

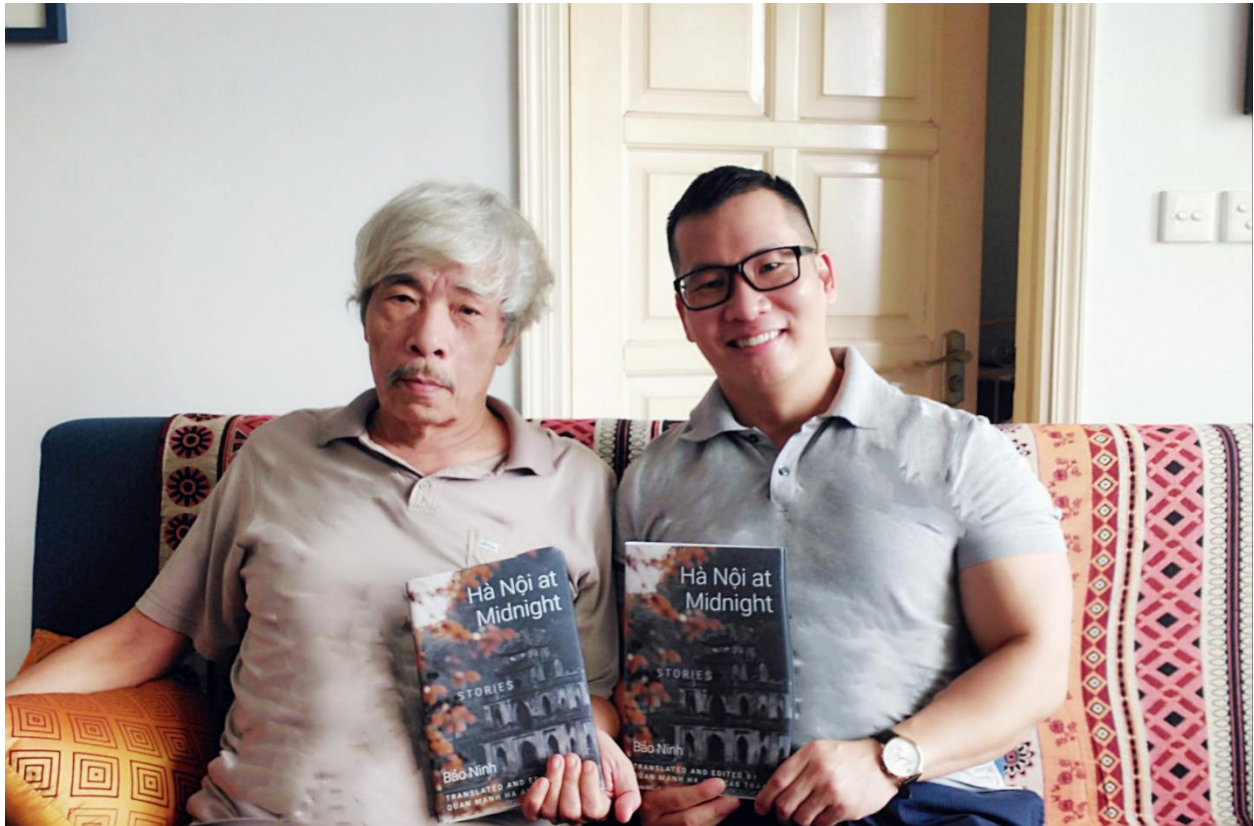
# “The Sorrow of a Bygone Time”: Reflections on Bao Ninh’s *Ha Noi at Midnight*

Thomas G. Bowie, Jr.

**H**ow long do we feel the sorrow of bygone times? How long might the tragic losses of a distant past reverberate in the present? How long might the trauma of bygone times haunt the lives we live today ... and tomorrow? Will such memories, and the overwhelming sorrow that accompanies them, ever truly be gone? In the opening story of his first published collection in over thirty years, the internationally acclaimed Vietnamese author Bao Ninh looks back, with his narrator, on his life as a soldier. In the words of the narrator, “Now, as I look back on the final days of my life as a soldier, my heart is laden with sorrow and longing” (Ninh, *Ha Noi* 3). In this 2023 collection, the twelve stories Bao Ninh selects (most newly published in English with two stories re-translated at his request) evoke both deep sorrow and timeless longing.

As the Vietnamese professor Nguyen Van Thuan observes in his Foreword, in Bao Ninh’s collected stories, “The past continues to haunt the present; the living mourn the dead; the physical war may have ended, but the internal conflict rages on” (xi). Each story in the collection approaches this internal conflict from a unique perspective, yet each one also conveys a sense of grief, or loss, or suffering, or sorrow, or trauma that casts a shadow over the stories that come before and after. Importantly, beyond this shadow, the stories also illuminate the deepest reaches of our humanity, the spaces where love and loss, the past and the present, sorrow and hope might intersect. As they highlight in *Ha Noi at Midnight’s* “A Note on the Translation,” Quan Manh Ha and Cab Tran have chosen stories that “are universal to the human experience,”

that resonate “across generations and cultures, in ways both profound and ordinary, no matter the language” (xxi). Their graceful translation brings alive these universal stories that probe the



Author Bao Ninh and translator/editor Quan Manh Ha in Hanoi, Vietnam, April 2023. Photo used with Bao Ninh's and Quan Manh Ha's permission.

deep sorrow of war and its aftermath, even as they touch our hearts with longing and hope.

In the farewell to arms that opens this collection, “Farewell to a Soldier’s Life,” after describing his aging parents, his siblings who have moved away, his son who is now the age he was when he joined the military, after cataloguing, in other words, the many losses that punctuate his life, the narrator seeks a way to recover bygone times. Embracing his role as a writer, he relates his journey becoming an author in terms that Bao Ninh would recognize. “I threw myself into my work, took up all kinds of odd jobs, and finally became a writer” (Ninh, *Ha Noi* 3). In the story, the narrator echoes rumors attributed to Bao Ninh’s own reluctance to

publish a second novel when he says, "I've never had a high opinion of my work" (3). To anyone who knows Bao Ninh's internationally acclaimed novel *The Sorrow of War* (first published in Vietnamese in 1991 and in English in 1994), this seems difficult to imagine. Yet he has suggested in several interviews that a rumored second novel might not live up to his expectations in various ways. Perhaps it is politically out of touch or dangerous in a climate that still censors the works of its artists—*Sorrow* was banned in Vietnam for fifteen years—but for whatever reason, he has limited most of his literary production to short stories over the past thirty years, and only a handful of those have been translated into English.

In an interview with Nick Hilden for the *Washington Post* shortly after *Ha Noi at Midnight* was published (June 2023), Bao Ninh shares that from 1979-1986 he worked various jobs to simply get by. His father (a professor of Vietnamese linguistics) encouraged him to return to school and study creative writing. "I realized," Bao Ninh says, "that if I hadn't fought in the war and had never been a soldier, I would have chosen another path and not become a writer. That's why, ever since I began writing, I've always written about the suffering of the Vietnamese and how they lived during the war" (qtd. in Hilden). In this collection, he broadens the scope to include stories that imagine Vietnamese life both before and after the war, such as in the story "Ha Noi at Midnight"—from which the collection takes its name—and the story "Reminiscences" that recalls the "sorrow of a bygone time" in a conversation between a father and son on the eve of the son's departure for the war.

Yet writing can only rescue so much from the past, only restore partially the hope that something was gained in spite of such overwhelming losses. For example, a central narrative line that connects these compelling stories often evokes the devastating and lasting damage the American War (as it is known to the Vietnamese people) did to the people and land of Vietnam.

This description of the traumatic impact Agent Orange had on the narrator of "Farewell to a Soldier's Life" is among the starkest I have ever read:

Our clothing and our bodies absorbed the dampness, which troubled us. We started to feel sluggish and weak. I smelled my hands, now covered with tiny droplets of water, but sensed nothing unusual. But didn't the air have some kind of burning smell? I looked up. The entire forest was shedding its leaves. There was no wind, no trees rustling, yet the leaves were falling as though an earthquake had shaken them loose. First leaves, then flowers, crops, and saplings fell down as though a raging tempest had passed through. Foliage in every shape and size shriveled and turned a dark brown. The grass below us also was dying and changing color. In the war, I had seen much worse, more horrifying things than this, but what haunted me for the rest of my life was how the Americans during that month, had destroyed our land with Agent Orange." (Ninh, *Ha Noi* 8)

Clearly, the narrator has seen more horrifying things over the course of his time in conflict, but the lasting impact of the defoliant dioxin haunts him—and Bao Ninh—to this day. Asked about Agent Orange in an interview, Bao Ninh was unequivocal: "The dioxin the Americans used in the war was—and still is—a weapon of genocide. Many Vietnamese from the generations following the war were adversely affected and killed by it" (qtd. in Hilden). As the narrator closes the story, walking literally away from the war and all the death and destruction it entailed, he passes mangled tanks and collapsed factories and warehouses, buildings riddled with gunfire, churches and homes in ruin. In the final paragraph of "Farewell to a Soldier's Life," the narrator reflects on

the burdens he and his fellow survivors are carrying, a “thousand-year burden” (Ninh, *Ha Noi*). What could possibly give such sacrifice meaning? What might alleviate the thousand-year burden of Agent Orange? What could somehow give him strength to hope for a brighter future? In the narrator’s words, “We were a young generation who became men in the trenches and on the battlefields, and this is what gave our lives meaning...the war, and our friendship, was what made us who we are” (Ninh, *Ha Noi* 14). One way, then, of thinking about the stories in this collection is to ask “who *we* are” in the aftermath of conflict.

This question seems crucial to Bao Ninh in the stories collected in *Ha Noi at Midnight*. After all, how do you come to terms with a conflict that killed over three million of your countrymen, -women, and -children? How do you account for the two million of those losses who were civilians? For the over 300,000 Vietnamese soldiers who went missing in action? For the countryside that was destroyed by bombing, the rivers polluted, the land poisoned, and birth defects caused, by dioxin?<sup>1</sup> I’ve argued elsewhere that in the aftermath of the war Americans struggled to understand what they had lost, both individually and as a nation, whereas the Vietnamese have struggled to come to terms with what they won. Bao Ninh seems haunted by this as well, questioning if “winning” a war is even possible. “But every time Vietnam was invaded,” he muses in an interview, “the country suffered catastrophic consequences: the land was reduced to ashes and death lurked everywhere. After the end of each invasion, the Vietnamese people in order to survive, not only had to work hard to rebuild their homes and communities, but also had to come to terms with the nightmares and recurring psychological trauma brought on by war” (qtd. in Hilden). Nightmares and psychological trauma overlay most

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<sup>1</sup> See the introduction by Quan Manh Ha and Joseph Babcock in *Other Moons* for a more detailed and devastating picture of the destruction caused by the American War, 1965-75.

of the stories in *Ha Noi at Midnight*, especially "Beloved Son" where the letters a grieving mother writes to her missing son are never delivered, much less answered. "Her face," the narrator observes, "until the day she died, was always one of longing heartbreak, and inconsolable loss" (Ninh, *Ha Noi* 22). Longing and loss also punctuate the story "301" about a chance encounter between a tank crew and a photographer's daughter near the end of the war, where the daughter snaps the crew's picture, and they promise to return some day. Like so many soldiers on both sides during the war, the tank and its operators simply vanish. One of the machine gunners, who left the tank because he was wounded, seeks for twenty years to find some news of his three comrades, only to discover the photo of them in a coffee shop near Nha Trang. He and the woman (the daughter who snapped the picture) finish the story weeping "as we revisited our experiences from twenty years ago, shedding our tears in memory of that war" (Ninh, *Ha Noi* 35). Often, tears in memory of *that war* seem the only appropriate response to the inconsolable losses and sorrows that haunt participants.

Even stories that have the potential to recount moments of happiness or joy falter under the weight of memory. The story "Letters from the Year of the Water Buffalo" tells the tale of a sort of "Christmas Truce" (famous from the early days of the Great War in 1914) during TET in 1973. For all the harmony and peace and even joy the soldiers of the opposing sides found together in their brief new year's celebration, a several days interlude between vicious and deadly fighting, when the battle resumed it did so with predictable tragedy and loss. In this case, the narrator meets a lieutenant from the ARVN forces from South Vietnam during the cease fire celebration, Lt. Duy, who asks him to deliver a letter to his family in the north, in Hanoi. The narrator takes the letter but never manages to deliver it, leaving him haunted by "the sorrows stemming from the events of 1973" (Ninh, *Ha Noi* 48), events that in the pervasive

irony of war ended in the narrator's assault on the enemy and the death of his "friend" Lt. Duy. Stories such as "The Camp of the Seven Dwarfs" and "Giang" also recall the toll war takes on relationships, the "unexpected encounters of our lives" that remain with us, "causing us great pain in the silent ways we evoke them" many years later (Ninh, *Ha Noi* 71). That pain throbs through the father and son story of "Reminiscences" mentioned above, and with poignant urgency through "Evidence" and "The Secret of the River." To be human is to live lives dotted with unresolvable mysteries, sorrowful memories, uncertain relationships. Throughout this collection, Bao Ninh crafts stories that engage the vagaries and complexities of being human. Following the cycles of friendship, love, and loss, his stories touch deeply human chords at each turn.

The final two stories in the collection expand then contract the focus on what it means to live in the aftermath of conflict, even a conflict fifty years in the past. "Ha Noi at Midnight" is a complex story of love and loss, and the power of story and art to somehow contain both. We owe a debt to the editors and translators, Quan Manh Ha and Cab Tan, for their masterful work. In their "A Note on the Translation," they share the challenge of "balancing the rhythm of Bao Ninh's descriptive prose and the Vietnamese tendency to use idiomatic and proverbial language in storytelling while staying faithful" to his original writing (*Ha Noi*). Their work in the story "Ha Noi at Midnight," where the stylistic choices Bao Ninh makes with point of view (alternating between first person to something close to third person, then back to first person to reveal the identity of the narrator in relation to the pivotal climax in the story), harmonizes the narrative for western readers, the translator's note, preserving some narrative "incongruity while at the same time making it less confusing for readers to follow" (xix). Curating this unconventional storytelling—the editor's note some call it "problematic"—allows readers to experience the

power of Bao Ninh's writing in ways that maintain fidelity to his voice at the same time they resonate with readers in translation.

The story itself traces a long arc across time, following a soldier from his time as a boy through the losses of war until his return to his boyhood home thirty-four years later—from the Year of the Dragon in 1964 until the Year of the Tiger in 1998. Punctuating this story of friendships, real and imaginary loves, and the passage of time is a narrative of longing for identity. Who are we, the narrator seems to ask, and where might our hopes and dreams intersect with the realities of living, especially when such a life is filled with overwhelming, even inconsolable, loss? The mysterious narrator in this story emerges thirty-four years later at the end of the story as the boy he once was, frozen in time despite the tragic legacy his war years have bequeathed him. In the eyes of an artist whose own tragic narrative crosses that of the boy and his family, the boy, the soldier, the lover, the survivor are all latent in his painting of the boy and his family and friends during TET in 1964. Who are we, as individuals both rooted in time and transcending it, the artist seems to ask? Who are we in the company of family and friends, the narrator and the artist wonder? Who are we in the turmoil and tragedy of war? Who are we in the aftermath of trauma, in the suffering that we carry with us?

As the narrator discloses in an epiphany near the end of the story, "I was foolish and naïve, but in that imaginary first love, which I had buried deep in my heart, I was encouraged by its uplifting promise. It was why, I believe, I had survived the war and returned from it safely" (Ninh, *Ha Noi* 129). It is important to note that he is the only male child in that painting to survive the war. Much like Bao Ninh's own experience with the 27<sup>th</sup> Glorious Youth Brigade, where out of the five hundred soldiers he began the war with only ten returned, the tragic deaths of friends and family during the war has altered this fictional narrator's life forever. What



uplifting promise might give someone hope in such traumatic circumstances? What enables some soldiers to survive when so many are killed around them? The narrator continues, "Even more so, that illusory first love became a source of hope that helped me in conducting my life after I returned from the war, to live courageously, happily, and overcome those long years of struggle in the postwar period" (Ninh, *Ha Noi* 129-30). Living courageously, much less happily, in the aftermath of long years of struggle is the challenge Bao Ninh and his generation have faced for almost fifty years. Much like his narrator, Bao Ninh searches for answers to the timeless pains and sorrow of war. Much like the hope his narrator finds, Bao Ninh writes to find peace in the aftermath of such a horrific conflict.

But is such peace truly possible? Can a story like "Ha Noi at Midnight" somehow overcome the "immense sorrow, the sorrow of having survived, the sorrow of war" that eludes the narrator, Kein, of Bao Ninh's novel *The Sorrow of War*? As Kein is pondering the price of war, the ability for "justice" to have won with the North Vietnamese victory, he makes himself look closely at what it might mean to *win* in any war. "Look carefully now at the peace we have, painful, bitter, and sad. And look at who won the war" (Ninh, *Sorrow* 192-93). Peace is elusive and perhaps one never really wins it, certainly not in the war they fought. The scars of war, as Kein knows, "will remain forever" (Ninh, *Sorrow*). And so, despite his fervent hope for peace, and despite seeking to live courageously and happily, the narrator of "Ha Noi at Midnight" doesn't get the final word in this new collection of stories.

Lest the power of such hope blind us to the realities of posttraumatic stress disorder that afflict so many veterans, both in America and Vietnam, and across the globe wherever war is a daily occurrence, Bao Ninh chooses "The Untamed Wind" for the final word in his brilliant collection of stories. Zooming in to a particular village in the aftermath of the communist

liberation and its subsequent destruction by the South Vietnamese Air Force and ARVN soldiers once anti-aircraft batteries from the north move in, the story paints a stark picture of the devastation war inevitably brings. Wandering through the story are Vietnamese refugees, wounded veterans, displaced priests, homeless orphans, and a traumatized singer from Saigon. Often noted as Bao Ninh's most powerful story, "The Untamed Wind" portrays a savage and hopeless reality for the people of South Vietnam as they are on the verge of being re-educated into the communist regime. First published in the early 1990's in Vietnamese, it was immediately suppressed by the government. A glorious victory couldn't acknowledge such a dark reality. In ways similar to *The Sorrow of War*, which was published several years prior to this story, the official narrative of the war had no tolerance for a story that didn't hue to the heroic narrative line imposed by government officials.

Even more telling, "Untamed Winds" is also a tragic love story where a soldier from the north falls in love with the singer from the south. In trying to save each other, they both die in a hail of bullets at the story's end. The story concludes with this line: "We had shot to death the two people who most embodied peace, even if peace did finally come" (Ninh, *Ha Noi* 157). In the 1990s in Vietnam, how to embody peace was a very real question. Could love actually save a country torn apart by a vicious civil war and could the "winners" actually build a hope-filled peace for all their citizens? Bao Ninh has struggled with the costs of war for many years, and he views his writing as one way to help us reckon with those costs. As we heard above, his work is indebted to, perhaps only possible because of, his war experience. He does not think of himself as a *war* writer, any more than Tim O'Brien would adopt that label in the United States. Bao Ninh is tethered to his material, even as he understands the stories he must tell: "But I also write

about war in order to take a stand against war; writing about war is writing about peace—about reconciliation, love, joy, absolution and other humanistic ideas” (qtd. in Hilden).

In the end, *Ha Noi at Midnight* is a collection of powerful stories that seeks to take a stand against war by writing about peace—about reconciliation and the human journey toward redemption. In giving you a glimpse of these stories, I hope their quest to find reconciliation, the power of love, the need for joy—their urgency to locate deeply human qualities in the characters within their sorrowful yet hopeful narratives—might be calling to you. Like other recent collections of postwar Vietnamese fiction, such as Quan Manh Ha and Joseph Babcock’s powerful collection, *Other Moons: Vietnamese Short Stories of the American War and Its Aftermath*, Bao Ninh’s *Ha Noi at Midnight* lives in an urgent, and one hopes, immortal present. As he writes in his Foreword to *Other Moons*, Bao Ninh joins other contemporary Vietnamese authors who “write about the war to oppose war rather than to promote or advocate for it. In other words, they write” and we might insert *he* writes, “to express their love for peace and promote cross-cultural understanding and global love” (Ninh, Forward xiii). Bao Ninh gives us stories for our time and for all time. Such stories have tremendous power as they bear witness to conflict, as they look unflinchingly at the trauma of war, the tragedy of loss, the devastating destruction that all wars embody. But such witness must also engage the hope for peace, as Bao Ninh urges, must seek reconciliation, must share love and even joy. In short, he knows stories have the power to work miracles—to promote understanding and foster global love. Let me close with a story that clings to such power, that embraces the miracle Bao Ninh’s writing provides.

For the past twenty-five years, we have offered a course at Regis University, in Denver, called “Stories from Wartime.” Open to the public as well as our students, during the course and

over many years, my colleague Dan Clayton and I have interviewed hundreds of veterans, from World War II, to Korea, to Vietnam, to the Gulf War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We construe the notion of veteran broadly, conversing with soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines—of course—but also with nurses, holocaust survivors, prisoners of war, journalists, wives and mothers and brothers and sisters of those who died in modern conflicts. Just before Veterans Day this fall, I was moderating a panel of Vietnam veterans who were sharing their wartime experiences with our audience. All in their late 70s, all fought in Vietnam, in the Central Highlands, at roughly the same time Bao Ninh did as a member of the North Vietnamese Army. Each veteran shared his story, each probed the sorrow of war they experienced, each confessed to the life-long trauma that continues even today. They shared stories that, in many ways, echoed those Bao Ninh has collected in *Ha Noi at Midnight*.

At the end of the evening, I asked each vet to share one thing they would like the class to remember. After he left the military, a highly decorated army lieutenant, now 78, couldn't remember much detail from his twelve months as a platoon leader in Vietnam. Returning from Vietnam, for over a decade, he wasn't sure if he had even fought there. Medal citations for a Silver Star, two Bronze Stars, and a Purple Heart suggest otherwise. After many years of therapy beginning in the late-1980s, he finally began to recall the repressed traumatic memories of his wartime in Vietnam. But it was in the mid-1990s, following the publication in English of Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*, that he experienced a miracle and finally began to heal. Choking back tears, he shared how reading Bao Ninh's novel saved his life. He wanted the students to know that the literature and history they were reading, and the stories veterans were sharing—stories even or especially from those who fought against them—can provide a crucial path to healing, a path to peace. Those writers who painfully pursue truth, and in so doing, who hope

deeply and desperately for peace, can help heal the lasting trauma that afflicts so many witnesses of modern conflict. As Tim O'Brien shares in *The Things They Carried*, "But this too is true: stories can save us" (213). Bao Ninh's novel did just that for this army lieutenant. Read *Ha Noi at Midnight*. In the face of unending sorrow, these stories retain the power to work miracles.

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