

## CATHERINE CALLOWAY

REVIEW: *Other Moons: Vietnamese Short Stories of the American War and Its Aftermath*. Translated and edited by Quan Manh Ha and Joseph Babcock. Foreword by Bao Ninh. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. Pp. vii-xiii, xv-xvi, xvii-xxvi + 241-242, foreword, acknowledgements, introduction, permissions, acknowledgements. \$27.00, paper)

Quan Manh Ha and Joseph Babcock have edited, translated into English, and compiled a substantial collection of twenty contemporary short stories, originally published between 1967 and 2014 in Vietnamese. This collection represents an often overlooked point of view: that of the Vietnamese people who fought the American War in Vietnam on their own soil. The first short story anthology treating this conflict by Vietnamese writers in almost a decade, *Other Moons* offers an insightful view of how the war between North and South Vietnam drastically affected soldiers and families in Vietnam, both during the war and long afterward.

Certainly other significant anthologies have preceded this one, most notably Michele Janette's *Mỹ Việt: Vietnamese American Literature in English, 1962-Present* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), thirty-two prose and poetry selections by Vietnamese immigrants; Charles Waugh and Huy Lien's *Family of Fallen Leaves: Stories of Agent Orange by Vietnamese Writers* (University of Georgia Press, 2010), twelve stories by Vietnamese writers that treat dioxin poisoning; Wayne Karlin and Ho Anh Thai's *Love After War* (Curbstone Books, 2003), forty-five thematic stories from five different contemporary eras; and Wayne Karlin, Le Minh Khue, and Truong Vu's *The Other Side of Heaven: Post-War Fiction by Vietnamese and American Writers* (Curbstone Press, 1995), thirty-eight stories from both Vietnamese and American writers. *Other Moons* enriches this existing canon by offering new authors and fresh literary works, some unfamiliar to current readers, and including antixenophobic texts that reject the propaganda of socialist realism so prevalent before 1990.

Even forty-five years after the fall of Saigon, publishing and Vietnamese literature are still largely controlled by the state; therefore, the volume is structured solely around the North Vietnamese point of view and omits the perspective of the ARVN or dissident voices. Three stories by southern writers are included, Nguyen Thi Thu Tran's "An Ameri-

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can Service Hamlet,” Lai Van Long’s “A Moral Murderer,” and Nguyen Ngoc Tu’s “Birds in Formation,” and these additions to the volume tackle subjects traditionally absent from the works of northern authors, such as natural kindness, especially between Americans and Vietnamese, family members who fought on different sides of the war, and freedom from generational oppression. The editors have taken care to cover Vietnam’s three main geographical areas: the northern, central, and southern regions.

The collection strives for diversity, both in its varied content and in its wonderful blend of canonical and non-canonical texts, all published in this volume in English for the first time. While many of the stories are well-known in Vietnam and have previously appeared in Vietnamese magazines, anthologies, and newspapers, readers outside of Vietnam are unlikely to have encountered these works before. Quan Manh Ha and Babcock seek “for American audiences to learn about how the Vietnamese people continue to think about, commemorate, and generally process the conflict that consumed their country for so many years” (xx-xxi). They provide a thorough introduction to the anthology as well as a brief preface for each story. Individual contributors to the volume include well-known writers like Nguyen Van Tho, Suong Nguyet Minh, and Bao Ninh, and authors such as Nguyen Thi Am, Mai Tien Nghi, and Luong Liem, war veterans who are employed in a variety of non-literary professions. Bao Ninh, who is perhaps best known for his novel *The Sorrow of War*, provides a foreword that places the collection in context and also contributes an individual story. While some writers hold membership in the Communist Party’s renowned Vietnamese Writers’ Association and publish nationally, others are recognized only in their local communities. A highlight of the collection is the editors’ inclusion of a more recent generation of writers who were not born until the 1970s and who therefore can offer the unique point of view of younger Vietnamese who emerged on the literary scene long after the official conclusion of the war.

Since most of the writers included in the anthology still reside in Vietnam, the perspective offered is that of the North Vietnamese or Communist victors from Hanoi rather than the South Vietnamese. As the editors point out, the South Vietnamese point of view has been widely available outside of Vietnam by authors who left Southeast Asia and resettled in the United States and other countries during the diaspora. However, even though the stories are limited to the point of view of the “winner,” they clearly demonstrate that the average Vietnamese person

did not emerge victorious from the war. Even those who fought bravely or served loyally for years in other capacities are denied medals and Party affiliation. They frequently return home after a decade, only to discover that postwar life has its own challenges: loved ones have moved on without them, the land has been destroyed, hidden land mines and bombs are still threats, food is scarce, and they are expected to marry even though there is a lack of suitable spouses. The protagonist of Suong Nguyet Minh's "The Chau River Pier," for instance, returns home to find her former fiancé in the middle of his marriage ceremony to another woman, and the narrator of Nguyen Thi Am's "The Person Coming from the Woods" receives a wedding invitation from her boyfriend who has decided to marry someone closer in proximity while she is away serving her country during the war. In Ta Duy Anh's "The Most Beautiful Girl in the Village," the protagonist, Tuc, sees her own photo in a war museum, a photo that had been taken off of the body of a dead soldier, and realizes with a shock that her missing love, Mr. Kieu, likely died in the war. Love is fleeting for many of the characters, including Lam and Nguyet in Nguyen Minh Chau's "A Crescent Moon in the Woods," two people who possibly encounter each other briefly one night, both silently unsure that that each is the person to whom Lam's sister had wanted to introduce the other. This story is unique in the collection not only in that Lam's tale is an embedded narrative within Nguyen Minh Chau's larger story, but also in that Lam recounts his and Nguyet's lost love story to his fellow construction workers, emotionally breaking off his account without officially ending the tale. His lack of a definite resolution echoes the loss of love and the lack of closure that many experience during the war and its aftermath.

The individual contributors emphasize the high price of conflict, both during the combat years and decades later. While the opening narrative, Nguyen Van Tho's "Unsung Hero," concludes with an act of heroism by a canine combatant, it begins with a graphic description of the dead body of a young boy, a reminder that even children are casualties of war. Overall, stories address issues like hunger and thirst, malaria fever and other illnesses, children who help raise each other because they lack parents, those who return from the war as amputees, fetuses that are deformed as a result of Agent Orange, the lack of respect for veterans, and soldiers who are virtually children themselves. As Ta Duy Anh writes in "The Most Beautiful Girl in the Village," "The war reached out and snatched eighteen-year-old kids for the battlefield" (92). Domestic conflict is prevalent in stories such as Thai Ba Tan's "War," Hanh Le's

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“Ms. Thoai,” and Mai Tien Nghi’s “Louse Crab Season.” Another subject, Marxist/Leninist indoctrination and reeducation camps, is treated in Lai Van Long’s “A Moral Murderer” along with the betrayal of the lower social classes by the Communist revolution.

Quan Manh Ha and Babcock avoid the limitations of a male-centered text by including five stories by female authors as well as others by male writers that focus on female protagonists. While the impact of the war upon women is evident throughout the volume, some of the most compelling contributions are those by women writers. In “The Person Coming from the Woods,” Nguyen Thi Am treats a familiar Vietnamese folk legend, that of the wandering ghosts of dead soldiers who cannot rest and who wander for years because they cannot find a woman to love them. Love is treated from a slightly different perspective in Vo Thi Hao’s “Out of the Laughing Woods,” a 1991 story originally published in *Người sót lại của rừng cười* and later turned into both a popular film and a musical. Like the men in Nguyen Thi Am’s story, the women in Vo Thi Hao’s tale, who work in a war supply depot deep in the forest, have also never had the chance to have been in love. However, as a result of their isolation and love deprivation, they suffer from a hysterical laughing disorder, and when the enemy approaches their watchtower, all but one commit suicide. Thao, the sole survivor who must bury her female comrades, returns home and attends college, but eschews love from her prewar boyfriend as she knows that he is attracted to a healthier-looking woman whose body and soul have not been destroyed by the war. Nguyen Thi Mai Phuong’s “Storms,” Luong Liem’s “The Sorrow Wasn’t Only Ours,” and Nguyen Ngoc Tu’s “Birds in Formation” treat the war’s collateral damage: “Storms” and “The Sorrow Wasn’t Only Ours” the effect of dioxin poisoning or Agent Orange and “Birds in Formation” the trauma that results when family members who fought on different sides of the conflict may have been responsible for the death of a loved one.

Nguyen Thi Thu Tran’s “An American Service Hamlet,” another contribution by a female author, is one of the few stories in the volume that ends happily.<sup>1</sup> As the volume’s editors point out in their preface

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<sup>1</sup> Three other notable stories also offer hope. In Vuong Tam’s “Red Apples,” Ms. Hanh An and the narrator, Cuong, a visiting soldier, meet as strangers for the first time, yet each is able to understand the war’s traumatic effect on the other. After Ms. Hanh An plays marching music for Cuong, he realizes that Hanh An, “the female soldier standing in front of [him,] was someone [he] could rely on for the rest of [his] life” (89). In a rare moment of happiness, they are able to “enjoy...sweet, crispy red apples” (89) together. In Luong Liem’s “The Sorrow Wasn’t Only Ours,” Hoa and Dai reignite their love after years apart, their lives drastically affected by dioxin poisoning. They decide “to spend

to the story, the tale is distinctive in Vietnamese literature “in that the American characters are portrayed as innocent victims of the war as opposed to cruel, bloodthirsty killers” (175). The story focuses on an act of kindness, the saving of a Viet Cong infiltrator from drowning by Smith, an American soldier, and on the love between Smith and Miss Trung, a woman in the village whom Smith marries at the end of the war and takes home to the United States. The couple happily return to Vietnam thirty years later when they are sixty years old and have raised two children together. Smith has even learned Vietnamese, which his wife taught to their children. As one character, Bach, realizes, in the case of the Smith family, “[t]he war had in fact created something beautiful” (186).

The impact of the war upon women is evident throughout *Other Moons*, not only in those contributions by women writers. In Vuong Tam’s “Red Apples,” Miss Hanh An is blinded while serving as a musical performer for the military, and in Suong Nguyet Minh’s “The Chau River Pier,” May loses a leg while working as a medic in the war. Other women fight wars at home when their husbands return from the battlefield after a long hiatus, find their wives pregnant, and doubt their fidelity, for instance, in Thai Ba Tan’s “War” and Hanh Le’s “Ms. Thoai.” Sexual assault is also a familiar topic. In “Ms. Thoai,” the wife’s pregnancy results from her being drugged and raped, while in Ta Duy Anh’s “The Most Beautiful Girl in the Village,” when a soldier, Hao, tries to force himself on Tuc, a beautiful woman, she is able to fight him off and emerge physically unscathed.

Two stories distinctive in their treatment of women are Nguyen Ngoc Thuan’s “Love and War” and Pham Ngoc Tien’s “They Became Men.” “Love and War,” which contains a female character who cannibalistically devours her male lover bit by bit, echoes the loss of body parts in combat and metaphorically comments on the way that war devours its victims. A female character is at the center of Pham Ngoc Tien’s “They Became Men,” a story unique in its revelation that many of the male soldiers were virgins. After her boyfriend is killed in the war, one female soldier begins to give her body to young men as a gift so that they can experience sexual pleasure at least once and become men before they are claimed by the war only to find herself raped by an older male soldier who thinks that he is also deserving of her compassion. Like the legendary female cannibal in “Love and War,” Tien’s protagonist is turned into

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the rest of [their] lives together” (224) and consider starting a family through adoption. A child is also possible for May, a single amputee in Suong Nguyet Minh’s “The Chau River Pier,” when she receives the chance to become a mother by raising the son of Ba, a woman killed while stepping on a cluster bomb left from the war.

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myth after she vanishes and is classified as missing in action. The rumors of her death demonstrate the many ways that one can die in war, from drowning to hanging to being blown up by a bomb.

The male characters, especially those who are not cruel, often fare no better than the female ones with some stories offering examples of emasculation. Whereas the Vietnamese women are expected to marry and to bear children, the men are not only expected to marry but to provide well for their families. In Mai Tien Nghi's "Louse Crab Season," the main character, Tran Xuan Vop, is called "a worthless man" (22) because he is unable to feed seven people. His years of military service go unrecognized, and his emotional castration becomes physical after he is sexually wounded in an encounter with a couple in a rowboat while swimming in a river. In Nguyen Trong Luan's "The Corporal," Xuan's husband is considered impotent merely because the couple have no children.

A common thread in many of the stories is how people age prematurely because of the war and/or the harshness of Vietnamese life. In "Out of the Laughing Woods," for instance, the faces of the women are described as "haggard" (207), and their scalps are almost bald from the loss of hair. Those characters like May in "The Chau River Pier" who retain their hair see it lose texture and become "thin and brittle" (139). Not only combatants age prematurely; those who wait for their loved ones to return home, sometimes for years or decades, age drastically as well. In "Birds in Formation," a character's fear of having shot his own brother in the war manifests physically when his family condemns him for what the war has done to their family: "His face looked withered and his hands resembled pieces of dry bone" (43).

Even after the war has officially ended and Vietnam is unified, challenges from the war remain, especially the need to find and honor the bodies of fallen soldiers that are hidden in the vast terrain of northern Vietnam, a popular theme in Vietnamese literature that emerges in stories like Nguyen Thi Mai Phuong's "Storms" and Truong Van Ngoc's "Brother, When Will You Come Home?." These writers call attention to the fact that among the war's casualties are several hundred thousand Vietnamese soldiers whose bodies are missing and that society and kin have a duty to locate them. Until these combatants are found and given a proper burial, neither their souls nor their family members can rest. The question asked in Truong Van Ngoc's title is one that weighs heavily on the minds of too many Vietnamese family members. Bao Ninh's succinct story, "White Clouds Flying," takes a similar approach in its inclusion of

a woman who is traveling to honor the thirtieth anniversary of her own son's death by visiting the location where he died. To reject her son by not officially recognizing his loss three decades earlier would be dishonorable, even if he were one of the lucky ones whose body had been recovered. In fact, she honors him on the airplane in advance by creating a mini shrine "[o]n her tray table," using his photograph, "a vase of flowers, some green bananas, a few rice cakes, and three incense sticks standing in a glass of dry rice" (20).

Appropriately titled, *Other Moons* revolves around the juxtaposition of the beauty of the natural world in Vietnam and the image of the moon, which is skillfully woven into many of the stories, texts that serve as miniature celestial bodies that orbit around the war's circumference and magnify it. The use of the word "other" is a reminder also of the volume's emphasis on reconciliation, especially between the two "others," Vietnamese and American, encouraging us to extend friendship and healing to the other side and to focus on the peace and humanism desired by these writers who refuse to glorify war. *Other Moons* is a rich collection that makes a significant contribution to both contemporary global fiction and the diverse canon of Vietnamese literature.