

COMMENTARY BY KRYSTAL MCGUINNESS

Laren McClung's *Inheriting the War*
Poetry and Prose by Descendants of Vietnam Veterans and Refugees

I DON'T KNOW VIETNAM. I do know the heat of an Iraqi night. The line for the latrine hazy through cigarette clouds. Nerve endings in my upper thigh were dead asleep after 72 hours of flying from Okinawa to Baghdad; my left leg still aches. I also know the dirt that floats around mangled bodies. While on my way to administer American language exams to Iraqi Air Force Officers, we cruised over the aftermath of an IED in downtown Baghdad; six bodies were draped in white sheets, lining the road. I know they were dead bodies because the State Department helicopter pilots interrupted their morning banter to announce that these were dead bodies: six. I know these things, I have been “over there.” I can't know Vietnam.

But I know its echoes. Laren McClung's collection, *Inheriting the War* gathers voices of Vietnam's descendants around the shared grief of unseen brutality, loss, and a relentless search for beauty. She places strangers: Americans, Vietnamese, refugees, all once war's children, in conversation for an unveiling of generational wounds, and a recognition that humor and love linger in post-war families. Her collection validates the fractured experience of those who saw Vietnam through the broken bodies and minds of their adult family members. *Inheriting the War* is an excavation—these stories were here all along. Of her collection, McClung writes:

When one inherits the residue of a parent's experience of war—whether a momentary disruption in time and place, the phantom weight of a weapon or the stench of a village in flames, the perpetual suffering of exile—one also inherits an abstraction, maybe in the form of total silence, or in the form of a family history told and retold at the dinner table. But the said and unsaid leave only impressions. What descendants of war witness may persist in the body of the parent, though much is left to the imagination and to a perpetual search.

(9)

War does not occur in isolation; there is no lack in war's ripples. I searched for some understanding in war's abstraction in a Connecticut living room. We were visiting my

husband's grandfather before a three-year overseas assignment in Japan. The only time Grampy had been to Toyko was to wait for his trip to the Korean peninsula; while awaiting orders he played for the Army's baseball team in Japan. Grampy's eyes sagged red when I pressed him about Korea. His water glass of merlot shook. He showed us a picture of a smiling face in Army training; he sent it back to his wife and scratched a note to show where her "wonderful picture" was pinned on his wall; he labeled where he slept: "my bunk." He said he served in the 304th Signal Battalion in Korea, he said things were awful, he said he lost friends. He said no more. He had recently received a Korean Service Medal in the mail. He interrupted to tell us he wished this medal be given to his half-Korean grandson, a fact that must have seemed impossible. But now, "that's just the way things go" he said.

Lê Thi Diem Thúy, an author in McClung's collection, writes about her mother in "The Gangster We Are All Looking For:"

When I was born, she cried to know that it was war I was breathing in, and she could never shake it out of me. Ma says war makes it dangerous to breathe, though she knows you die if you don't. She says she could have thrown me against a wall, until I broke or coughed up this war that is killing us all. She could have stomped on it in the dark, and danced on it like a madwoman dancing on gravestones. She could have ground it down to powder and spat on it, but didn't I know? War has no beginning and no end. It crosses oceans like a splintered boat filled with people singing a sad song. (146-147)

A good war story hits your stomach, demanding: are you worth this? Do not squander your chance to listen.

Inheriting the War looks back at Vietnam through the eyes of those who heard of war through rumors, letters, and empty dining table chairs. Some stories slice like "The Man in the Jeep" by Karen Spears Zacharias: "Daddy kept his promise, in a way. He did come back. Via airmail, in a cargo plane full of caskets" (404). McClung's collection communicates that the essential act of looking back at war requires a look inward. As Americans we cannot escape our failures overseas. We lost Vietnam. Our objectives were as unclear, perhaps, as our current role in Afghanistan. A lust-filled vendetta against communism bore ideas like those that led,

and still lead us into unclear wars against terror. Kennedy's Camelot birthed descendants of a brutal war; we now grapple with America's future.

McClung's gathered stories invade my quiet moments. Nam Le, in a selection from *The Boat* titled "Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice" remembers "the small body of [his] father dripping water onto hardwood floors" (156). Le's story is not explicitly about war; it takes place in the middle of an Iowa Writers' Workshop. The author cleans his apartment before his father arrives from a transpacific flight. His mind is occupied by the distracting body of a girlfriend who cannot understand his desire to spend "just three days" with his Vietnamese father (160). Le writes of an author grappling with writers' block while being told it should be so easy to "just write a story about Vietnam" (160). And yet, even there, the war slips in through his father's drunken reverie. A somewhat familiar scene for Americans reflecting on Vietnam, a scene from the My Lai Massacre:

They made us walk to the east side of the village. There were about ten of them, about fifty of us. Mrs. Tran was saying, 'No VC no VC.' They didn't hear her, not over the sound of the machine guns and the M79 grenade launchers. Remember those? Only I heard her. I saw pieces of animals all over the paddy fields, a water buffalo with its side missing—like it was scooped out by a spoon. Then, through the smoke, I saw Grandpa Long bowing to a GI in the traditional greeting. I wanted to call out to him. His wife and daughter and granddaughters, My and Kim, stood shyly behind him. The GI stepped forward, tapped the top of his head with the rifle butt and then twirled the gun around and slid the bayonet into his throat. No one said anything. My mother tried to cover my eyes, but I saw him switch the fire selector on his gun was automatic to single-shot before he shot Grandma Long. Then he and a friend pulled the daughter into a shack, the two little girls dragged along, clinging to her legs. (166)

Nam Le's story is a force at the midpoint of *Inheriting the War*. He relays the struggle of writing and finding the space that Vietnam *should* occupy. He tells of reconnecting with a father. Of a girlfriend who doesn't quite understand. Through moments of failure, Le enacts the listening

many of us are too shy to initiate. We fret over what questions to ask Veterans, perhaps not realizing that the simplest questions paired with a willingness to listen is what (all that) matters.

Inheriting the War opens a space in your working mind; the descendants embed in your most selfish moments. The experience of reading McClung's collection forces a recognition of the fractured narratives that ultimately comprise our inheritance from Vietnam. A piece of Suzan-Lori Parks's play, *Father Comes Home from the Wars* is framed with the author's biographical note that Parks's "father is a Vietnam Veteran and US army officer who reached the rank of colonel" (251). Parks's scene grabs readers: "Murderer, baby killer, racist, government pawn, ultimate patsy, stooge, fall guy, camp follower, dumbass, dope fiend, loser.' Hhhhh" (252). Our assumptions about Vietnam warrant continued inspection. Stage directions in Parks's play read:

Soldier Dad smacks Kid upside the head.

The move comes so fast and seemingly out of nowhere.

Like a flash flood.

The Kid's head snaps horribly back, but then, just as quickly, the Soldier

Dad's anger is spent.

The Kid doesn't cry or anything. (255)

The split of Soldier / Dad cuts. Vietnam demands an attentive ear. McClung's collection validates descendants, many who have not seen combat firsthand, but instead live through war's shadow. The inability to cut to the marrow is the story: it will not sever. Yusef Komunyakaa writes of this sensation in the Foreword to *Inheriting the War*: "I hadn't found my own refuge. I didn't wish anyone to know I had served in Vietnam. I wanted to forget that time, even in a cultural landscape where the institution of war was so apparent. But the echoes of war can traverse or circumnavigate borders of the mind and flesh" (3). Komunyakaa once returned to Vietnam with other writers: "Still, the day before I traveled, a dud ammunition fired years earlier exploded when struck by a farmer's plow in a rice paddy, maiming him and his three children. And yet, the Vietnamese welcomed us and we engaged in a dialogue. We listened to their stories and they listened to ours" (4). There is no complete understanding. There is, however, a sense through McClung's collection that we can add color, acknowledgement, and images to the mutual sense of what it means to want to scratch the

itch of knowing what a family member went through; the itch of wanting to know *why*. Komunyakaa writes: “*Inheriting the War* brings people together; voices speak to each other...This is the stuff of supreme caring. Sometimes, when we speak of ourselves we are also telling each other’s stories” (5).

Telling the stories of Vietnam’s Veterans is fraught with difficulty. Another author in McClung’s collection, Nick Flynn writes about a Marine named Travis who lived next door:

Mid-afternoon, one Saturday Travis comes home after digging clams with a buddy. Leaning on pitchforks knee-deep at low tide, they’d each managed to kill a case of beer before noon. He dumps the clams in the sink and tells my brother and me to circle around, he wants to show us his photo album. For the first few pages he’s a teenager, cocky beside hot rods, girls sitting on the hoods, one with her arm draped over his shoulders. The next page shows him at boot camp, Parris Island—crewcut, sudden adult. The next show Vietnamese women dancing topless on tables, and on the next page a village is on fire. Corpses next, pages of corpses, bodies along a dirt road, a face with no eyes. As the stories of what he’d done unreel from inside him, my brother stands up and walks into his room, back to his wall of science fiction. I look at the photos, at Travis, look in his eyes as he speaks, somehow I’d learn to do that, like a tree learns how to swallow barbed wire. (80-81)

Flynn’s story continues. He speaks to the emptiness left in the wake of sharing a piece of war; the unnecessary waste in Vietnam, the lingering impacts:

The night he showed us his photo album, after the house went quiet, I crept into the kitchen for a glass of water, the sink still full of sea clams, forgotten. Under the fluorescent hum they’d opened their shells and were waving their feet, each as thick as a long forearm. A box of snakes, some draped onto the countertop, some trying to pull themselves out. (81)

I can’t let go of this image; the isolation Travis felt as a Marine mine-sweeper, and the community he felt in the neighbor kids’ presence. I can’t forget clams licking their way out of

a sink. Later, after the author takes Travis to Vietnam for a visit, Travis “shakes his head” at the conflict in Iraq: “Invading Iraq was like opening Pandora’s box, now no one knows how to stuff everything back in” (86). The abstraction of war is familiar to me. While deployed, I would imagine a bullet rotate through the base of the man’s neck sitting across my cafeteria table. I could see the round tearing through layers of skin, crushing bones, fracturing and snapping into shards of white and pools of red. I envisioned the bullet continue through his brain. The dumb expression of shock and surprise. To snap out, I would finger the outline of the pistol on my hip. I am not confident I could rip off a round in the face of imminent danger. The search for meaning in the monotony of everyday experiences drove me to capture incomplete impressions during my deployment; storytelling seems a natural evolution of war.

McClung is aware of the incomplete nature of her collection. She closes her Introduction, writing:

The poems and narratives depict only a sliver of the larger experience. In regards to history, the truth is manifold, and through this collective of voices these writers direct us both backwards and forwards: the aftermath of war crosses borders of generation and culture. In many ways this is new territory, as writers of this generation are still emerging; thus, there are voices not yet represented here—missing are works by descendants of women veterans and nurses; there are few writers living in Vietnam represented in these pages; and there are many other writers of this community who are not included within the confines of this collection. So let this be a continuum. Let this conversation extend beyond these pages, beyond even literature, into action, policy, and acts of empathetic listening. (22)

McClung is also aware that her gathered voices inherently speak about fathers; mothers and children become the site for exploring what happens when a father, husband, and sibling disappear into war’s grasp. My experience reading *Inheriting the War* allowed an entry into private, broken, and beautiful family moments. Vuong Quoc Vu’s poem “Flower Bomb” closes with questions:

Brother, I have come home from Hell.

How now shall I tell the story
of Man—the wars, wars, wars
until the end of time?
How now shall I tell—my mind
already a shattering lake of glass,
my heart bullet-holed—
to write in blood or with red rose petals? (368)

Personal narrative is important for the ongoing conversations about the consequences of human brutality (is anything more human than warfare?). Reading McClung's collection is listening. You must cringe, you must brace, you must hear the sounds of the Vietnam War from those left to tell it. Levi Rubeck's poem "Mall Flare" captures one such sound:

A buddy sent me this video he took
on his boat of missiles launching.
He wasn't supposed to take it
but the boys are filming everything,
it's so easy now. Even though
you can't really see anything,
there's the sound of the air boiling
and then some cheers. (323)

My husband's grandfather died while I was deployed. The last time I saw him was through an iPhone while I stood in my metal containerized housing unit. It was Veteran's Day, and members of the Connecticut hospital staff walked through their halls to recognize service members with a pin. "Well, hi, Krystal," he said in a shaking voice. He smiled so big I lost sight of his eyes in my phone. I could see my husband next to him, holding Grampy's hand.

The totality of warfare is only physically experienced by a few. I am not so naïve to believe that these experiences are limited to the terrain of combat. War is an immersion. In excavating Vietnam's families, McClung's collection ensures Vietnam's ripples will carry the voice of those touched by Vietnam. *Inheriting the War* is a dip into the fractured, inconstant

bitch of a memory that our families bring back from war. Nothing is new here, and yet, children of war grow into storytellers. Nothing could be more important.

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