

Editor's Choice

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To Search for Understanding: A Conversation with Quan Manh Ha and Joseph Babcock about *Other Moons: Vietnamese Short Stories of the American War and Its Aftermath*

How long do we live with the aftermath of a war? How long are we haunted by ghosts of the past? How long must we struggle to finally reconcile ourselves with the toll of conflict? Consider this. Over the last 20 years at Regis University, Dr. Dan Clayton and I have interviewed hundreds of veterans, from World War Two, to Korea, to Vietnam, to the Gulf War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We construed the notion of veteran broadly, conversing with soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines—of course—but also with nurses, with holocaust survivors, with prisoners of war, with wives and mothers and sisters and brothers of those who lost loved ones to war, with children and families who grew up in the midst of conflict, and so on. Dan's research on the US veterans of World War Two is extensive, and as that generation has almost completely left us, he has noted the enduring legacy of war even into veterans' final hours. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised, but with veteran after veteran, many of their final memories are those of battle, conflict, friendship too, but mostly the sorrow of profound loss. Scholars of traumatic memory note the complex intermingling of narrative and memory, of history and remembrance. If we take the "greatest generation's" experience as a proxy, the aftermath of war may haunt veterans for the rest of their lives...or perhaps it will haunt us even longer.

For over 45 years, I have been studying the Vietnam War, gradually expanding my understanding of it with each new novel or memoir or history of the conflict I encountered. I've

interviewed dozens of American veterans of the conflict, listened to their stories, shared their trauma, followed their search for understanding and meaning. I have seen Vietnam veterans tell stories to an audience of 200 that they have never shared with their wives or children, and seen the faces of them, sitting in the audience, as the story unfolded. I have also heard the stories told by their families, recounting the marks PTSD left in their lives, the tortured accounts of fractured and failed relationships that followed the war. And I have sat with families whose husbands and fathers never returned from Vietnam, whose remains were never recovered. The Defense Department still staffs an office that reports monthly on the current numbers of Americans who are unaccounted for in Southeast Asia: 1,584 as of 1 March 2021. How long will we live with the aftermath of this conflict?

I first taught courses on the literature of the Vietnam War in the 1980's with only American authors on the syllabus. Our locus of meaning and understanding then was of "our war," "our losses," and our search for true war stories. In many ways, it still is today. However, in the mid-90's, after Bao Ninh's magnificent novel, *The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam*, was released in translation in 1993, I began including Vietnamese authors in the course, noting their unflinching reflections on the conflict often echoed those of American participants, even as *Sorrow* also deepened our understanding by inviting us to accompany its narrator, Kien, a soldier in the North Vietnamese Army, to the Jungle of the Screaming Souls. Kien hears echoes "from another world...eerie sounds...from somewhere in a remote past, arriving softly like featherweight leaves falling on the grass of times long, long ago" (4). *Other Moons*, published last year, invites us to go over that ground again, to return to a past that is simultaneously long,

long ago and one that lives in an urgent, or as Donald Anderson has claimed, even an immortal, present.

Over twenty years ago I visited Vietnam in search of understanding. A damp, misty fog shrouded Hanoi that morning, and I greeted a city caught in contradictions, caught between generations, caught—as was the entire country of Vietnam—between past and present. In 1999, the contradictions were everywhere. On a tour of the Temple of Literature, which celebrates a millennium of Vietnamese culture and education, street urchins were hawking pirated copies of Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name*, a book officially banned for sale in Vietnam. The squalor and meanness of everyday life—chamber pots being emptied into the gutter and breakfast cooking over open coals on the sidewalk—contrasted with the opulence of the newly opened Hanoi Opera Hilton, just around the corner from these ordinary citizens. In the quarter of a century since the fall of Saigon, Americans had continuously asked what they lost—as a nation and as individuals—in Vietnam. The Vietnamese, no less puzzled, wondered what they had won.

At the time, I did not know that the Vietnamese phrase for studying the Vietnam or American War, "Tin Hieu," translates literally as "to search for understanding." But everywhere I looked it was clear that the complexities of conflict still haunted both Americans and Vietnamese, still begged for understanding. The Pulitzer Prize winning Vietnamese scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen reminds us, in his thoughtful study *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, "that all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory" (4). He observes that the problem of war and memory in Vietnam is called by some "the Vietnam War and others call [it] the American War. These conflicting names indicate how

this war suffers from an identity crisis, by the question of how it shall be known and remembered" (4). Certainly, in my own quest for understanding, the question of how the American/Vietnam War shall be known and remembered has been uppermost.

In *Other Moons*, the editors and translators, Quan Manh Ha and Joseph Babcock, frame the experience as it is often framed in Vietnam, as the American War. The American war was a chapter in the longer struggle for independence beginning with France, from 1945 to 1954, then the American War, from 1954-1975—with the intense fighting occurring from 1965 to 1973 and the fall of Saigon two years later. Slowly easing into its aftermath, Americans have grappled with understanding our role and our losses in Vietnam for over four decades, often seeking healing at the Vietnam War Memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Paying tribute to 58,318 Americans who gave their lives during the conflict, the names can seem overwhelming as you face the memorial.

Imagine, then, the impact of this conflict in Vietnam, where Quan and Joe rightly call the impact "devastating." In their summary, they highlight the impact this way: "According to the best available estimates, 3 million Vietnamese died in the conflict, roughly 7 percent of the country's population at the time; 2 million of those killed were civilians. Over 300,000 Vietnamese soldiers were still missing when the war ended, and hundreds of thousands of farmers and their families were displaced from their homes." But "displaced" doesn't do justice to the destruction, where "American bombs had left sections of North Vietnam in ruins, and U.S.-manufactured chemical weapons had, quite literally, poisoned the soil and environment across many southern provinces" (xix). What does it take to understand the magnitude of such loss and destruction? To tally its costs, weigh its aftermath, calculate its lasting impact? Perhaps

to understand this conflict in a fuller way, to grasp a larger truth about it, to glimpse the depth and force of its aftermath, we need stories that shine under other moons.

Twenty-five years ago, Donald Anderson began to take stock of what the aftermath of such a conflict might look like for Americans. In *Aftermath: An Anthology of Post-Vietnam Fiction*, Anderson selects 14 short works of “the fiction borne of this wrenching period in the life of our country...[telling] the stories not only of men who fought the war, but also of those who stayed behind” (xv), as the eminent Vietnam War historian George Herring puts it in his foreword. In Herring’s estimation, in 1995, “those Americans who fought in the war were in many ways the primary victims of the nation’s conflicting emotions.” Assessing blame and identifying victims is always tricky, even twenty years distant from a conflict. Herring’s assessment continues: “Younger than veterans in earlier wars, having endured a conflict far more complex and confusing, they were whisked home virtually overnight by the miracles of a jet age to a nation that had grown hostile to the war and indifferent to their plight. Some returning soldiers were made to feel guilt for the nation’s moral transgressions; others, responsibility for national failure. Most veterans simply met silence” (xiv). Certainly, we were a nation of conflicting emotions, and just as surely the young veterans often paid the price for bearing witness to a wrong war. But in the broader scope of time, perhaps it’s time for us to also engage the pain and trauma of a nation that was not whisked away from the war overnight. Perhaps our search for understanding must sample stories told by Vietnamese authors who are still searching. In the west, most of these Vietnamese authors have also simply met silence.

As the editors of *Other Moons* indicate, most of the stories written by Vietnamese authors about the conflict in Vietnam adhere to a dominant narrative, one that supports the

orthodoxy of the ruling Communist Party by framing the war as “a struggle to reunite the two Vietnams, North and South, and shake off foreign control. Virtually all literature about the American War published in Vietnam adheres to this narrative” (xvii). Yet the stories they collect tell powerful versions of the conflict, despite the governmental restraints and censorship. “Given the restraint placed on these authors in terms of what was viable for publication about the American War in Vietnam,” the editors observe, “the artistic and thematic diversity represented in their work is even more striking” (xviii). In short, these stories have earned more than silence. The twenty stories are richly diverse and strikingly powerful in their rendering of the conflict and its aftermath. In summarizing the fourteen stories in Anderson’s *Aftermath*, Donald describes his collection this way: “In describing these stories, I have too simplified even a sampling of post-Vietnam fictions in which are represented but a fraction of the 8.5 million U.S. participants” (xxxi). Then he makes a claim that I believe holds equally true for the wonderful stories collected in *Other Moons*. “These stories are more complex than I have described them. They are about memory and love and resentment and loss and disbelief and defiance and humiliation and earnestness and blame and shame and blood and sacrifice and courage and sorrow” (xxxi). *Other Moons* invites similar consideration and justifies a comparable claim. Anderson concludes: “Such stories are about what we must live with after any fought war, soldier or not. They identify us, these stories. *They are about us*” (xxxi).

Set 7,800 miles away from the United States, the stories collected in *Other Moons* also identify us, inviting us to see anew the identity crisis surrounding a conflict that concluded almost 50 years ago. The stories probe the humiliation warriors, especially female warriors, faced upon returning to their villages. They examine loss and disbelief, sometimes through encounters

with ghosts whose sacrifice, courage, and sorrow relentlessly haunt the aftermath. They too are about memory, they too are about love. Many are canonical stories in Vietnamese literature, yet none have ever been translated into English prior to this anthology. These stories actively seek to understand the aftermath of the American War because they live in an immortal present. Quan Manh Ha and Joseph Babcock have done us an enormous service by sharing this amazing collection of stories. As Quan says in our interview, translation is a moral and political act, a claim he embodies through the powerful translation of these narratives. In so doing, these stories unveil a more complete picture of “what we must live with after any fought war, soldiers or not.” Yes, they do indeed identify us because they too are about us.

***Other Moons* Conversation, 9 July 2021, with Quan Manh Ha (QMH) and Joseph Babcock (JB)**

Interviewer: *Would you begin by sharing a bit of your story? What drew you to this project, and how do you identify with these stories? And maybe share why it is two of you rather than one of you translating and editing this collection?*

QMH: Joe and I are delighted to be speaking with you about the book today. Joe, please talk about how you and I met, and we'll go from there.

JB: My background is in creative writing, and like many creative writers these days, I went through an MFA program at the University of Montana. Before starting the MFA, I'd been living

in Vietnam for about two years, teaching English, like a lot of westerners who had trouble finding work in their home countries in the wake of the 2008 recession and ended up in Asia. When I started the MFA program at UM, people kept telling about this very charming Vietnamese scholar who was on the faculty of the English department. And so one day, basically on a whim, I emailed Quan in my not-so-great Vietnamese, and he very graciously replied. We became friends. Fairly quickly we started having discussions about narratives of the war—especially what gets lost in American narratives and how myopic the American perspective of the conflict tends to be. We really were not seeing very much representation of what we might broadly call, and what people often referred to as, the “Vietnamese perspective.” The broad Vietnamese perspective was not really represented in film or fiction, or even documentaries in many ways, or in nonfiction writing, or even scholarly work. So, I think from an early stage when Quan and I met, we were already thinking about how we could work collaboratively to correct some of that myopia, to correct the tunnel vision that is built into so many popular narratives of so many historic events in America.

QMH: After Joe left UM, he went back to Vietnam, for the third time, and then when he returned to the US, I called him and said, “Joe, I have this idea,” to which he replied, “Let’s do it,” because he knew that I had access to all the stories and that I had connections with many of the authors in Vietnam. Basically, I did all the translations, and Joe did all the editorial work, but we discussed a lot during the process as we figured out which stories we should include and which ones we would leave out, or what kind of voice or perspective we wanted to represent in the collection. It was through this ongoing cooperation that led to the book being published.

Interviewer: *It is good to hear in your own words how the book came together, and to get a glimpse into your deep ties with Vietnam. Joe, were you in Vietnam, teaching in the South, during that period around 2015?*

JB: Yes, that was the second stage when I was living over there and teaching in an international university in Saigon from 2014-16.

Interviewer: *And Quan, your Vietnamese background is rich, as you lived there until 2001. How often are you back in the country now, and what is your relationship with family, friends, scholars, or authors who still live there?*

QMH: I came to the US twenty years ago as an international student, but all my family still lives in Vietnam. I have a very strong relationship with my family and country, and I visit them every other year. I also maintain a professional network with many Vietnamese authors.

JB: Quan is really a pre-eminent scholar operating in the US in terms of Vietnamese fiction and Vietnamese fiction in translation. Quan is responsible for curating the selection of stories in the collection, and I didn't have much of a role in that process. But right away, when Quan came to me with this collection of stories, I was really blown away by his ability to pick pieces that represented both canonical and lesser-known work. There are a few stories in the anthology that are weird and postmodern and outside of typical socialist realism or classical Vietnamese literature.

Interviewer: *As you note, there is a wonderful range of stories in the collection, and you were especially attentive to the ways different voices and experiences shape our understanding of the war and, given the range of authors in particular, our view of its aftermath. Quan, can you say a little more about how you went about selecting these particular stories? Were there certain narratives that you felt needed to be included, certain stories or experiences that had to be in the collection for it to be complete?*

QMH: There are three things I would like to emphasize when we talk about choosing the stories for the collection. I have taught Vietnam War literature twice here in the US, and I got a bit frustrated (and I know some other scholars share my frustration). First, many Americans think they can rely on the refugee perspective to understand the war, because the refugees represent the marginalized voices, so if the Americans read diasporic literature, they can learn something about the war. But that is very narrow-minded in that most diasporic literature represents the anti-communist perspective. They represent "the losing side," so if we rely on them completely to learn about the war, we miss what the Vietnamese at home think about the war.

Second, Viet Thanh Nguyen, an influential Vietnamese American scholar, made an important statement in his book *Nothing Ever Dies* that really caught my attention: "Given that the overwhelming majority of the Vietnamese are peasants," he points out, "it is ironic that almost all the literature focuses on the classes above them. This irony is especially evident when American readers rely on a Vietnamese American literature produced by an urban, educated class to tell them something about the history and culture of the agrarian country and peasant

people for which the war was fought.” The refugee perspective that gets published in the US is primarily about the privileged class, the sons and daughters of high-ranking officials and officers of the former South Vietnam. Thus, we do not get to hear the voice of the peasants, the workers, and the common people who survived and who died in the war. This anthology’s mission is to fill that gap in readily available perspectives of the experience of the war and its aftermath.

Third, twenty years ago Wayne Karlin and Ho Anh Thai edited the short-story collection titled *Love After War* (2003), which focuses mostly on the theme of love. We need to have something more contemporary in translation—especially Vietnamese stories that depict ordinary lives of men and women searching for meaning, purpose, happiness, normalcy, and even love, after conflict.

Interviewer: *I would like to return briefly to Viet Thanh Nguyen’s Nothing Ever Dies that you mentioned earlier. His notion that every war is fought twice, first on the battlefield and then again in memory, seems to be one that you subscribe to as well. To adopt Nguyen’s thesis for a moment, the collective memory must be shaped by a fullness of perspective—one that needs the voices you present now more than ever, one that expands the stories told by American veterans, or South Vietnamese refugees, one that provides a contemporary update and important additions in the ongoing battle for memory. Do you see your collection providing a counterpoint to these other narratives, a counterpoint that seems so essential to me? Is this your own battle in that larger war for memory?*

QMH: To a lot of people, the Vietnamese at home are called *the victors*, and when they are labeled *the victors*, the assumption is that victors are free from traumatic memories. On the contrary, the losing sides, the Americans and the refugees, must struggle with the psychological battles of the war. This is a rather poorly informed belief. *Other Moons* clearly displays the Vietnamese people's psychological wars and traumatic memories, just like everyone else.

JB: On that first point that Quan mentioned, the importance of honoring the different perspectives of the experience of the war and its aftermath—I think that's something that we (the West)—maybe especially in the United States—tend to usually forget when we think about the war in Vietnam, or maybe any conflict, really. We want there to be a clearly defined, simple narrative that describes the experience of the "victor" and the experience of the "vanquished." But reality, of course, is much more complicated than that, and that certainly holds true when we look at narratives of the war.

What you have really when people talk about the "Vietnamese perspective" of the war is actually a range of unique and really diverse perspectives. For example, the family of a high-ranking South Vietnamese general or a farmer in the Mekong Delta or a general in the North Vietnamese Army or a farmer in North Vietnam—the "Vietnamese perspective" includes this diversity of regional and life experience, especially the range of socioeconomic backgrounds. This diversity of perspectives—we might also just call it the more nuanced, realistic representation of the experience of the war—has traditionally been excluded from the way we talk about and memorialize and fictionalize the war, not just in the US, but all across the West.

There has been a real leveling of the experience of the war on the Vietnamese side that does a huge disservice to the people who lived through it, not to mention a disservice to the historical record, because it is not accurate, it does not give us a good picture of what people went through and what it was really like. A good example of this is the Ken Burns PBS Vietnam War documentary. That film got a lot of praise for trying to include the Vietnamese perspective, but it was really limited in terms of capturing what the people in Vietnam went through during the conflict, and it ultimately focused on what we in America usually care the most about—the stories and struggles and sacrifices and pain of young American soldiers and their families. It is crucial to acknowledge that even when we hear from diasporic voices or Vietnamese American voices—again each voice is a specific, unique perspective. No single voice can be representative of the entire “Vietnamese perspective” of the war.

QMH: When you look at the scholarship on Vietnam War literature and films produced in the US, critics have pointed out that Americans and many diasporic Vietnamese writers often stereotype and dehumanize the Vietnamese who fought on the communist side. The same thing happens in revolutionary Vietnamese literature, which denigrates the enemies—the Americans and their supporters. I want to humanize the Vietnamese at home, even though they fought on the communist side. They are not filthy jungle fighters, automatons, disgusting Truong Son Mountain monkeys, or any of the other racial slurs we might come across. Importantly, translation is a political and moral act, because through literary translation we can fight against misrepresentations, stereotypes, racial profiling, invisibility, and marginalization. If we do not give these people a voice, then the dominant group will always control the discourse.

Interviewer: *Reading the stories in Other Moons, I found myself hearing constant echoes from Bao Ninh's The Sorrow of War. In his magnificent novel, unable to escape violence and destruction, he still presents a remarkably human perspective, one that invites his readers to share in the overwhelming sorrow. As he observes in the Foreword to your book, the Vietnamese rebelled against almost a hundred years of hatred, violence, and exploitation, and so the stories must carry a deep sorrow with them. In the stories your authors tell, Ninh characterizes their work when he says, "the stories are about people and their sorrows, tragedies, and suffering caused by the war." That was Joe's point just a moment ago—that you cannot go one story into your collection without beginning to sense that. As Quan was just saying, throughout there is an undertone of human pain and suffering that is a common denominator to this conflict, perhaps to all conflicts. But neither the Americans nor the refugees can claim an exclusive ownership of such suffering. One striking example is in the view towards soldiers missing in action on the American side versus the Vietnamese side. Consider the profound disconnect between the numbers missing on each side and the narrative attention they have received. Joe, you have worked more closely with this issue in Vietnam, and perhaps you could share your sense of the dilemma.*

JB: I appreciate you bringing up the issue of missing Vietnamese soldiers, because it is almost entirely glossed over in the West. I think you can make the argument that the issue of a missing family member as a result of the war is one of the most insidious legacies of the war, up there with the environmental poisoning from chemical defoliants like Agent Orange that still cause birth defects and health issues to this day. The issue of a missing family member is so

common—and Quan can certainly speak to this too, I think—that when you just chat with people on the street in Hanoi or Saigon, you’re guaranteed to meet someone who either has a missing relative within their own family—a father or grandfather or uncle—or who knows someone who is still missing. In some cases, they’ll have gone to search for the remains themselves. In most cases, there was no money or resources to look for bodies in the immediate aftermath of the war—partly as a result of the harsh US imposed sanctions which were, some historians argue, used to “punish” Vietnam for winning the conflict.

Families could not search until the economy started getting better in the 1990s, and then you started seeing a lot of privately funded search missions. A family of a missing soldier would pool their funds, rent a van, mostly families from the North, and they would drive down to the center of the country where most of the fighting happened, and they would literally—sometimes with the help of a psychic to guide the way for where to look or dig—they would walk into the jungle and just start digging. And a lot of these search missions would prove fruitful, and they would actually find remains. Whether they were the remains of their specific loved one, who knows? But the grim reality is that chances are, if you go digging almost anywhere in the countryside in Quang Nam or Quang Tri province where there was heavy fighting during the war, chances are you are going to find some remains just because there was so much death during the war in those regions. Maybe one way to address myopia in the collective narrative would be to present more research and nonfiction work about that legacy and its history, but another way is through art and storytelling. I really appreciate that we have some stories in the collection that address this issue. “Brother, When Will You Come Home?” by Truong Van Ngoc highlights how for

families in Vietnam who experienced a missing loved one, the pain, the trauma, the urgency of finding the remains is still very, very present.

QMH: Joe, that is a critical point, and the story "Brother, When Will You Come Home?" displays the trauma of one family. When you look at trauma and PTSD from the Western lens, most people in the West rely on a psychologist or therapist to help them with healing. But when you look at the stories in this collection, the Vietnamese go to neither therapists nor psychologists. They rely on the supernatural and spirituality. Obviously, there is a stark difference between how the West might reconcile with trauma and how the Vietnamese deal with trauma.

Interviewer: *This is an issue that reverberates throughout your anthology. The story "Storms" by Nguyen Thi Mai Phuong probes another dimension of it where the narrator is talking about her father, Trong, and how he can never escape the aftermath of the American War, never escape a profound sense of loss, of sorrow, of the "horrifying memory of the war." Yet what is the antidote to that? What can be done? They go out and search. They take the psychics that Joe mentioned, and they try to locate the remains of their friends and family through the supernatural realm, with a spiritual link to the dead. They seek to maintain some kind of connection with the loss, and they deal with those horrifying memories in a way vastly different than most westerners might.*

JB: Just to add on to that, I think one of the elements marking the distinction we are talking about is how we process death in the West. In America, we had the great benefit of this conflict

not being fought on our soil. We did not experience the land we called home, that in some cases we relied on for our livelihood, and where we buried our ancestors and worshipped them every year, being ravaged. We did not live through the trauma of being displaced from our land or having that land get poisoned with chemicals, or having it haunted in a sense, with the bodies of literally millions of our fellow citizens. This sense of haunting is really present, especially for folks still living on the battlefield who have not left the country. And these differences in how we grieve are huge, because they define how families would process their losses, especially with a missing family member.

Interviewer: Part of the power of your collection is the way you orchestrate these many and diverse voices, bringing the experiences and losses of soldiers and families into a shared focus, during the war itself, of course, but also as these experiences continue to reverberate in its aftermath. Can you say more about the ways your stories illuminate essential aspects of our shared humanity when we encounter grief?

QMH: Joe has lived in Vietnam as an American, so his perspective might help us here. Joe, when you look at early Vietnamese American literature, for example, you see a lot of hatred and resentment. In Vietnam, American tourists and veterans often get asked, "Do you still hate the Vietnamese?" Just like I get asked frequently, "Do you hate the Americans?" And this is why Bao Ninh's foreword is so important with his focus on reconciliation, forgiveness, moving on.

JB: Yes, Bao Ninh's foreword is enormously powerful and beautiful as a statement, and it seems especially so in the context of our current global crisis we are living through. In his iconic, understated, but really emotionally powerful way, Bao Ninh's foreword is a call to global brotherhood, a brotherhood of love and compassion and peace and understanding. He addresses the question that is so indicative of how many Americans think about global events, where we are very solipsistic, and we always want to position ourselves as the protagonists. We care about how the event impacted us and how we acted in the event. So, Bao Ninh says that American veterans will ask him all the time, "Why don't you hate Americans? Why aren't you more resentful?" And he responds very simply: it just would not make sense for us to hold on to hate, because that would not help us live a healthy life, or a happy life. That is one thing we have not talked about yet.

Part of the power of some of the stories in the collection is that, even though they are dealing with trauma and loss and the legacy of this war, there are also moments of tremendous joy, fun, and humor. When we talk about the broad umbrella of the "enemy's perspective," this joyful dimension gets completely lost. When Americans do acknowledge the Vietnamese perspective, it is often in a way that fails to acknowledge any glimpse of humor or joy which is a big part of being in Vietnam. I am grateful that Quan managed to capture this in the stories he selected. Many stories exhibit that optimism, for lack of a better word, or stories that look to the future and building a future grounded in optimism and peace. And maybe it is this optimism that explains why folks in Vietnam have not held on to anger. As Bao Ninh says: What purpose would that serve? Holding on to hate won't do any good for your individual health, or any good for the

country or society, so why hold on to it? I honestly think there is a lot we can learn from this perspective, especially in America.

Interviewer: *Thanks for sharing that, Joe. It has been over twenty years since I was last in Vietnam, and from my time in 1999, I would say the perspective you describe was more evident in the South than in the North then. Would you say there are still differences today? Or is the spirit of reconciliation and hope a more dominant reality?*

QMH: I don't think any American experiences hatred or resentment in Vietnam nowadays, whether they are tourists or returning veterans. The Vietnamese at home want to move on and be friends with the Americans. The war is past, in a real sense. The Vietnamese still commemorate the martyrs, mourn for the war dead, and demand justice for victims of the Agent Orange, but it is not something that prevents the Vietnamese from becoming friends with Americans.

JB: We should also acknowledge that the geopolitical situation is now completely different, and so distancing from America would not really make sense. A statistic that speaks to this that is often cited in the West is that Vietnam is now a much younger country, and the majority of Vietnamese living today were born after the war, and the lingering impact would be indirect, more intergenerational trauma that might be passed on within a family.

But Bao Ninh makes this point in his foreword: today, it just would not make sense for folks to hold on to past anger because it just does not serve any purpose. Globalization has impacted the Vietnam of today in profound ways. There are now posters of Steve Jobs or Bill Gates, who are real heroic figures to a lot of the younger generation, and these global “hero” titans of industry—if we can call them that—didn’t exist in the decades during the war. It is just such a different cultural and global environment today.

One other thing worth noting is that there would be no logic in feeling anger towards individual citizens of a country, and sometimes we miss that big distinction. Why would a Vietnamese person, even a veteran of the war, hate a random traveler from America? It just is not logical. A tourist probably had nothing to do with the war. There is a sense, to me, that when the war is talked about in Vietnam, or in textbooks, or in documentaries on Vietnamese TV, there is a distinction drawn between American citizens and the government. In Vietnam, the war is framed as an effort on the part of the government, and in some cases, they will call out top leadership, specifically McNamara, Johnson, and Nixon, rather than the soldiers who actually fought on the ground. You can see this in Vietnamese propaganda posters from the war, which are beautiful pieces of social realist art. These posters will call out the President of the United States by name—Nixon, Johnson. There are a handful of American scholars who have done work on the different traditions of remembrance in Vietnam compared to traditions of remembrance in the US. A thread running through those Vietnamese traditions of remembrance is the acknowledgement of the global antiwar movement and its power and energy and popularity.

I can remember when I first personally recognized this distinction. I went to a public elementary school in Chicago, and then to a private high school and an elite university. I never learned much about the antiwar movement. It seemed like, for the most part, the antiwar movement was erased from our narrative of the war. We only heard about it in the context of the broader history of the 1960s, and a lot of times antiwar protestors were dismissed as insipid hippies, whereas the international peace movement is extremely present in most Vietnamese narratives of the war. There were something like half-a-dozen Americans who even self-immolated in protest of the war—one of them was a student at the University of California at San Diego, where I used to teach—and those folks names are basically completely unknown to most Americans today. But in Vietnam school kids learn the names of those Americans who sacrificed their lives in the name of peace and ending the war.

Interviewer: *As you were editing the collection, how did you arrive at the title *Other Moons*? The second half is very clear, “*Vietnamese Short Stories of the American War and Its Aftermath*,” but can you say more about how you chose *Other Moons*?*

QMH: Joe actually came up with the title, but let me share a bit about why it resonated with me. There are several stories in the collection that depict the moon, whether literally or symbolically. The moon in Vietnamese literature often has to do with romance or romanticism, and we chose this title because we wanted to emphasize the connotations of the moon in the stories. Even though the collection depicts losses, trauma, and sorrow, the Vietnamese are very romantic. The Vietnamese are human and humane, and even if they are communist, or they fought on the

communist side, that does not mean they lost their romantic soul. They can still maintain their romantic soul, so that was one purpose in naming the book *Other Moons*. In addition, in Vietnamese culture the moon often has positive connotations. Moonbeams and moonlight are symbolically very peaceful. Many stories in the collection depict war atrocities, but they do not focus on resentment, hatred, and indignation, but rather on human beings calmly working to understand the war and its lasting impact.

JB: I would agree 100% and just reiterate Quan's point about romanticism. We wanted to honor the joy and optimism and humor and beauty that are really at the center of all literature. I think that is why most of us read literature, probably. The words touch us; they are beautiful—even if the ideas and emotions and stories they represent are painful and sad and difficult. And we wanted to acknowledge and honor moments of beauty—emotional, physical, or natural—in our lives and in these stories. The title *Other Moons* works and feels right because the moon as a literary symbol runs through many of these stories, and we use the moon as a way to orient ourselves, even as a global community. We share that compass point, we share one moon, yet we do not all follow the same path, especially when we consider the different ways various groups try to understand and memorialize collectively traumatic events. When we use the moon as a metaphor and we think about how the West or America orients ourselves and our understanding of the war, or how we write about it, or memorialize it, we tend to focus on one myopic, very specific moon. The moon works as a metaphor to remind us of the many phases that might orient us, or guide our understanding of experience, and so instead of the experience of an American soldier from Ohio, we see the experience of a young Vietnamese soldier from

the Mekong Delta under another moon. I think, also, we both wanted to make sure the name of the collection did not sound violent and did not just evoke war iconography.

Interviewer: *Storytelling is a powerful trope in Vietnamese culture, an almost sacred act deeply embedded in their way of being. In the story "A Crescent Moon in the Woods," all the drivers returning from their supply missions vie with each other to tell their story. "On this night," the narrator says, "those images were in competition to come alive." In many ways, I might say the same about the twenty stories you have translated. What would it mean for those stories to come alive, in America, in 2021? What is the hope and dream for these stories?*

QMH: War in literature, films, and arts is usually masculine, because war is often associated with masculinity. This collection contains many stories that focus on how civilians, women, and children deal with domestic conflicts caused by the specter of war. We wanted to give voice to those people who never get a voice in the dominant narratives of war—to include the perspectives, feelings, emotions of women, children, and family members who did not go to war. The collection tries to balance both: the men who are away fighting the war and those who stay at home, away from the battlefield. Also, the Americans often consider the war an "American tragedy." Our collection invites readers to see that the war is actually a Vietnamese tragedy, and to help us shift gears more toward a fuller Vietnamese perspective, one that recognizes their suffering and victimization. The Vietnamese have been reduced to invisibility in US culture and history. With this collection, we acknowledge their experience and provide them visibility and agency.

JB: This is a strength of the collection where again we broaden the “Vietnamese perspective” to include what is happening on the home front. What happens at home is often a rich entryway into understanding the experience of war, one happening away from the battlefield. And this view has been completely missing.

To directly address how these stories might come alive today, to make the diversity of experience more present in American narratives—to be honest, I think it will be tough. These stories are up against the power of dominant culture and popular culture and the stories we have been inundated with for a long time. Here we are almost 50 years after the fall of Saigon, and we have lived with a certain narrative, a certain storyline, for so long. Our brains seem like they are wired to process things a certain way. For example, when the mainstream media refers to Vietnam today, a lot of journalists use the word *Vietnam* as shorthand for the war. Older generations tend to associate the word *Vietnam* immediately with the Vietnam War, which is problematic. We saw this most glaringly and embarrassingly in the media coverage of the COVID crisis. When American deaths hit 60,000 from COVID, every major news outlet in America carried a headline that noted we just hit more deaths from COVID than the deaths from Vietnam. At the same time, when the American press was using Vietnam as a barometer for American suffering and loss, the country of Vietnam was having one of the most successful fights against COVID in the world. Still today the deaths are very minimal in Vietnam (225 total deaths from the virus in a country of 90 million people), in a country that shares a land border with China. Yet the early coverage was all about the comparison to wartime American deaths rather than to the successes with public health going on today. This example speaks to how

trenchant these narratives are and how difficult it will be to get Americans to stop thinking about the word *Vietnam* as the Vietnam War, or the movie *Apocalypse Now* as the “true” narrative trope for the war. Sadly, it seems like in 2020/21 we still have not gotten to a place where American filmmakers and writers and novelists can write about the war in a way that feels more representative of the reality and diversity of perspectives.

Interviewer: *As you mentioned earlier, both of you have deep engagements with Vietnam, with the people, with their stories, with their endless search for lost loved ones. As you look ahead, what is next for you?*

QMH: My translation of Bao Ninh’s short-story collection is currently under review with an academic press. Hopefully it will be in print soon. Looking ahead, I am thinking about one of the two following projects. I am considering translating a novel written by a Vietnamese female writer about the war. Or I could look for a banned Vietnamese novel about the war—a novel that deviates from the communist government’s ideology and propaganda.

Interviewer: *I want to publicly admire the selection of stories you have assembled here, especially in terms of introducing readers to powerful female authors through your translations. I know the challenges you faced in terms of trying to find voices to represent, but the five stories you include are powerful additions to the anthology.*

JB: Just to put a plug in for Quan's upcoming project translating Bao Ninh's collection of stories, this will be the first book of his work published in English since *The Sorrow of War* was published in 1995. He has not really published anything although he is working on a second novel that is almost finished, which we are eagerly awaiting. So, Quan's translation will provide access to his stories in an important way.

I am working on a book project about defectors during the war, American defectors, which again is part of the historical story that has been mostly ignored or erased. It is hard to find information about Americans who deserted or even actively defected when they were in country. I am hoping that I can tell some of their stories.

Interviewer: *What else should readers know about Other Moons?*

QMH: One thing that Joe and I wished we could have included would be the voices of those who fought on the former South Vietnam's side but remain stuck in Vietnam. The problem is that their voices are censored, and thus we cannot find their stories in books that are legally published in Vietnam. In addition, we don't want to put them in danger with the government if their stories got translated and published.

Interviewer: *Given this tension, what is your relationship with the authorities, Quan? Do they respect your work and understand what you are doing, or do they at least cooperate with you on your projects?*

QMH: I am in a good place with them. In fact, last summer, right after my book was released in the US, it was highly acclaimed in *Thanh Nien News*, the most circulated newspaper in Vietnam. I did not have to seek approval from the Vietnamese government when I published the book. I only had to go to the authors and get their permissions. Whenever I went back to Vietnam, I bought a whole bunch of anthologies about the war to get started. The writers I know also introduced me to other writers, and many of them also suggested stories for me to consider. During the process of translation, if I ran into something that needed the author's clarification, I contacted them. I guess you can call that collaboration.

JB: I would emphasize that literature in translation provides such a valuable opportunity to understand a different lived experience of the world, especially when we are talking about trying to understand a global conflict. I love that in Vietnamese the phrase for studying about the war—*tim hiểu*—would translate literally as “to search for understanding.” When you study history, you are really just searching for understanding. As increasingly global citizens, I think we can really learn from this. The more that we can learn and understand from those in different countries, especially about their experiences, struggles, feelings, joys, and sacrifices, the more compassionate we will be as people. I hope that as we continue to be more interconnected in our global community that we can have more fiction in translation, translations that are more popular and accessible, so that people turn to it for entertainment and to enrich their experience and understanding of the world.

Interviewer: *You have done remarkable work in Other Moons, and your translations gracefully give voice to the forgotten and invisible. We are fortunate to have the gift of your collection. Thanks for sharing in this conversation today.*

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