

Writing the War

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Kissing the Dead

*...I have thumped and blown into your kind too often,
I grow tired of kissing the dead.*

—Basil T. Paquet's (former Army medic) "Morning, a Death"
in *Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans*

In November 2017, the old war intruded again onto America's consciousness, at least that portion of the population that still watches PBS and whose conception of an even older war was informed by the soft Southern drawl of Shelby Foote, sepia images of Yankees and Confederates, and the violin lamentations of Ashokan Farewell, all collaged by Ken Burns in his 1990 landmark documentary about the Civil War. Burns' and Lynn Novick's new series on the Vietnam War evoked arguments among everyone I knew who watched it; their reactions to it were like conceptions of the war itself: the nine blind Indians touching different parts of the elephant, assuming each was the whole animal.

Three words tended to capture my own reaction to the series: "the Walking Dead," a phrase that these days connotes a TV show about zombies but was the name given to what we Marines call One-Nine, meaning the First Battalion of the Ninth Marines, meaning the ungodly number of Marines killed in action from that battalion, which fought, as one of its former members interviewed by Burns and Novick recalled, along the ironically-named Demilitarized Zone, the DMZ. The Dead Marine Zone, as the veteran interviewed more accurately called it, and what I saw after I watched his segment was the dead I'd seen piled on the deck of the CH-46

I flew in as a helicopter gunner during operations in that area. They walked through my dreams that week, and sometimes spilled out into my days.

I also dreamt the writer Le Minh Khue among those dead, seeing her in a nightmare that was an image-echo of the kind of grief I'd felt when I first met her in 1993 and had considered how it would have been to have killed her during the war: she had been a North Vietnamese Army "Youth Volunteer" working on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in an area we often overflew. In my dream, strangely, she was lying curled among those American dead on my helicopter deck. I have a friendship with Khue that has gone on decades, and, as far as that is possible, has untangled from who we were in the war. But seeing her interviewed in the Burns / Novick documentary pushed me back that night, in that dream, to the roil of emotions I'd had the first time we'd met and I had first faced with the reality that if it had been during the war I would have killed her. I had met other former enemies that year and the year before, and had had that same reaction, but only in an abstract, intellectual way. Khue had personalized it. Maybe because she had been an unarmed combatant and had had less chance of killing me, though—she told me—she would have been happy to see my helicopter go down in flames. Maybe it was a sexist reaction, the fact of her gender shifting her out of the nebulous, pith-helmet wearing, AK-47 carrying, always male figure I envisioned as "enemy." But I didn't think so. She was too tough to think of as helpless victim, tough not in manner but in the steel you sensed in her soul. Many years after that meeting I would write about a soldier who took a personal journal off the body of a man he had killed face to face. The care with which the dead man had kept the book, preserving it with tape in that humid, rotting jungle; the careful and beautiful illustrations and painstakingly neat handwriting on its pages forced the man who had killed him to suddenly see

and feel connected to the NVA soldier, to see his complex, reflecting humanity. I had felt the same way meeting Khue.

She spoke, in the Burns and Novick documentary, of her parents, murdered during the Land Reform campaign in the fifties, of the village she has seen destroyed in an air raid, killing her schoolmates and teacher, of her war as one of the hundreds of teenage girls who kept the Ho Chi Minh Trail operative by defusing or exploding the bombs our aircraft dropped, filled in craters, guided living soldiers to their destinations and dead soldiers to their graves. Or, as I would have seen them, and her, as targets.

I was surprised though that she wasn't asked about her writing. Khue is a novelist and short story writer, and as I watched the series, I had been struck by the directors' decision to include veterans who had become writers for many of the interviews, and in particular the selection of three writers with whom I'd formed friendships over the years: Khue, novelist Tim O'Brien, an Army veteran; and Marine veteran, poet and memoirist Bill Ehrhart. Another author, People's Army veteran Bao Ninh, was interviewed as well; I've taught his great novel *The Sorrow of War* and was able to speak with him some years ago for a radio program aired on PBS stations about writers from all sides of the Vietnam War.

Each of those writers have struggled in their work to capture with the written word that deadly paroxysm that had so deeply wounded our countries and our own younger selves that it had inextricably melded the personal and the historical in our lives. I like to think that Burns and Novick's decision to speak to authors was made because of their ability to articulate that struggle: otherwise why choose to interview writers over any other combat veterans? And yet their interviews only encompassed what O'Brien has called the "happening truth" of their

experiences and did not touch upon what he labelled “story-truth”: meaning in this case the origins and motivations and value of their decisions to render the experience of the war into art.

That attempt by its participants to wrest the complex and experiential level of understanding that can only be accomplished by literature has been going on since the beginning of the war itself. Poetry and fiction by American veterans of the Vietnam War—and, as it turns out, Vietnamese veterans, Vietnamese refugees and their descendants—began as perhaps any new compulsion to express the unexpressed and the inexpressible begins: as a response to isolation and silence.

The Big Kiss

....red arching rainbows of dead men

rising like a promise

to give Jesus the big kiss

and sinking down—

only my breath on their lips,

only my words in their mouths.

From “Easter ‘68” by Basil T. Paquet, in *Winning Hearts and Minds*

The first two collections of poetry and fiction by American Vietnam veterans were published in 1971 and 1972 by First Casualty Press, the latter’s name taken from the famous quote from Aeschylus: “in war, truth is the first casualty.” The Press was begun by three poets: Jan Barry, Basil T. Paquet and Larry Rottmann, though Jan had left by the time I joined the project. I’d

served in the Marine Corps, Basil, a conscientious objector, had been an Army hospital medic, Larry a former lieutenant with the 25th Infantry Division, and Jan an army radio specialist who served early in the war, in 1963, when we were in Vietnam only as “advisors.” He was later appointed to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, but resigned as a protest to the war.

The year before I came to the Press, First Casualty had produced *Winning Hearts and Minds*, a collection of poetry by Vietnam veterans.¹ The book had stunned readers; it was the first time the untrammelled words of those who had been in the war had been brought together and the poems, whether polished or raw, had been brilliantly edited and arranged by Basil Paquet into a kind of collective primal scream that managed to resonate and thrum in—to use the Vietnam war phrase from which the title was drawn—the hearts and minds of the book’s readers, veterans and non-veterans alike. John Seeley, in a front-page, Sunday *New York Times Book Review* wrote that “...if one or more of the impact of all these poems does not make you weep, then by Jesus Christ you are not human and should destroy your Social Security card.” The first edition sold out, with profits donated to various anti-war causes; those sales and the critical attention WHAM received provoked the interest of McGraw-Hill. The publisher offered First Casualty a dual contract. Half the reprints of the first anthology and the next would come out under the auspices of First Casualty and the rest under the McGraw Hill label: in the end over 45,000 copies of the collection were printed and sold.

I was living then in White Plains, New York, where I’d grown up. I’d come back from the war in 1967. Like most who served, I was in Vietnam for a set tour of duty, marked by a beginning date and an end date. The latter was a lie. Nothing ended, neither over there, nor in the daily tallies of the dead on the news, nor in the talon-clutch of dreams and nightmares on my brain. Like many of the writers I was later to meet, in the flesh or in their pages, or in the

pages of writers from other doomed generations, we seemed compelled to fashion language that would speak the unspeakable: "I'm dying to write," lamented John Dos Passos, who like Hemingway drove an ambulance in World War I, "but all my methods of doing things in the past merely disgust me now, all former methods are damned inadequate...Horror is so piled on horror that there can be no more."² It seemed impossible to seize and secure Vietnam, by which we meant both the war and the country and the way it had been tortured into a shape couched by dreams that had nothing to do with its own. "[Vietnam] is the place where we find out who we are," ex-Marine Converse tells his buddy Ray Hicks in Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers*, a book I would carry around for months like a talisman.³ "What a bummer for the gooks," Hicks replies, the essence of the war never captured more perfectly. It was a lesson, as were the poems I read in *Winning Hearts and Minds*, in the possibility of expressing what I'd thought was inexpressible.

I had sent some stories—a connected series about a helicopter gunner—to First Casualty, answering a call for submissions printed in one of the underground G.I. publications circulating in those days. After some weeks, during which I'd mentally, preemptively, filed my submission with the dozens of rejections I'd received from the usual mainstream publications, Basil called me. He loved the stories, wanted to publish them, wanted me to come up to Connecticut to speak, as it turned out, about working on the short story anthology First Casualty was considering doing. It would be called *Free Fire Zone*,⁴ the title taken from the military designation of certain, shifting areas of Vietnam where anything—pigs, water buffalo, trees—or anyone—man, woman, child—was considered an enemy and could be killed, a description that at times seemed to encompass the whole country.

Shot from the Canon

My move to First Casualty, which had meant giving up my first real newspaper job after college, seemed to offer not only a way to deal with the war but also an affirmation that I was fit to choose the vocation that seemed to have chosen me, but about which I had feared I was deluding myself, blinded by need and ego, from recognizing a lack of talent that should have been apparent by the steady roll of rejections my stories had been receiving.

It was an unremarkable experience, one common to most writers. But later, soliciting and selecting from the sometimes uneven and raw, but often devastatingly powerful and clearly publishable submissions from veterans for *Free Fire Zone*, we found that many of those writers had had the same feeling, often expressed in conversations or in the letters that accompanied their work, that they were being rejected because of a common and widespread resistance to work about the Vietnam War from publishers and publications, whether the reasons for it were that the war would not sell, or because there was an innate prejudice against veterans who were perceived as not having the correct counter-cultural or academic credentials, or who were regarded as baby killing thugs (Left) or whiny losers (Right). Or because the material just made people uncomfortable. Our war was at the center of the debate churning through the national consciousness, but we were to remain silent about it, to be spoken about but not to speak, to be written about but not to write: still essentially cannon—or, forgive me, canon—fodder for both the Right and the Left, the fact that some of us wrote poetry and fiction seen as the actions of literary idiots-savant. The Vietnam War was forcing post-1950's America into a new and uncomfortable way of looking at itself and whatever the portion of the national psyche was represented by literary publications and book publishers was just not ready, we felt, for our stories and poems. Rightly or wrongly, a good part of what drove us during the First Casualty

Press project was that sense that the rejections we and our fellow veteran writers received reflected and perpetuated a rejection by the country not only of our work, but of ourselves.

Winning Hearts and Minds had been rejected by forty-two publishers, an experience that had pushed Jan, Basil and Larry to form First Casualty. It also led to hundreds of submissions for *Free Fire Zone*.

As it turned out, some of our former enemies in Vietnam were spurred to write about their war for similar reasons. People's Army veteran Bao Ninh's novel *The Sorrow of War*,⁵ was the first novel published in translation from a participant who had been on the other side in Vietnam. It is a searingly truthful work told through the consciousness of a veteran whose mind, like Kurt Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, is "unhinged in time," a perfect depiction of a traumatized soldier and the brutality that wounded his soul, written and published in a country whose authorities, at the time, forbade any account of the war that spoke to its damage. When I interviewed the author in Hanoi and asked what had motivated him to write the novel, he said: "We were told to not tell the truth about the war. And that *irritated* me. Sometimes you have the truth inside you, but you feel you have no right to speak it out, and that in fact motivates you to speak it out."

So, yes, like Bao Ninh, part of our motivation was irritation. "The town could not talk, and would not listen," wrote Tim O'Brien in the chapter "Speaking of Courage" in *The Things They Carried*.

"How'd you like to hear about the war?" [Norman Bowker, the protagonist] might have asked, but the place could only blink and shrug. It had no memory and therefore no guilt. The taxes got paid and the votes got counted and the

agencies of government did their work briskly and politely. It was a brisk polite town. It did not know shit about shit, and did not care to know.⁶

For many of the Vietnam veterans who were struggling at that time to write, what had become an inescapable and defining reality for us was not shared by our fellow citizens, not unless they were directly affected by loss. Our experiences separated us from the country we represented; we could not become part of that country again, could not come home, until those at home had shared and been changed by our experience; the pain needed to be in some measure communalized. In Jim Aitken's *Free Fire Zone* story "Lederer's Legacy," the title character is an awards clerk who leaves a manual to his successor—a "legacy" of ready-made, euphemistic phrases to use when composing medal citations: "with total disregard for personal safety" "intrepid actions at the cost of his life." "Gallant display of heroic action." "Resolute personal determination." But his real legacy is a story about a Vietnamese woman Lederer tries and fails to save after she is crushed to death by panicked American soldiers. The ambiguous and disturbing truths of the war exist not in the worn and abstracting phrases of those citations, but in that story whose purpose is expressed by Lederer in a sentence that we used as an ending epigraph for the book: "And of course, the nice thing about the story is that once you have heard it, what happened is part of you too." In Larry Rottmann's epistolary poem "APO 96225" in *Winning Hearts and Minds*, a young soldier writes home, but avoids giving his parents any real details about the war, describing instead the scenery, the amount of rain, and "the funny monkeys." His father presses him to "not hold back," to tell them what is really happening. Finally the soldier breaks down and tells them that "Today I killed a man. Yesterday, I helped drop napalm / on women and children / And the father wrote right back, / "Please don't write

such depressing letters. You're upsetting your mother." / So, after a while, / the young man wrote, / "Dear Mom, sure rains here a lot."

Tell us what it's like, Mom and Dad and the country, was saying to him. To us. Tell us what it's like. But don't tell us *that*.

So sleep, you Mother, replies Gustav Hasford in his poem, "Bedtime Story," which was also published in *Winning Hearts and Minds*.

Consciously or not Americans, as they would fifty years later in the course of the official commemoration which largely has presented the war as a lost noble cause, had retreated into their safe places, whether by simply not thinking about the war, or by viewing of it only through the lens of their own needs, politics, and pre-conceptions, the comfortable euphemisms of Lederer's citations.. "*Sleep tight, America / / Five O'clock News. My son the meat*," Hasford writes, and goes on to write the novel *Shorttimers*,⁷ is ripped off by Stanley Kubrick who adapts the book as *Full Metal Jacket*, and writes another in which his Marine character defects to the Viet Cong. After which Hasford drinks himself to death.

"I don't want to heal, and am sick of those who do. / Such things end in license," wrote George Evans in his "Revelation in the Mother Lode."⁸

We didn't want to heal. We wanted to wound. We needed to keep wounding ourselves in order to wound our readers. We needed to wound our readers so that they might have the wisdom that comes from wounds. Their ignorance cost too much.

The stories in *Free Fire Zone* were the legacy we wanted to leave to the replacements we hoped never to have, the "yet another generation," W.D. Ehrhart described forty years later in his poem "Guns," whose kids, in the killing fields of Iraq and Afghanistan, are "...rudely about to discover / what their fathers never told them."⁹

We wanted to be the fathers that told them. Put in another way, we wanted to rub people's fucking faces in it. We thought it would make us feel better.

The Shit We Knew

Free Fire Zone is more than America can bear to know about itself.

—Gloria Emerson, in *Harpers*, July 1973

In 1972 *Free Fire Zone* was published jointly by First Casualty and McGraw-Hill in first editions of 7500 from each publisher. The work of twenty writers and (later) two photographers were selected, edited, and woven in a way we hoped led to a kind of dialogue between the stories, giving the collection a novelistic quality. The contributors came from all branches of the armed forces; their names, ranks, branches, military specialties and decorations were all listed at the end of the book: combat infantry badges, combat medics badge, bronze stars, purple hearts, air medals, a deliberate credentialing meant to preclude any denial of the authenticity of these writers' voices, to add the power of presence to their acts of witness and art.

But if Owens and Sassoon and Babel and Dos Passos and Hemingway and Heller and Mailer and John Horne Burnes and James Jones and J.D. Salinger were our literary ancestors, the shit we knew was somewhat different from the shit they knew. Many of the over two hundred manuscripts that poured into First Casualty Press from Vietnam veterans shaped into a literary response to war that was intrinsically different than that which had emerged from previous wars.

While each veteran took his or her own truth home from the war, with some exceptions the stories we received at First Casualty during the early Seventies were largely anti-war, or as

their authors would describe them, realistic. Those writers, including ourselves, were deeply troubled not only by the horrors of combat, but by the gulf between the American values many of us, enlisted or drafted, had brought to the war and the reality of the way the war was being fought (and, among a smaller but growing group of veterans, the *why* the war was being fought). Courage, self-sacrifice, loss, and the deep comradeship among soldiers that so sharpens loss, are as much a part of a soldier's heart as brutalization and waste. The traditional task of the battle-singer, wrote Philip Caputo in his afterword to *A Rumor of War*¹⁰ is to give the tribe stories which provide examples of virtuous behavior that can—when told—be imitated, and of acts of depravity that can—when named—be avoided. But while descriptions of what Caputo called acts "of great virtue" and self-sacrifice, and the grim realities of combat marked some of the submissions we received, most evoked the damage wreaked on Vietnamese civilians.

Did the stories in *Free Fire Zone* fairly represent the reality of the war as experienced by its American combatants? Not entirely. The war many soldiers and Marines saw occurred in the country's spine of jungled, sparsely-populated mountains, and their enemy was the regular army of North Vietnam; they geographically avoided the intrinsic moral dilemmas of a guerilla war by fighting a more classic though absolutely brutal war that cost them more casualties. The aforementioned One-Nine, Walking Dead Battalion had over 700 killed in action during its time in the war. The men who fought at Ia Drang and Kontum and in the streets of Hue, who endured at Con Thien and Khe Sanh were as courageous as any American soldiers in any war. Karl Marlantes' novel *Matterhorn*¹¹ published in 2009, has been criticized for ignoring the deadly interaction between American troops and the Vietnamese population. But what Marlantes describes is a reality of a part of the war based on his own experience in a Marine infantry unit fighting the regular North Vietnamese army in the largely un-inhabited cordillera areas of

Vietnam. The Vietnam War, as described by Marlantes, could be the war fought in the Pacific jungles of World War II. For many Americans fighting against a highly-motivated, regular army in the mountains and jungles, it was.

But the ghosts that crowded the stories selected for *Free Fire Zone* were more often the non-combatants, often old people, women and children, that made up most of the dead from the Vietnam War, the accusatory figures of the Vietnamese civilians brutalized, killed or maimed in the course of a war fought in, among and supposedly for those civilians. It was a war that Dr. Robert J. Lifton called an "atrocious-producing situation,"¹² inevitable when the military power and weaponry of a technologically advanced, industrial First World country is brought to bear on a largely agricultural Third World society. Outside of the more clearly drawn lines between forces in the jungled highlands, the enemy and the population we were to drag to democracy with that power and weaponry were mixed together or were often the same, making the gage of military success not the capture of territory but the body count. "If it's dead and Vietnamese, it's V.C.," Caputo wrote, describing the inevitable result of that policy.

You knew what was going on. The stories and poems in both anthologies dealt with the radical notion that the Vietnam War had somehow involved the Vietnamese. This is what happened by our hands and in your name, those writers, their medals listed at the end of the book, were telling their readers. An old man run over by a jeep and left like a dead dog. A helicopter gunner's tracers moving up the back of a woman carrying a baby, the baby's astonished face, the red glow of the rounds "look[ing] better [to him] crawling up her black [trousers] than they did when they got to the white [shirt]." Marines exterminating rats as they called them "gooks," infuriated at a mother rat who refused to die even as they burned off her face with flame shot through a spray of deodorant. A medic trying to inject some feeling back in

his soul by sexually abusing a teenage masseuse. No My Lai's, no large scale atrocities, and for the most part no depictions of the combat that was also the reality of the war, but instead a piling up of humiliations, small brutalities, and occasional murders of the population that was the essence of Vietnam—the country, the war, the very air of it—for thousands of G.I.'s, the things they would prefer to forget, revise, erase. The damage to the Vietnamese and the way it had damaged us informed the stories in *Free Fire Zone* and created an intertextuality of consciousness between them formed by the ways in which the war was traumatizing, corrupting, wounding and killing the bodies and souls of its American characters by traumatizing, corrupting, wounding and killing the bodies and souls of the Vietnamese.

It was not a comforting nor comfortable exploration, and a decade later, as the war began to be re-written in Reagan's (and Rambo's) "morning in America" era, more acceptable narratives and memories—that is, lies and self-deceptions—emerged. And continue. The opening narrative of the Burns / Novick documentary refers to a war started with "good intentions" By last year, it became clear in the Defense Department sponsored 50th anniversary commemoration that the war was to be remembered as an ultimately ennobling American experience, Forest Gumped into a story told by an idiot and fought by naifs in a Vietnam void of Vietnamese, its main take-away an agreement that it was not nice to spit on veterans.

When *Free Fire Zone* was published, it was reviewed, for the most part very positively, by dozens of newspapers, journals and magazine, from large national periodicals, including *Newsweek* and *Harper's*—to city and home town papers and underground and alternative press publications. But while the First Casualty edition sold out, sales were not nearly as high as *Winning Hearts and Minds* had been for McGraw-Hill. It was 1973 and the war, the country wanted to believe, was over. As did McGraw-Hill. The next year when we presented the

anthology *Postmortem*, a collection of stories and poems about the experience of veterans coming home (and containing a story by a young writer named Tim O'Brien), the company declined to publish.

The Other Side of Heaven

*To understand my stories, you have to understand
their background in my country's history of
suffering and war.*

—Le Minh Khue

Eighteen years later, in 1994, the two mainstream publishers with whom I'd published three novels, and a long list of other publishers my agent queried, refused to consider a proposal for an anthology that I thought of as the literary child of *Free Fire Zone*. It would not only include our depictions of the Vietnamese, as that collection had done; it would include the Vietnamese themselves. None of the publishers we queried thought such a book would sell. Their refusal evoked a not too strange sense of déjà vu.

In 1993, Le Minh Khue and several other Vietnamese writers, PAVN veterans, had been invited to attend the remarkable summer program run by the William Joiner Center at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Joiner brought together American veteran writers—Yusef Komunyakaa, Robert Mason, Tim O'Brien, Phil Caputo, Bruce Weigl, Larry Heinemann and George Evans were in the program that summer—with Vietnamese writers Le Minh Khue, Huu Tinh and Nguyen Quang Thieu, all of whom had been on the other side of the war. We taught in

fiction and poetry workshops, did readings and seminars, and, mainly, lived and worked with people we would once have tried to kill.

The friendship that grew between Khue and I was triggered—the right word—one morning at breakfast, a moment I described in the introduction to the anthology whose origin traces back to that meal, when I revealed to her I'd flown missions as a helicopter gunner and she, from age fifteen to nineteen, had been in a unit of teenage girls who worked defusing and exploding bombs and doing road repair on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, under the jungle I'd sometimes flown over and sometimes shot down into:

We had become friends by then and at that moment I pictured myself flying above the jungle canopy, transfixed with hate and fear and searching for her in order to shoot her, while she looked up, in hatred and fear also, searching for me—and how it would have been if I had found her then. To waste someone, we called killing in the war, and the word had never seemed more apt. I looked across the table then and saw her face, as if, after twenty years, it was at last emerging from the jungle canopy. She looked across at me and saw the same. It was that look, that sudden mutual *seeing* of the humanness we held in common—which is of course what all good stories should do—that led to [*The Other Side of Heaven*]¹³.

When Le Minh Khue went back to Hanoi, where she was the chief fiction editor at the Writers' Association Publishing House, we continued to correspond, refining and reinforcing the desire we had to publish a book that would contain stories from all sides of the war: American, Vietnamese, and—more politically difficult for Khue, from Vietnamese who had been on the losing side of the war. It was to be a book that contained the found voices of the silenced that

we had previously had only been able to imagine. As writers, we were convinced that only “story-truth” would allow people to share that simple but necessary revelation of common humanity; as veterans we understood that the inability to do so allowed people to kill each other:

What drew the Vietnamese and Americans together at Joiner was more than the historical or personal accident that we had been in the war. It also had to do with the fact that we had chosen to write about the war or its aftermath, that we shared a compulsion to use our art as an instrument of witness. The war had shown us in the most vivid way possible the kinds of choices human beings had to make and the consequences of those choices, the damage left behind... We’d become writers, like all writers, because we thought we were good at it. But we’d also become writers because we knew in the deepest sense the way in which simplifying human beings and human situations to the priorities of power or convenience or fashion could lead to death and degradation. We had become writers, in other words because we wanted to tell stories that showed the complexities of the human heart, its capacity for both love and brutality; we wanted to show the human faces, under the leaves, under the noise of the rotors, under the hatred and fear that distorted those faces into configurations of hatred and fear. We knew, deeply, those of us who were in the war, that to not write about these things was the beginning of moral death and physical murder. [*The Other Side of Heaven*]

It finally took a dose of sixties synchronicity—and consciousness—to find a publisher for the proposed anthology: the visionary Sandy Taylor, head of Curbstone Press, immediately

understood the significance of the work. Curbstone, like First Casualty was a small, independent, non-profit publishing company run out of Willimantic, Connecticut, just a few miles from where First Casualty had been located.

The stories, Khue and I—and the author Ho Anh Thai who became essential to the project—selected would not be combat narratives, but would center on the aftereffects, the cost to bodies and souls. To be truly a work of reconciliation, we decided, it would also need to include work from the overseas Vietnamese community. The latter was a dangerous and daring move by Khue and Thai, though to protect them we would make it clear that the selection of those stories would be my responsibility. It was relatively easy for Khue to get permission from the Writers' Association in Hanoi to work with an American and have a mix of stories from both countries. Americans were OK as former enemies. But Vietnamese who had been on the other side were anathema, "puppet-soldiers," traitors. That attitude was mirrored in the Viet Kieu, the overseas Vietnamese community, a symmetry of hate, though not of power. They had lost not just the war, but their country.

Yet there were writers—and many others—on both sides, who felt that the deepest reconciliation would have to be among the Vietnamese, a belief deeply held by the third editor we brought into the anthology, Truong Hong Son (Truong Vu), a former South Vietnamese Army officer who left Vietnam as a boat person. I described him in the introduction as "a stubborn survivor who dreamed impossibly and fit life to the needs of his dream, a South Vietnamese war veteran, a refugee who started with nothing and became an aerospace engineer at NASA, a lover of literature (the poetry he hated to learn in high school, he told me, had helped him survive the journey from Vietnam to the Philippines on a leaky twelve-foot fishing boat). Son knew, and introduced me to the emerging literature from Vietnamese-American

writers, some in Vietnamese, some translated, and some, from the “1.5 generation” written in English.

In 1994, I returned to Vietnam for the first time since the war. I didn’t go to any of the places I had served, but stayed in Hanoi, with some side trips to Ha Long Bay and other areas in the North. Part of this was logistical: it was a working trip; I was meeting and securing, through the Writers’ Association, reprint agreements with the writers who were members of the Association. But I also, at that point, was not ready to go back to the South.

Later, working on the anthology, I became more conscious of the connections the new collection had with *Free Fire Zone*, in the way the stories seemed to be engaged in a natural, inter-textual dialogue that was even more powerful than the first collection because that weave was coming through the voices of former enemies, the book achieving, I hoped, that same epiphany of commonality I had felt meeting Khue:

When I sat down to decide upon an order for the stories, I found that a strange—or perhaps not so strange—synchronicity was taking place. Not only did the selections echo each other thematically, but often situations or characters would seem to leap from one story to another. Ward Just and Bao Ninh both write about writers, one in Washington, one in Hanoi, unable to let the war go, struggling to find ways to write about it. The woman in “Nada,” Judith Ortiz Cofer’s powerful story of grief, loses a son named Tony in the war; in Le Minh Khue’s story “Tony D,” two Hanoi hustlers find the bones of a dead American (who begins to haunt them); they identify him as Tony from his dog tags. Ngo Tu Lap’s “Waiting for A Friend” is told by the ghost of a dead North Vietnamese soldier who, with his other dead squad mates, observes the life of the lone

surviving member of their unit, just as the ghosts in Larry Heinemann's "Paco's Dreams" observe and comment on the life of Paco—the only survivor of their unit—as if he's living for all of them. In Nguyen Mong Giac's "The Slope of Life" we see two veterans who had grown up together in the same village, one a former soldier of the losing side, one a veteran of the winning side, one an amputee, the other blind, meeting in a Saigon cafe, just as two American veterans, one black, one white, one a quadruple amputee, the other scarred, meet in a VA hospital in Larry Brown's "Waiting for the Dark." Many of the stories have similar threads that weave them together, and of course, in truth, that quality is not strange: a soldier's bitterness and alienation or cynicism at the way truth is twisted after the bullets no longer fly, a mother's grief, a spouse's rage at the loss of the ability to love, a child's sense of aching absence— [*The Other Side of Heaven*]

The Other Side of Heaven: Postwar Fiction by Vietnamese and American Writers, was published in 1995. The profits from it—and the book sold well—were donated to a new obstetrics wing in a hospital in Hue, as the profits from *Free Fire Zone* had gone to the bombed out Bach Mai Hospital in Hanoi. Later, royalties went to Project Renew, an organization clearing unexploded ordnance in Quang Tri Province. The war was still seeded deep: the book did not usher in an era of peace and understanding. Khue, for a time, was harassed by the authorities because we had included the Viet Kieu writers. Truong Vu and other Viet Kieu contributors were denounced (and one writer beaten) by elements in the overseas Vietnamese community, and when Khue and Thai came to the United States for a book tour, we were met by hostile demonstrations from some in that community in every major city we did readings.

Yet many people from all three sides loved the collection, and in all the places we visited, we were met also by American veterans and Vietnamese-Americans who found, in the stories from those people on the other side of a dividing chasm, a mirrored humanity that was somehow hopeful, or at least revealed the possibility of hope.

The Other Side of Heaven became the first book in Curbstone's *Voices from Vietnam series*. Over the next fifteen years, seven novels and short story collections by Vietnamese writers: Le Minh Khue and Ho Anh Thai, but also Ma Van Khang, Da Ngan, Nguyen Du, and Doan Le, and another anthology, *Love After War: Contemporary Fiction from Vietnam*, containing the work of fifty writers would be published.¹⁴

During that decade translations of the works of other Vietnamese writers began to be published as well, including Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* which would never have been published in the West without the tireless, fervent and risky efforts of its Vietnamese translator, Phan Thanh Hao. The same could be said of Phan Huy Duong and Nina McPherson in France and the books of the dissident writer Duong Thu Huong. Many of the books came into print through the partnerships between American Vietnam veterans and Vietnamese-Americans connected to the Joiner Center: *A Time Far Past*¹⁵ by Le Luu, translated by Ngo Vinh Hai, Nguyen Ba Chung, Kevin Bowen, and David Hunt; George Evans and Nguyen Qui Duc's translation of Huu Thinh's *The Time Tree*;¹⁶ Thanh T. Nguyen and Bruce Weigl's *Poems From Captured Documents*;¹⁷ Nguyen Duy's *Distant Road*,¹⁸ translated by Kevin Bowen and Nguyen Ba Chung; Lam Thi My Da's *Green Rice*,¹⁹ translated by Martha Collins and Thuy Dinh, and more. All pushed into print by people who believed that Americans needed to understand the people they had conveniently regarded as enigmatic ciphers. If at all.

At the same time, the children of the Vietnamese diaspora had found their own literary voices in English and had begun to tell their own stories.

Circle

Like Bao Ninh and other war veteran writers in Vietnam, and like the early American Vietnam veteran writers, Vietnamese American writers were irritated into writing by their sense of being excluded from or distorted in a narrative that in essence was about them. "The Vietnamese remain irrelevant and invisible even in the universe of the novel," opined the Vietnamese-American novelist Lan Cao in *The New York Times* "Notable Vietnam (sic) novels," she writes "... all center on an American central character transformed in one way or another by a place that was not a country but a vehicle for American metamorphosis."²⁰

Her observation is largely true, but it is important also—and hopeful—to go beyond the "notable" works—which are often the only ones used in courses or mentioned by critics--and take a look at the exceptions. To paraphrase a quote from Viet Thanh Nguyen that appears later in this essay: They are out there. Google them. Some writers, such as Robert Olen Butler who won the Pulitzer Prize for his collection *A Good Scent From a Far Mountain* are more "notable", presumably meaning best-selling or nationally awarded, than others, but novelists, memoirists and poets such as John Balaban, W.D. Ehrhart, Gloria Emerson, George Evans, James Janko, Ward Just, Yusef Komunyakaa, Robert Roth, Bruce Weigl, and Tobias Wolff have produced an important body of work that evinces a deep awareness of the effects of the war on the Vietnamese.

But it is also important to separate the notable wheat from the notable chaff. There is an important difference between writing and writers who turn the Vietnamese into mere scenery

for their own stories, and those who use that omission in order to draw our attention to it. Lan Cao offers Tim O'Brien's most famous story, "The Things They Carried," as an example of a work in which "Encounters with the Vietnamese were barely worth a nod." O'Brien's brief, almost laconic announcement in that story of the burning of a village, the slaughter of its animals and the poisoning of its well as retaliation after the death of an American soldier (which is described in much more detail), would seem to reinforce Cao's point. But given the way *The Things They Carried* demonstrates over and over again O'Brien's awareness and control of his craft, the way his descriptions of brutalities inflicted on the Vietnamese are threaded throughout the narrative, the way O'Brien's avatar, the Tim O'Brien character in the novel, is depicted as a man who loses his humanity by dehumanizing the Vietnamese, then that sparse description that deposes so easily of that village as a kind of "barely-worth-a-nod" afterthought, *draws attention* through its very casualness to the racism, moral confusion and brutal reality of a war in which the enemy was indistinguishable from the population those teenage soldiers were told they were there to protect. The fact that such attention requires close reading is part of what makes the novel literature—work that needs to be read at least twice, especially by teachers who only see in it a description of American suffering.

In *The Things They Carry* the unredeemed, naked racism of O'Brien's characters are deliberately presented by the author without comment; the contempt and sexual and physical abuse of the population they were supposedly fighting for reflects the prevailing reality of the American marginalization of the Vietnamese and the price in brutalization and death that blindness affected. The novel, as Lan Cao generalizes correctly about American Vietnam war novels, revolves around an American protagonist for whom the country (of Vietnam) and its people acts only as a means for his "metamorphosis." But it is a mistake to confuse the self-

centeredness of the character with the intent of an author who is revealing the cost of that egoism. The transformations O'Brien depict destroy his characters' souls: the author lets us understand how that solipsism, so destructive to his characters and to the population among whom they fought, was the essence of the war. It is that tough, artistic awareness on the part of O'Brien that sets him, and other authors who write from that same consciousness—Larry Heinemann in particular comes to mind—apart from writers whose marginalization of the Vietnamese simply reflects their own mental erasure of them rather than deliberately drawing attention to it.

Reading O'Brien's work plunges readers into the dark true heart of the war.

Still, with the above exceptions noted, the crux of Lan Cao's argument is inarguable: what largely has been left out of mainstream literary or popular American depictions of the Vietnam War has been Vietnam. Vietnam the country, not the war. Vietnam and the Vietnamese who waged the war or were victims of it or about whom the war was waged. Vietnam the country and not the movie, as one finds it in one of the other "notable" books Lan Cao mentions, the late Denis Johnson's National Book Award winning *Tree of Smoke*²¹ in which the Vietnamese exist on the same two-dimensional level of reality as the pseudo-mystical burn-outs, psychos, dopers and other regurgitated Vietnam veteran stereotypes that people the novel. I never believed one has to experience a war or anything else directly in order to imagine and pen it (see Stephen Crane), but *Tree of Smoke* seems to have been written by a guy who has seen a lot of Vietnam war movies: his enigmatic Vietnamese, stoned G.I.'s and mad colonel could have emerged from the dark false heart of *Apocalypse Now*.

Which of course is the film, and the mindset that produced and celebrated it, that is skewered brilliantly by Viet Thanh Nguyen in his 2016 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The*

*Sympathizer*²² in which the main character, a Vietnamese double-agent (reflecting his conflicted identity not only as Vietnamese and American but also as a Vietnamese who lives and understands both Vietnamese sides of the war) becomes one of the hundreds of Vietnamese extras on the film, serving in the same capacity as human fodder, a malleable, anonymous, faceless material that exists in American consciousness, once again, only as a backdrop for the American story.

As a result of the Pulitzer Prize, Viet Thanh Nguyen emerged from that scenery as the most well-known Vietnamese-American writer, a fact that inevitably labels him a “new voice” for his community. But as he points out in his New York Times article “The Great Vietnam War Novel was not written by an American”²³ his is not a new nor a rare voice: “...literature by Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Americans is out there for anyone who knows how to use Google. But so many here and abroad would rather not know, or when a new Vietnamese author is published, would prefer to say, ‘At last! A voice for the Vietnamese!’ In fact, there are so many voices, for the Vietnamese people are very loud.” In that article and elsewhere, Nguyen names and briefly describes the work of the writers who own those voices, including Le Ly Haslip , Nguyen Qui Duc, Le Thi Diem Thuy, Andrew Lam, Lan Cao, Linh Dinh, Monique Truong, Quang X. Phuong, Duong Van Mai Elliott: writers who have had been “emerging” for years, as well as new voices such as Ocean Vuong and Nguyen Phan Que Mai, an author from Vietnam writing in English whose epic war and generational novel *The Mountains Sing* will be published next year by a major American publisher.²⁴ They are the voices that once upon an earlier time we knew had to be heard, even if we had to create them. Their work cries out to be heard, to make the ignored and invisible visible. “We are fragmented shards / blown here by a war no one wants to remember” writes Le Thi Diem Thuy in her poem “Shrapnel Shards on Blue Water” a description

Lan Cao echoes in her novel *Monkey Bridge*: "We were, after all, a ragtag accumulation of the unwanted, an awkward reminder of a war the whole country was trying to forget."²⁵ It is a description the early Vietnam veteran writers could relate to deep in their own bones.

Wayne Karlin is the author of seven novels: *Marble Mountain*, *The Wished-For Country*, *Prisoners* (all with Curbstone Press), *Lost Armies*, *The Extras*, *Us* (all with Henry Holt), and *Crossover* (Harcourt), and three works of non-fiction: *Rumors and Stones*, *War Movies* (Curbstone Press), and *Wandering Souls: Journeys with the Dead and the Living in Viet Nam* (Nation Books). His books have been published in translation in Denmark, Sweden, Italy and Vietnam. Karlin co-edited the first anthology of veteran's fiction from the Vietnam War, *Free Fire Zone*, and was the editor of the Curbstone Press Voices from Vietnam series, publishing Vietnamese writers in translation. He has received five State of Maryland Individual Artist Awards in Fiction, two Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1994 and 2004), the Paterson Prize in Fiction for 1999, the Vietnam Veterans of American Excellence in the Arts Award in 2005, and the Juniper Prize for Fiction for 2019 for his novel of the War of 1812, *A Wolf by the Ears*, which will be published by University of Massachusetts Press in 2020.

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