Year Is 0025

The year is 0025 – twenty-five years after The End.

She wakes in a daze, swallowed by dazzling fractures of red and yellow. Their haunting polygonal shapes remind her of something familiar, yet beyond reach.
The first sense to return is smell – moist, warm, chemical.
“Rain?” The thought drifts through her fogged mind. It’s been years since she last smelled rain. But as the dampness seeps into her skin, activating her nerves back to life, she realizes: “Rain does not burn like this.”

Her fingers twitch against the metal beneath her, her mind counting out the sensation. *One, two, three, four, five*. Left hand intact. *One, two, three, four, five*. Right hand, too. Her spine stiffens against the cold surface. She swallows, and the acrid taste rolls down her throat, digging up memories long buried in the deep.
Gasoline.
Laundry detergent.
And something else – sharper, bitter. Not gasoline, more like fuel oil. Not detergent, more like mothballs.
The unmistakable scent of napalm.

“It smells like victory”, he had smirked, before explaining in sickening detail how the gasoline gel stuck like leeches to whatever – whoever – it touched, clinging, eating, never letting go. “One of man’s greatest inventions”, he concluded.
She had called him a *sick fuck* before pulling the trigger. A single shot to the head.

It smells like victory.
Whose victory?

Because here she is, back in the pod, her body wrung out from another mission. The missions that repeat themselves, journeying forward and backward in time, always rooted in Vietnam.
Did she succeed? Did the General die? Did it change anything, or did they simply burn Indochina to the ground regardless?

Time cannot save mankind.
These missions cannot save mankind.
Not unless they *want* to be saved – from their own sins and desires.

The year is 0076 – seventy-six years after The End.

Pain hums behind her eyes. She breathes in slow, dragging herself back to reality – or whatever passes for it.
She’s in the pod. Again. Maybe the thousandth time. Maybe the hundred-thousandth. Each time is the same: ripped from one timeline, flung between worlds, body reshaped, dissolved, reconstituted. Sometimes human. Sometimes something else – an object, a shadow, a smear of data.
And then, inevitably, she returns here, *home*. Another mission failed.

She had stopped journaling after the year 0005. Thoughts no longer mattered. The only constants were the mirrored walls of her pod, her unaging body, the relics of a forgotten time, scattered around her like ghosts:

Brother and sister’s baby photographs, torn at the seams.
Grandmother’s jars of sugarcane, thick as time.
Grandfather’s severed fingers, wrapped in plastic bags.
Mother’s blood-orange jelly stars, hand-carried from the North.
Father’s burnt vinyl records, salvaged in the South.
A lineage sealed by violence.

From afar, glowing monitors tracking the fragile line of her heartbeat, food pills capable of feeding a thousand versions of herself for thousands of years. And above her, the half-burned instruction, clinging to the ceiling like an epitaph:

Agent: XXXX Nguy—
Location: Sài Gòn, Việ—
Mission: Save ma—

Save *what?*
Ma – mankind?
Má – mother?
Ma – ghost?
Mày – you?

She stares at the half-gone letters until her eyes ache, willing them to mean something.
She thought she’d know by now. She never did.
The mission was never meant to be clear. Only endless.

Before The End, her siblings and her, along with other *Việt kiều* kids, would fool around with words – switching pitch, twisting tone, bending folk poems just to mess with their elders. The perks of being twin-cultured.
She learnt, eventually, that the sound of a Vietnamese word matters as much as the letters used to write it. A language longing to be heard. Alive only through the living voices that speak it.
The irony?
With no one to share it with, even her mother tongue has broken – fractured by undecipherable letters, swallowed by the sound of silence.
After all, those folk poems weren’t just words –
they were prophecy,
whispering of fated partings and unwilling farewells,
of loss without measure, of solitude without end.

The Year Is XXXX

Words Bill Nguyễn
Translation Vinh Sơn
Design Thái Hà *
* After *Paper Stacks* by Felix Gonzalez-Torres

The year is 0005 – five years after The End.

They disappeared like smoke before her eyes. Brother. Sister. Grandmother. Grandfather. Mother. Father.
They were right there – flesh and breath – before their bodies ignited, collapsing, melting into a black, gelatinous liquid with that distinct smell.

Gasoline?
Laundry detergent?
No. Not gasoline, more like fuel oil. Not detergent, more like mothballs.

She barely has time to process before instinct kicks in. Counting. *One, two, three, four, five.*
Time jump.
Dazzling fractures of red and yellow. Their haunting polygonal shapes remind her of something familiar, yet beyond reach.
The pod.
Again.

Her whole body trembles, raw with anger. She screams from the deepest end of her guts. But can they hear her? Her pod-mates – floating in this infinite loop, trapped in their infinite failures, voices just as lost. From time to time, she wondered – what does it say on *their* instructions?

She thought she'd grow numb by now. She never did.
Another mission failed. She couldn't even save má – her own mother.

Eyes brimming with tears, she pulls out her journal and begins to write – unaware that this would be her final entry:

I am just a ghost, one among many –
the ghosts of the unburied, the uprooted, the displaced,
the ghosts of wars and greed refusing to fade,
the ghosts of yesteryears.

I am a birthless, homeless, worldless ghost –
moving between past and future,
rewriting what has been, undoing what will be,
no longer knowing where one ends and the other begins.
A harbinger of a broken present.

Your Buddha is gone.
Your God is gone.
And yet, here I am.

What am I?
Invincible.
Industrial.
Indestructible.

But to what end?
I am but a part of The End.
I am their bodies, their images, their data, their projects.
I am but objectified.

Yet.
I am a daughter.
I could have been a wife.
I would have wanted to be a mother.

But no.
I am just a woman.
A no-man.
A no.

So go ahead – let me be no-thing.
Let me go.
Don't let me go.

Before she knows it, instinct kicks in once more. Counting. *One, two, three, four, five*.
Time jump.
Again.

Curator's Note

Exploitation and resistance against forgetting. These are the key concepts that, for me, link Nguyen Phuong Linh, Quynh Dong, Thao Nguyen Phan and Danh Vo – the four artists curator Thái Hà has chosen for the first two chapters of her exhibition and adventure story *The year is XXXX*. Across their works, Vietnam – as land, country, people, identity, language, song, belief, symbol, and memory – appears extracted, fragmented, and abstracted. Never whole, never one.

So, when Thái Hà invited me to curate and write the third chapter, selecting Diane Severin Nguyen's work *Tyrant Star* from the collection of Nguyen Art Foundation felt natural. However, unlike the four artists before her, Diane's work moves us beyond the historical context of the Indochina Wars and into the contemporary reality of Vietnam today, where the specters of violence continue to linger.

In *Tyrant Star*, lush tropical fruits of the Mekong Delta flourish alongside discarded remnants of human consumption. Towering cranes and hyper-modern constructions devour the last patches of green in Thu Thiem – once a natural reservoir that absorbed Saigon's excess rainwater during the monsoon season. A young Vietnamese YouTuber, in broken English, performs the anti-Vietnam War anthem *The Sound of Silence* without a direct connection to its original meaning. As these footages rapidly intercut, stories of dreams emerge next to bubbling blood-orange jelly stars, flickering LED smiley faces, and pixelated hearts. A rural landscape longing for modernization. A country pushing toward great-nation status. A girl enacting her fantasy of pop stardom. Yet these dreams unfold in tandem with the erasure of others – human and non-human alike. The natural world is pushed to the background, its degradation an inevitable consequence of development. Voiceless, faceless orphans remain out of frame – robbed of agency – much like Vietnam itself in *The Sound of Silence*, where the country exists only as a peripheral subject within a larger existential crisis of the 1960s.

Theatrical and seemingly disjointed, uncomfortable yet alluring – such contrasting narratives appear side by side in *Tyrant Star*. Their seductive, artificial beauty functions as a means of excavation; it lures us in, then pulls us beneath the surface, forcing us to taste the grit of reality. Beauty and grit. This is contemporary Vietnam – where history, memory, and trauma are continuously rewritten in the name of progress, where exploitation has become a mode of production, and forgetting a way of surviving. Vietnam, like the YouTuber's performance, like the symbols that represent the nation, the fragments it has become and is remembered by, exists in a space of dislocation – caught between aspiration and estrangement, imitation and reinvention. History loops endlessly: a Vietnam once exploited by external forces, now in the process of exploiting itself. Echoes of the past – unresolved yet sugarcoated. Signs of future conflicts – ominous yet illuminating.

Taking *Tyrant Star* as a point of departure, I realized it was time for our protagonist in Thái Hà's adventure story to shift to another timeline, one not yet written. My chapter thus begins at *The End*, where life as we know it no longer exists. Much like the girl in the previous chapters who constantly wakes up between dream and waking life, and finds herself shaped – and somewhat rebirthed – by each environment she encounters, our protagonist is now trapped in another time–space, outside of any conceivable logic, seemingly on an unnamable mission.

Perhaps, over time, her experiences accumulate but are not entirely retained, for each transformation has stripped away certain aspects of her identity, body and memory, embedding fragments into new forms. Perhaps, by the time she reaches my chapter, she is no longer the same little girl but a composite of past versions, a failed heroine who has lost all agency, having drifted so far from her origins that she now exists only as a response – to external forces, to algorithms, to protocols.

And perhaps, the transition from the earthly, mythic world of Thái Hà's story to the mechanical, sterile environment of my sci-fi world represents nothing but a trap of another kind. A desperate attempt to break free from nature's grip, only to land in a new kind of limbo. A simulation. A data loop. An endless cycle controlled by artificial systems, a higher technological order, or some unknowable governing machine, designed to control and erase her sense of self, will and consciousness.

In this relentless process of destruction and reinvention, our protagonist seems doomed to fail.
But was she ever free? Did she ever escape?
Or is existence itself just the passage from one prison to another – one algorithm, one system, one ruling order after the next, day in day out?

In her, do we see ourselves?