

# **The Land I Lost: Adventures of a Boy in Vietnam Study Guide**

**The Land I Lost: Adventures of a Boy in Vietnam by  
Quang Nhuong Huynh**

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# Plot Summary

The Land I Lost consists of Huynh Quang Nhuong's recollections of his boyhood in Vietnam in the 1950s. His family owned a rice farm in an agrarian hamlet. The book covers a couple of years in the very young life of Nhuong, including adventures with many wild and dangerous beasts.

Nhuong had two constant companions during his time at the rice farm. One of these was Tank, the water buffalo, so named because he hit other male buffaloes like a tank during fights over dominance. Tank combined the ferocity of the mountain buffaloes with the obedience and intelligence of the lowlands buffaloes. Nhuong would often ride on Tank's back during his excursions into the woods and around the farm. After Tank defeated a jungle tiger, he was retired from working the farm and tasked with the responsibility of protecting the hamlet's livestock from wild animals.

Nhuong's other companion was his cousin, who was raised by the family after Nhuong's aunt died in childbirth and uncle died from a wild hog attack. The cousin was about ten years older than the six-year-old Nhuong, and he had a natural attraction to hunting and the outdoors. The cousin was brave enough to tame a python and use it as a pillow, and he also became a town hero after he sliced another treacherous snake in the head, killing it.

Another constant in Nhuong's young life was his grandmother. Nhuong's grandmother was a feisty, lively soul. One tale has her handling an insulting "rascal" at a restaurant by using karate on him, and another tale has her stopping a bandit from robbing the family home by shooting him with an arrow in the leg. Nhuong's grandmother loved opera and plays, and she often staged traditional Chinese mythology plays in the hamlet, starring as the young heroine despite her age.

The threat of wild beasts was constant in the hamlet, and the community frequently rallied around the family to create hunting parties. In one incident, a lone wild hog killed a farmer and had to be slowly worn down by dogs (with significant dog casualties) before a team of hunters sliced its throat. The horse snake was also a terror, due to its speed and ferocity. Meanwhile, crocodiles made the waters hostile. One incident has a young boy named Hung cleverly cut off the tail of a crocodile intent on attacking boaters in the water. The stump-tailed crocodile was thereafter known as Mister Short.

Much time was spent by Nhuong and his cousin attempting to tame various beasts. They raised a breed of birds, and then had them drink opium-laced water in order to create an addiction that would have the birds come back every night instead of flying away. Monkeys were also used as pets and work animals by many families in the hamlet.

In the final chapter, beloved Tank was killed by a stray bullet from the Franco-Vietnamese war, signaling a loss of childhood and innocence.



# Tank, the Water Buffalo, and My Cousin

## Tank, the Water Buffalo, and My Cousin Summary and Analysis

**Tank, the Water Buffalo:** Author Nhuong recounts his boyhood in Vietnam, starting from when he was six. His family owned a rice farm, and from July to January, frequent rains meant that the soil had to be tilled by water buffaloes. One of the family's buffaloes died from old age, so the father sought a replacement. The ideal buffalo had to have both the fiery temperament of the mountain-bred herds—so as to fight off tigers in the nearby jungle—and the patient and obedient temperament of the lowlands herds, so that the beast would be easy to handle. The father managed to find such a mixed-breed buffalo from a local merchant.

The calf and Nhuong grew up to be good companions. The buffalo was called Tank because of his tenacity with fighting other bulls for supremacy; he hit like a tank. Soon Tank was known throughout the hamlet (local province) for his fighting prowess. One day, Tank battled with a large bull and was knocked backward, something that never happened. A loss by Tank would mean shame for the family and possible financial disaster if female buffaloes followed the other bull home. However, Tank managed to ram the bull into a ditch, and the fight was stopped before Tank could kill the bull.

Tank gained such fame that the family was worried he would be stolen. Sure enough, one day he did not come home from grazing. A family member with a hound dog helped the family to track Tank down to a river, where the buffalo was tied to a tree. The family rejoiced at the discovery, but wondered how Tank had gotten there. Later, a drunken man at a wedding confessed that he and two other men had attempted to steal Tank by seizing the rope slipped through the beast's nose for handling. The buffalo's nose is fragile, and Tank could not thrash for risk of ripping apart its nose.

The thieves led Tank away to the river, and loosened the rope to allow it to drink. Tank responded by goring one of the men in the leg, such that the other thieves had to abandon Tank in order to carry the injured thief away to safety. Nhuong's father untied the rope from Tank's nose so the deed could not be repeated. It turned out that Tank was also very smart, and it could farm without needing the rope. It responded to simple vocal commands.

One day during the dry season, a great roar from the buffaloes caused the townspeople to come running to the herd. The buffaloes had circled to protect the young, all except Tank, who was battling with a jungle tiger. The tiger ended the fight limping away, defeated, while Tank sustained only minor injuries. From that point on, Tank was retired from farming, and given the sole responsibility to protect the herd from tiger attacks.

**My Cousin:** This entry is about Nhuong's cousin, who is not named. The cousin's mother had died during childbirth, and the father had died while hunting a wild hog, so



Nhuong's family raised him. The cousin was ten years older than Nhuong, but they became good friends. They often went out hunting together. One day, they hunt wild chickens, chasing them around until they tired, and then cooked them alive by forming clay balls around them and tossing these into the fire.

Another time, the cousin took three songbirds from a nest, and isolated each in cages built in holes in the ground. He taught each a different tune by playing the song again and again to them. A boy, Tchen, stole one of the birds, but the cousin threatened to kill him unless he returned the boy, so Tchen did.

The cousin also managed to tame a python by letting the snake wrap around his body, using one hand to hold its head (so it wouldn't bite), and then softly biting its tail, an action that, per legend, prevented the python from squeezing you to death. The python became a good pet, and the cousin entertained guests by coiling the snake up and using it as a pillow.



# The Lone Wild Hog, and Mister Short

## The Lone Wild Hog, and Mister Short Summary and Analysis

The Lone Wild Hog: Wild hogs were another danger in Nhuong's hamlet. Hogs rub up against oil trees, which ooze sap. This sap dries on the hog's skin to become a hard armor that prevents knives or even bullets from penetrating the hog's hide. The only vulnerable place on the hog is its neck, because no sap builds there. The worst kind of hogs is male hogs which have separated from their herds, because they are particularly vicious.

One of these lone wild hogs attacked a farmer and his daughter one day. The farmer was gored to death and died, along with his dog, while the daughter hid in tall grass. The hamlet rallied a hunting party, and followed their team of bloodhounds to the edge of the jungle, where the dogs had trapped the hog. The hunters surrounded the hog but did not yet confront it, giving their dogs all night to wear out the hog, because facing a fresh hog was suicide. By dawn, four dogs had died with horrible wounds. The dogs were called off, and the men formed a line to attack the hog.

The hog charged one man, breaking his leg and knocking him unconscious. A second line of men was formed. The men were all equipped with special crescent-handled knives that were designed to get stuck in a hog's neck. A hog has two attacks: a charge, and a subsequent thrashing of his head. The skilled hunter sidesteps the charge and then holds out the knife so the hog essentially stabs itself by thrashing its neck right into the knife. And this is precisely what happened to this hog, which died from a neck wound after a second charge.

The hog was loaded onto a bamboo stretcher, and other stretchers were made to carry wounded men and wounded and dead dogs. That night, a festival was held to celebrate the survival of the men, and hog meat was served. The heart of the hog, however, was placed on the burial altar of the young farmer killed in the initial attack, while the hog's broken tusks were hung on the man's tomb to remind everyone of the danger of the lone wild hog.

Mister Short: This tale is about Mr. Short, the crocodile. Crocodiles were very intelligent creatures that were never tricked by poisoned animal carcasses left by humans to kill them off, so the villagers had to learn to live with them. One particularly dangerous crocodile waited in the mud of a riverbank for villagers traveling to town in small boats. While a villager was using a bamboo pole to navigate the boat, the crocodile would use its long tail to knock them into the water and eat them. Quite a few villagers lost their lives in this manner.

One day, a young man named Hung decided to put a stop to this. He and a friend built a wooden dummy to approximate a man. The dummy was rigged to stand up in a small



boat, and Hung hid in the boat, lying down, with a long knife. The boat was then sent downstream.

The crocodile was fooled by the dummy, and it used its tail to lash out at it. At this instant, Hung slashed at its tail, lopping off a large portion of it, which fell into the boat. From then on, the deformed crocodile was named Mister Short, and while it lived for a long time feeding off of other animals, it never again attacked humans.



# River Creatures, and The Horse Snake

## River Creatures, and The Horse Snake Summary and Analysis

River Creatures: One day, Nhuong got the idea to disrupt an otters' party. An "otters' party" was a rare gathering of otters on the riverbank, where they would bring and eat a large number of fish. Nhuong knew that the otters would quickly scatter if they saw a human, so Nhuong wore brown clothing and rode flat on the back of Tank to avoid detection. Tank wandered over to the otters' party, where Nhuong sprang from his back and frightened the otters away. Nhuong got an impressive twenty-four fish from the raid, and he continued with several successful raids.

On one raid, Nhuong discovered three otter cubs in a hole. Cubs were prized because they could be taught to catch fish for their owner. Nhuong crawled into the cub hole, but before he could grab the cubs, the mother otter came back to shore and bit his toes. Not willing to abandon the prized cubs, Nhuong wrote a message to his family to send help, and attached it to Tank, which he then sent home. Tank reached his family, and with his cousin's help, Nhuong managed to take the otter cubs home.

Two cubs were sold, and the third was trained to catch fish. Many days, Nhuong would attach a long rope to the otter and let it swim in the river, where it caught many fish for the family and other villagers.

Another river creature was the white catfish, huge fish that were also prized. Nhuong once helped an elderly friend of the family catch a large white catfish by attaching the fishing line to Tank's horns, using them to back up and pull the catfish from the water. The fish was so huge that Tank was tasked to bring it back to the house, but only after the fish's pectoral fins were cut, as the fins produced a harmful poison.

A last creature discussed is the golden eel, prized for its delicious meat. An eel built a nest in mud beneath the water, and it was so strong that it took a fisherman (or even a small group of fisherman) a good hour to pull a golden eel out of its nest, as the eel clung to corners inside the nest. Fisherman used earthworms as bait, which were dangled on the surface of the water. Nhuong got the idea to use strong Tank to pull the eels out of their nests, which he did very successfully and much more efficiently than humans.

The Horse Snake: Out of all the dangerous animals in the hamlet, perhaps the most dangerous was the horse snake, so named because it was as fast as a horse. It grew as large as a python, but unlike the python, its bite was venomous and deadly. One day, a villager heard the distinctive hiss of the horse snake and warned Nhuong's father, who sent out a distress call with his hunting horn, alerting the community. A hunting party spent all day hunting for the snake, without success. That night, Nhuong's grandmother





told him and his little sister a tale about a woodcutter and his son successfully defeating a horse snake, which put young Nhung more at ease.

The next day, a farmer named Minh discovered the snake on a branch above his pond where he kept his fish. The snake had hung itself like a hammock, and was rocking back and forth to splash water out of the pond to make the pond shallow enough to attack the fish. The hunting party surrounded the snake. It darted away, knocking one man unconscious, but suffering several wounds. It slithered toward the river, and the hunting party again surrounded it. Four of the best hunters slashed it to death.



# Opera, Karate, and Bandits, and So Close

## Opera, Karate, and Bandits, and So Close Summary and Analysis

**Opera, Karate, and Bandits:** This entry is dedicated to Nhuong's grandmother. At eighty, she was still a spry, able-bodied woman. She loved theater, and would always attend local plays and operas, or even stage dramas herself if no local actors had come to town for a while. In these staged plays, she would play the role of the young heroine—despite her age—and Nhuong or another of her grandsons would play the role of the hero.

During one celebration of the Lunar New Year, Nhuong and his grandmother attended an opera. Many operas were based on Chinese mythology, and this was no exception. The play involved several archetypes, including the "Faithful One," a protagonist who lost favor with the king because of the lies of the villain called the "Flatterer."

Earlier in her life, Nhuong's grandmother was very feisty, in contrast to Nhuong's grandfather, who was mild-mannered and physically weak. One day, in a restaurant, a "rascal" heaved insults at the meek grandfather. The grandfather wanted to leave, but the grandmother wanted to stay. The rascal eventually came over to their table to start trouble, and the grandmother gave him a powerful elbow to the jaw, followed up by a kick to the chin. The grandmother told everyone that her husband taught her karate, but in fact she had been taught by her great uncle. Still, everyone assumed the grandfather was a powerful karate master, and no one messed with him again.

Another time, bandits attacked the family home, and once again Nhuong's grandmother was up to the task. While the grandfather herded the children to safety, the grandmother shot an arrow at one bandit's thigh.

Back in the present time of the novel, Nhuong's grandmother got sick sometimes, and when the doctor came, she would force her family to look very sad, as if the grandmother was about to pass away. That way, according to the grandmother's logic, the doctor would give her the most powerful medicine.

After having a conversation with Nhuong one day, Nhuong's grandmother returned home, had a small dinner, and then retired to bed. She was found dead after apparently sleeping peacefully. Nhuong remembers his grandmother and the conversation they had very clearly to this day.

**So Close:** This tale tells the story of a man named Trung and a woman named Lan. Trung and Lan grew up next door to each other and became good playmates. But when becoming teenagers, they became separated, as it was the custom to separate boys



and girls at this age. Yet, they had feelings for each other, and Lan would find an excuse to come over to Trung's house to help his mother mend fishing nets. When Trung whispered Lan's name in his sleep, Trung's mother knew the two should be wed, and she arranged a wedding with Lan's family.

After a successful and joyous wedding, Lan went down to the river to take a bath. A log barrier normally separated the bathing area from any dangerous creatures like crocodiles, but a wily crocodile managed to slip past the barrier. After Lan didn't come home, Trung went to the river and saw her ripped clothes. Everyone figured a crocodile ate Lan, but Trung refused to leave the shore in his grief. He heard distant cries for help from Lan, but his family figured he was going mad, or that the cries were from the ghost of Lan.

The next morning, after refusing to go inside, Trung again heard Lan's cries, this time very clearly. He spied a distant island and saw what looked like a moving tree. He and several others used a boat to cross to the island, and saw that the "tree" was in fact Lan, alive and well, dressed in leaves. The crocodile had knocked her unconscious, and after dragging her to the island, the crocodile had been tossing Lan up and down in order to soften her to eat. She regained consciousness, and while the crocodile left to get a drink of water, Lan had climbed a tree to escape. The story had a happy ending.



# Little Altar on the Roadside, and The Hero

## Little Altar on the Roadside, and The Hero Summary and Analysis

Little Altar on the Roadside: Nhuong speaks of a little altar that the townspeople used to burn incense on and maintain. The tragic story of the altar involves a mother and her son. The mother's husband was lost to a wild hog, and she urged her son to marry so he could carry on the family line and give her grandchildren. A bride was arranged from another hamlet, and the son went into the forest to cut bamboo and make a wedding bed. But since custom dictated the bed remain as "virginal" as the bride, he slept on a cot outside prior to his wedding.

The mother visited the son on this cot, and noticed that a banyan leaf had been placed over his face. She nearly fainted, as this was considered a bad omen: a banyan leaf covered the face of the dead. She removed the leaf, and then watched her son. A mouse appeared and covered the man's face again. This was an especially terrible omen. The mother committed to persuading her son to give up woodcutting for a safer profession in town, like blacksmithing.

The wedding came. On the first night when the couple was together, the son started screaming hysterically and foaming at the mouth. He died right there and then in the bed, and the mother dropped dead from grief alongside him. Absent any other explanation, the bride was charged with murder, but a sympathetic coroner investigated for the true cause.

The coroner examined the bamboo wedding bed, and nearly passed out from a toxic fume emanating from the bed. He ordered the bed split apart, and a snake called the two-steps snake was found in one of the bamboo stalks. Apparently the mother of the snake had deposited her egg in a small hole in the stalk, and as the stalk grew, the hole became smaller. The result was that the baby snake was essentially trapped inside the stalk forever, living off ants or dew from the rain. Never having used its fangs, the snake's venom had become so strong that its mere breath was enough to kill the son sleeping above the hole in the bed. The altar was built after the tragedy as a reminder.

The Hero: It was a known fact that the horse snake became intoxicated with the burning fat from the hogfish, so named because the fish grew to be as big as a hog. The hogfish was caught in a special way: the skilled fisherman would slowly coax the hogfish to the surface and scratch its belly. This scratching seemed to paralyze the fish, and it would let fisherman do anything to it afterward.



The hogfish's fat was prized as a component in a lantern's burning oil. When a traveler used a lantern with the oil from a hogfish, any horse snakes nearby would become confused and would forget about attacking.

Nhuong and his cousin liked to catch fish at night, during the rainy season when fish swam into the flooded rice fields. They always carried a hogfish lamp. One night while hunting, the cousin joked that, since Nhuong was carrying the lamp, a horse snake would be attracted to him. Sure enough, an intoxicated horse snake was drawn by the odor of the burning oil and started following the boys. The cousin turned quickly around and slashed at the snake, and then the boys ran home.

A hunting party was organized, but it turned out that the cousin's quick strike had found the center of the snake's head, killing it. The cousin was a hero, and was admired by girls and boys alike.



# The Monkey and the Old Lady, and What Can You Do with a Monkey?

## The Monkey and the Old Lady, and What Can You Do with a Monkey? Summary and Analysis

The Monkey and the Old Lady: Monkeys were a nuisance as well as a danger in the hamlet. They were smart enough to avoid even the most ingenious traps, and though they were cowardly and avoided confrontation, in packs they could gang up to kill children. Still, most families in the hamlet kept a monkey or two as a pet or to accomplish tasks like picking coconuts.

A friend of the family, an old lady, found and kept a baby monkey. She was lonely and had no children, and she treated the monkey like a son. Nhuong's mother warned the old lady that the monkey should be kept on a chain and constantly observed for mischief, but the old lady was reluctant to punish or restrict the monkey. To drive the point home, Nhuong's mother told the tale of a butcher who kept a monkey in his home. This monkey, observing the butcher's slaughter, imitated the activity by dismembering the butcher's baby in its crib when the butcher went away to a neighbor. The old lady listened to the story but did not heed the advice.

When the old lady's monkey was two years, the old lady left it when she stepped out. She had kept burning embers in the hearth. The monkey managed to get free of its weak chain and chuck the burning embers on the thatch roof, burning the entire house down and running away.

The furious and sad lady carried a stick around from that point forward, so she could beat the monkey if she ever saw it. Sometime later, a friend of the old lady's recognized the monkey in the wild and shot it with a poisoned arrow. The friend proudly showed the dead monkey to the old lady, but instead of being glad she only wept bitterly.

What Can You Do with a Monkey?: A peddler visited the family one day, bragging that he could train a roomful of monkeys in a short amount of time. Nhuong's father was intrigued by this idea and let the peddler stay overnight. The next day, they all went out to the river. To drink water from the river, monkeys form a chain from an overhanging branch, arm to arm, as opposed to wading in the river. When a large group of fifteen monkeys formed a chain, the peddler shot the topmost monkey, causing all of them to tumble down. The surviving fourteen monkeys were caught and brought home.

Identifying the leader of the group, the peddler showed it how to eat rice from a spoon. Belligerent, the monkey refused to imitate the peddler. The peddler then took a knife and cut the head off this monkey while the other monkeys watched. Sure enough, the other monkeys quickly learned how to eat with a spoon, fearful of the same fate.



The author then demonstrates another way to train a monkey. Another friend trained a monkey to pick certain tea leaves from the mountain by slowly addicting it to opium-laced water. The monkey would always return for the water at night, and if the monkey didn't do a good-enough job, it would get no water, providing motivation.

Nhuong's father taught one of the peddler's monkeys to catch squirrels, which involved cornering a squirrel in a coconut tree with dogs, and then the monkey climbing the tree to catch the squirrel. Nhuong's father flashed a knife to the monkey, to remind it of its poor leader's fate and thus provide extra motivation.

# The

## The Summary and Analysis

The "Unfaithful Birds": The "unfaithful birds" were known for their beautiful song, but they were unfaithful because they resisted all efforts to be tamed. At any opportunity, they would instantly fly away. Villagers worked hard to tame these birds, but no one had succeeded.

Nhuong's cousin gave Nhuong and his sister six unfaithful birds he had taken from a nest. The cousin knew of a surefire way to make sure the birds came back every day: opium. Nhuong and his sister fetched some opium residue from a neighbor who smoked the drug. Then, like the monkeys before them, the birds were fed opium-laced water. Sure enough, though the birds would be gone all day, around six o'clock (when the birds were fed every day) they would come back to Nhuong and his sister due to their opium addiction. Nhuong and his sister enjoyed the songbirds for many months, and they were a hit in the community.

One day, a storm hit, and the birds did not come back. After the storm, Nhuong discovered all six birds dead on the ground nearby the house. Apparently, their opium addiction had either weakened them to death, or caused them to recklessly disregard the dangerous storm. Nhuong buried the birds in six little tombs.

The Two-Steps Snake: A favorite pastime of Nhuong and his cousin was hunting for birds' eggs. While on one of these hunts, the boys discovered an odd egg they had never seen before. They bring it home to their father, who suspects it is a snake egg. Sure enough, after a few days, a two-steps snake bursts from the egg. The two-steps snake got its name from the observation that anyone bit by the snake could only walk two steps before dropping dead from poison. The snakes were especially dangerous because they did not back away from a fight, and because they wandered rather than lived in one place.

Nhuong and his cousin kept the two-steps snake in a glass case for some time, but it got aggressive, so the father ordered it destroyed. They burned the snake, because if they simply tossed the dead body away, someone could step on its jaw and still die from the active poison.

Another two-steps snake was found under the bamboo bush in front of the family home. Its nest was too deeply embedded in the bush, so the family had to learn to live with the snake. The family watchdog had a kind of love/hate relationship with the snake, and was always watching it. Observers joked that the two beasts were friends.

One day, the dog was found dead. Everyone figured it was the snake, but in the dog's stomach there was poisoned meat, indicating a bandit had poisoned the dog in anticipation of a robbery. That evening, a shriek was heard from the yard. The family





discovered the snake had bitten the thief, and everyone imagined that it was revenge for the thief killing the snake's "friend" the dog. The snake was hailed as a "guardian genius."

Sorrow: This brief final chapter involves Nhuong tending the water buffalo herd, and having to run for cover because of fighting and gunshots erupting from a skirmish in the Franco-Vietnamese War (which took place from 1946 to 1954). Nhuong gets away, but Tank the buffalo suffered a single stray bullet wound. Tank soon collapsed to the ground and could not get up, dying an hour later. Tank was buried in the graveyard like a family member.



# Characters

## Huynh Quang Nhuong

Nhuong is the author of the autobiography, and the primary person through which the reader experiences the events of the book. Nhuong was born in 1946 to a rice farmer, and from a very early age he helped his father grow and harvest rice. Living in the highlands, the family had to use water buffalo to till the soil during rainy season, and Nhuong got very attached to one of the family's water buffalo named Tank. Nhuong and Tank were nearly inseparable, and Nhuong rode Tank everywhere.

Nhuong had a child's naiveté as well as exuberance. He very much enjoyed hunting for birds' eggs with his brother, hunting for golden eels with the help of Tank, or raiding otters' parties. In several instances, Nhuong revealed himself to be a smart and resourceful boy. In the case of the golden eels, he harnessed Tank's power to more easily pull the eels from their underwater nests. And in the case of the otters' parties, he disguised himself with brown clothing and hid on Tank's back so he would not be immediately detected by the intelligent otters.

Because he was so young during the events of *The Land I Lost*, Nhuong did not participate in some of the more dangerous events relayed in the book, such as the lone wild hog hunt. Nevertheless, he got himself into plenty of mischief, such as when he encountered a horse snake on the road while carrying a hogfish oil lamp. Nhuong took most everything in stride, and until the death of Tank in the end chapter, his proximity to death and his harsh environs did not seem to faze him much. On the contrary, he spent many days carefree and happy.

## Nhuong's Grandmother

Nhuong is very close to his grandmother. Nhuong's grandmother was a feisty, combative woman who was spry even into her old age. She married a man who was a complete contrast to her, a weak, timid man. One time, a "rascal" in a restaurant became heaving insults at her husband. Nhuong's grandfather wanted to leave, but the grandmother insisted on staying. After the rascal became belligerent, the grandmother knocked him down with an elbow, and then knocked him out with a kick. The grandmother claimed that her husband taught her all the secrets of karate, and from that day on, no one would mess with the grandfather. This incident showed that while the grandmother was fierce and independent, she also deferred to her husband whom she loved very much.

In another event, grandmother continued to display her ferocity by ferrying her family out of the home because it was being attacked by bandits. As the grandfather hid the children in safety, the grandmother confronted the bandits and shot one in the leg with an arrow, stopping the robbery.



Nhuong's grandmother loved opera and plays, especially traditional plays about Chinese mythology. If no plays were being staged, she would become a producer and star of her own plays, and stage them for the benefit of the community.

Nhuong's grandmother spent a last evening talking about her deceased husband with Nhuong at the grandfather's gravesite, and she went home where she died peacefully in bed after a small meal. Nhuong stated that he would never forget his grandmother, and that their final conversation stuck firmly in his mind even as an adult.

## **Nhuong's Cousin**

Nhuong's cousin was ten years older than Nhuong, and was raised by Nhuong's family. Like Nhuong, he was very adventurous and loved the outdoors and animals. Nhuong accompanied his cousin on many of his outdoor adventures.

## **Hung**

Hung was a boy appearing in the chapter called "Mister Short." He devised a clever plan to get revenge on a crocodile that had been terrorizing boaters on the river. He hid in a boat with a sword and attached a dummy to the boat, so that the crocodile would attack the dummy. When it did, he lashed out and sliced the crocodile's tail off.

## **Minh**

Minh appeared in the chapter entitled "The Horse Snake." He was a rice farmer who had stored fish in a small pond. The rampaging horse snake hung above the pond and tried to splash water out of the pond to get at the fish. Minh saw the beast and alerted the hunting party.

## **The Groom**

The nameless groom appeared in the chapter, "The Little Altar on the Roadside." He built a bamboo bed for his wedding night, and an extremely venomous snake happened to live in one of the bamboo stalks he cut. On his first night in bed with his new wife, the groom was exposed to the snake's poisonous breath and died.

## **The Peddler**

The peddler came to town boasting that he could train a group of monkeys in a short amount of time. His gruesome technique involved cutting the head off the group's unruly leader, to show the other monkeys what would happen if they did not do as he instructed. Terrorized, the monkeys quickly fell in line and did what they were ordered to do.



## Lan

Lan appeared in the tale "So Close." She was a new wife who was attacked by a crocodile while bathing in the river. She was given up for dead, but in fact she had only been dragged away and then tossed in the air by the crocodile in order to soften her up before devouring her. She managed to escape to a nearby island, and she was reunited with her husband.

## Trung

Trung appeared in the tale "So Close." He was a new husband who discovered his wife Lan's torn clothes on the riverbank. The town gave her up for dead, but Trung in his grief refused to leave the bank. He heard Lan's cries for help, but the villagers all thought he was hallucinating. The next morning, Trung managed to spot Lan on a nearby island, and he rescued her with a boat.

## The Old Lady

The Old Lady kept a monkey she cherished as if it was her own son. She spoiled it and kept it on only a feeble chain. When she left the home one day, the monkey broke free of its weak chain and managed to set the house on fire by tossing burning embers from the hearth onto the thatched roof.



## Objects/Places

### Tank

Tank was Nhuong's beloved water buffalo pet, companion, and work animal. Tank was famed for his ferocious fighting ability, and he protected the hamlet on many an occasion. Nhuong rode Tank around for many of his adventures, and Tank aided Nhuong when he needed some extra muscle, such as with the golden eels or white catfish.

### The Lone Wild Hog

The lone wild hog attacked and killed a farmer. A hunting party was organized to stop and kill the hog. During one night, the hog was worn down by hunting dogs while the hunters kept the hog surrounded. At dawn, the hunters attacked the hog and it died of a neck wound, but not before wounding several hunters and killing many dogs.

### Vietnamese Highlands

Nhuong spent his boyhood on his rice farm in the highlands of Vietnam. It was a jungle wilderness, and the boy's community had to contend with a great many dangerous beasts.

### The Horse Snake

The horse snake was so named because it could move as fast as a horse. It combined the size and squeezing ability of a python with a deadly venom, and so it was greatly feared.

### The Golden Eel

The golden eel was prized for its tender and delicious meat. Usually, fishing a golden eel from its nest was a long and exhausting affair. Nhuong made the process easier by employing Tank to pull the fishing line with his mighty strength.

### The Unfaithful Birds

The unfaithful birds were prized songbirds who could not be tamed. Nhuong and his cousin attempted to tame a half a dozen unfaithful birds by addicting them to opium-laced water. The addiction caused them to come back for many months. Eventually, the birds were killed in a storm.



## Mister Short

Mister Short was a famous crocodile who caused the death of many boaters on the river by knocking them into the water with its long tail. Hung tricked the crocodile and lopped off most of its tail, giving it a stumpy deformity that led to its nickname.

## The Two-Steps Snake

The two-steps snake was so named because a person could only take two steps after being bitten by the snake before he or she died. The two-steps snake's venomous breath caused the death of the groom in "Little Altar on the Roadside." Another two-steps snake was a resident of the family's bamboo bush, and it killed a would-be thief.

## Trained Monkeys

Monkeys were often kept as pets or work animals by members of the community. Nhuong's family trained many monkeys to fetch coconuts or hunt squirrels. Nevertheless, monkeys were still wild and malicious, and there were several stories of monkeys doing harm to or killing careless owners.

## Opium Water

To teach a monkey to pick tea leaves, a friend of the family addicted the monkey to water mixed with opium, a powerful narcotic. That way, the monkey would return rather than run away after a day of picking on the mountain. Nhuong also addicted six songbirds to opium water so they would not fly away at the end of the day.



# Themes

## The Fragility of Life

One point made abundantly clear throughout *The Land I Lost* is that life in the unforgiving wilderness could be snuffed out in an instant. Nhuong treats the subject of death matter-of-factly, almost casually, demonstrating that death was a constant in his community.

Wild beasts presented the largest threat to the safety of the hamlet dwellers. Wild hogs, horse snakes, two-steps snakes, and crocodiles are just some of the forest denizens that present a daily threat. The community had to band together to resolve these threats, and survival definitely depended on being community-minded and helping one's neighbor. The most obvious manifestation of community activity was the hunting party, in which able-bodied men used bloodhounds to track and kill rampaging beasts. Nhuong describes hunting parties that were formed to take care of a lone wild hog that had killed a farmer, as well as a horse snake that was threatening the fish pond of a local farmer. While grouping together increased survivability, it certainly did not eliminate danger, as several men and dogs were killed during these excursions.

Death came in many forms. Some deaths were due to extremely bad luck, such as the young groom who cut bamboo for a bed, only to have the bamboo happen to house an extremely poisonous snake that killed the man with its venomous breath as he slept. Other deaths were the inevitable results of having to make a living in the harsh environment, such as the "Mister Short" crocodile eating boaters who had to travel to town on the river. Other deaths appeared to be the result of a person's own hubris, sin, or negligence, such as the thief who was bitten by the two-steps snake trying to rob the family home.

## The Wonder of Nature

Much of the interest generated by the book for the young Western reader involves the wide range of exotic animals Nhuong encounters on a regular basis. Situated directly next to a wild jungle, Nhuong is exposed to animals as diverse as tigers, buffaloes, snakes, eels, catfish, and many others.

Nhuong takes care to explain and introduce some of these animals' more unusual traits and characteristics for the benefit of the curious reader. The true-to-life details of these descriptions enhance the vividness of the narrative, giving the tales a sort of documentary realism.

For example, there is the detail of wild hogs rubbing their hides on trees that ooze sap, such that the sap becomes a near-impenetrable armor. Wild hogs also intentionally break off half of their tusks when cornered, so that the jagged ends point outward and can be used as a weapon. In the case of the horse snake, there is a semi-humorous



episode involving hogfish oil, the equivalent of a cat's catnip that drives the beast wild. Nhuong equips a hogfish oil lamp, confident that the oil odor will confuse the snake, only to suffer the opposite effect as the snake is dangerously drawn to the lamp.

Though Nhuong does not ever dwell too long on describing the beauty of his surroundings or how he is emotionally affected by nature, it is clear from the book's title that the Vietnam of Nhuong's childhood is a "land lost." Nhuong calls the time he spent with his cousin in the woods as the most enjoyable time of his life, and he recalls being touched by the beautiful song of the "unfaithful birds." There is also a poignant moment he shared with his grandmother, as she visited the picturesque gravesite of her deceased husband. Shortly after the conversation they had, in which Nhuong's grandmother stated that she would be with her husband soon, Nhuong's grandmother died peacefully in bed. Nhuong was touched by the beauty of the moment, and always remembered being with his grandmother at the beautiful gravesite.

## The Loss of Innocence

The title of the book, *The Land I Lost*, tells the reader that the author feels that he has lost something very valuable in the time he has grown up and left his boyhood home behind. The telling of the story is thus treated with a heavy dose of nostalgia, and the author is seeing his boyhood through the proverbial "rose-colored glasses."

Despite all the grave dangers around him—and Nhuong treats these dangers with frank directness—Nhuong has plenty of room to appreciate the small moments of beauty and thrilling adventure in his life. The final chapter, "Sorrow," is particularly demonstrative of what the author feels he lost. In this chapter, Nhuong is tending his herd, along with Tank, on another ordinary day. Winter is coming, and Nhuong worries that the herd will grow cold, but his father assures him they will be fine. While acting as shepherd, Nhuong hears gunfire nearby and runs for cover. Tank winds up taking a stray bullet in the chest and dying.

It is a poignant and sadly ironic moment when the mighty Tank, who could not be defeated by the worst beasts the jungle had to offer, was in the end taken down by a single, stray bullet from a senseless war. The bullet in itself is a kind of metaphor for the Franco-Vietnamese War in Nhuong's life, coming fast and violently without warning or reason, and changing his life forever. Nhuong not only lost his beloved companion that day, he lost his boyhood, and his innocence. There is a sorrowful sense that Nhuong could conquer all the dangers of the jungle, but he was no match for a human war he did not understand. Tank's death marked the end to an important chapter in Nhuong's life, something he could never recover, just as he could never recover Tank.





# Style

## Perspective

Huynh Quang Nhuong was a Vietnamese-born author writing about his experiences growing up in the rural highlands of Vietnam during the 1950s. He was born in Mytho, Vietnam. He writes in the first-person, autobiographically. Beyond the early formative years described in the book, his family (along with the entire country) was impacted by the Franco-Vietnamese War and later the Vietnam War. Nhuong fought in the Vietnam War, and was paralyzed by a bullet wound. Afterwards, he came to the United States for medical treatment, and stayed in the States to study literature. *The Land I Lost* was his first book, published in 1982.

Given Nhuong's terrible experiences with war, *The Land I Lost* is a very nostalgic look at an innocent time period in Nhuong's life. It is a recollection of a time full of adventure and wonder, when the world was new and anything seemed possible. Adult Nhuong, disillusioned and permanently scarred by war, no doubt wrote about his childhood with a bittersweet pen. Despite the constant dangers of the jungle setting, it is clear Nhuong valued the thrill and rawness of most of these moments.

As a young boy of about six or seven, Nhuong had only second-hand knowledge of some of the more ferocious encounters in the book, such as the hunting party's attack on the lone wild hog. Nhuong also relied on village lore rather than first-hand experience for other events in the book, such as the man's death in "Little Altar on the Roadside." Nonetheless, adventurous Nhuong was able to relate several exciting stories he personally experienced.

## Tone

Given Nhuong's nostalgic, positive perception of his boyhood, Nhuong often writes with exuberance and excitement. He wishes to share this excitement with his reader. Infrequent but significant exclamation points punctuate certain passages, relaying the author's own happiness.

At other times, Nhuong writes carefully, objectively, and simply in order to relay facts about the animals or culture of his community which may be unknown to the young Western reader who is the intended audience. When Nhuong shares information about the wild hog, the golden eel and its nest, or the horse snake's intoxication with hogfish oil, he does so in a matter-of-fact manner that will help the reader understand the events and motivations of the current tale. The effect is an alternation between educational information and exciting, tension-filled adventures.

This matter-of-fact manner extends to certain passages the reader may find shocking or grisly, all the more so because of Nhuong's deadpan delivery. When Nhuong describes how the peddler trained monkeys by cutting off the head of an unruly monkey in front of



the other monkeys, he states it in a surprisingly succinct, offhand way. This may relate in a more general sense to the author's perspective on animals, or at least certain animals outside of his companion Tank. Nhuong thinks of them as mere food sources or tools, and not so much as living things that hurt or feel pain or fright.

## Structure

The Land I Lost is comprised of fifteen chapters. It is a first-person account of events the author directly experienced, as well as village lore or events he heard about second- or third-hand. The chapters are usually distinct tales in their own right, centered on a person, animal, or event that is stated in a self-explanatory manner in the chapter title. For example, the first chapter, "Tank, the Water Buffalo," is all about the family's adoption of Tank the water buffalo, and Tank growing up to be a fierce defender of the hamlet.

As such, The Land I Lost doesn't have a single narrative thread that unites the disparate chapters. Chapters tell their own tales, and almost never depend on preceding chapters for context or story understanding. Chapters themselves are a mixture of concrete events and slice-of-life details about the daily lives of people in the hamlet or facts about the behavior of animals. For a typical example, in "Horse Snake," the author begins with an explanation of the general habits of horse snakes, and the origin of the name horse snake. Having established sufficient understanding of the danger of the horse snake, the author will then proceed to tell about a specific event involving the horse snake. The tale will then intersperse additional information about the animal or other issues necessary for full appreciation of the tale.



## Quotes

"Our calf grew into a handsome and powerful buffalo. He not only became the head of our small herd, but also became the head of all the herds in our hamlet after many ferocious and successful fights with the other males. We named him 'Tank,' because when he hit another male during a fight, he struck as heavily as a tank." ("Tank, the Water Buffalo," page 3)

"Sometimes, to entertain a guest at our house, [my cousin] would make the [pet] python into a coil and use it as a pillow. In fact, pythons make very good pillows. Their skins are soft, and their cool blood makes it seem as if your head is resting on an air-conditioned pillow." ("My Cousin," page 17)

"A fully grown male hog can weigh almost three hundred kilos, and its skin is covered by a thick covering of the sap from a tree we called the 'oil tree.' A combination of instinct and parasitic itches causes a hog to rub itself up against the oil tree, which oozes sap when its bark is broken. The sap, when condensed and dried, becomes an extremely tough covering that acts like armor [...]" ("The Lone Wild Hog," pages 19-20)

"Eels lay constantly in ambush near the main entrance of their nest, waiting for prey to pass by—fish, shrimp, crabs, even baby ducks if a mother duck was foolish enough to lead her young brood over an eel's nest. Then the eel would shoot out of its nest like an arrow, snap up a baby duck, pull it down into the nest, and swallow it moments later." ("River Creatures," pages 42-43)

"[T]here was one kind of snake that was more dangerous than other snakes—the horse snake. In some areas people called it the bamboo snake because it was as long as a full-grown bamboo snake. [...] In our area, we called it the horse snake because it could move as fast as a thoroughbred." ("The Horse Snake," page 48)

"It took me a long time to get used to the reality that my grandmother had passed away. Wherever I was, in the house, in the garden, out on the fields, her face always appeared so clearly to me. And even now, many years later, I still have the feeling that my last conversation with her has happened only a few days before." ("Opera, Karate, and Bandits," page 68)

"Lan's body was covered with bruises, for crocodiles soften up big prey before swallowing it. They will smash it against the ground or against a tree, or keep tossing it into the air. But fortunately Lan had no broken bones or serious cuts. It was possible that this crocodile was very old and had lost most of its teeth." ("So Close," page 78)



"My cousin put some coconut oil on his hair to make it shinier and he stayed around near the snake. The young girls smile at him a little bit more than usual, and the young men seemed jealous. My cousin was a hero!" ("The Hero," page 93)

"[M]y mother said: 'My good friend, you should not only chain your monkey to a tree but also inspect the chain every day. You came to live in our hamlet only a short while ago and you may not know how mischievous, malicious, and unpredictable these monkeys can be.'" ("The Monkey and the Old Lady," page 96)

"Next [the peddler] tried to teach the mean-looking monkey how to use a spoon to eat rice. He repeated the process about ten times, but the sullen monkey refused to learn. So the peddler asked for a knife and cut off the head of the stubborn monkey in front of the others." ("What Can You Do with a Monkey?", page 104)

"[The unfaithful birds] were killed because the storm had hit just when they were flying back to their cage. Maybe they were weak after months of having their special drink, or maybe they needed the special drink so much that they couldn't wait until the storm was over to fly back." ("The 'Unfaithful Birds,'" page 115)

"I saw tears in Tank's eyes, but I did not know whether he suffered from the bullet wound or whether he was sad because he was going to die. When the battle was over, Tank could not get up. He died about an hour later." ("Sorrow," page 127)

## Topics for Discussion

Why was the horse snake so deadly? Why was it called the horse snake?

What was the origin of Tank's nickname?

What was the significance of the banyan leaf in "Little Altar on the Roadside"?

Why were eels difficult to remove from their nests? What plan did Nhuong devise to get the eels from their nests?

How did hunters kill lone wild hogs? What did hunters do to prepare for the different attacks of the hog?

How did Nhuong and his cousin manage to tame the "unfaithful birds"?

How did the peddler in "What Can You Do with a Monkey?" teach wild monkeys how to perform tricks and do other tasks?