INTRODUCTION

A Note on the Selection and Translation of Stories

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The American War in Vietnam was an extremely controversial and complicated event in the context of both Vietnamese and U.S. history. In our selection of the stories collected in this anthology, we have tried to be as inclusive and diverse as possible in terms of both the author's background and the content, style, and themes present in his or her work. Still, some readers may notice that only one perspective on the conflict is represented here—that of the war's victors, the Vietnamese communists based in the northern capital city of Hanoi.

Since the end of the war in 1975, the Communist Party of Vietnam has maintained tight political control over the country. Today, Vietnam remains a single-party state, with tight controls and limits on freedom of expression, the media, and the arts. These extend, of course, to the publishing industry, where all literature, including works of fiction, is subject to censorship and the demand—sometimes unspoken, but always firmly understood—that all published work adhere to the tenets of Party orthodoxy. This includes narratives concerning the war against the Americans, a war seen by the ruling Communist Party 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.

We believe that it is important for readers to keep this strictly controlled publishing environment in mind when first approaching the twenty stories collected here. Given the restraint placed on these authors in terms of what is viable for publication about the American War in Vietnam, the artistic and thematic diversity represented by their work is even more striking.

By referring to the conflict as the “American War,” we are adopting the terminology most commonly used in Vietnam, *Chien tranh chong My*. The war is sometimes referred to in Vietnam as the “Resistance War against America,” *Khang chien chong My*, but this is often shortened simply to the American War. Outside of Vietnam, people usually refer to the conflict as the “Vietnam War.” Of course, it would not make sense for the Vietnamese to refer to the *Vietnam* War. Despite the persistent use in the West of the word “Vietnam” as a stand-in for the conflict itself, Vietnam is, first and foremost, a country, not a war.

Outside of Vietnam, the conflict is also sometimes referred to as the Second Indochina War. The *First* Indochina War was Vietnam’s earlier struggle for independence from French colonial rule, which lasted from 1945 to 1954. At the end of that conflict, the Geneva Accords split newly independent Vietnam at the 17th parallel into North and South. According to the agreement, the split was meant to be temporary, and the country would be reunified for national elections in 1956. That never happened. Instead, the United States began promoting South Vietnam—known also as the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) or the Government of Vietnam (GVN)—as a legitimate country, a “democratic” alternative to Ho Chi Minh’s northern communist government based in the capital city of Hanoi. By 1960, forces opposed to the government of South Vietnam had united under the Hanoi-supported National Liberation Front (NLF), known colloquially and often derisively as the Viet Cong.

By 1965, the conflict had become an all-out war, with the United States eventually committing hundreds of thousands of troops to fight alongside the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to preserve the newly formed country of South Vietnam, and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the NLF fighting to expel the Americans and reunite the country under a single, communist government. In 1973, with American loss of life in the conflict totaling nearly 60,000 and no easy end to the fighting in sight, the United States withdrew militarily from Vietnam and began cutting financial and military aid to the South. The Republic of Vietnam collapsed two years later, in 1975, as communist forces reunified the country by taking control of the southern cities, including Saigon, which they renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

For Vietnam, the impact of the war was devastating. According to the best available estimates, 3 million Vietnamese died in the conflict, roughly 7 percent of the country's total 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 in the rural countryside. 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.

The two decades immediately following the end of the war were extremely difficult for Vietnam and the Vietnamese people. Harsh U.S. trade sanctions—intended, some historians argue, to “punish” communist Vietnam for having won the war—kept the country staggeringly poor through the mid-1990s. The communists imprisoned thousands of people, mostly southerners who had been involved with the Americans or the former South Vietnamese government, in austere rural “reeducation” camps where they were held sometimes for upward of ten years. During this period, millions of Vietnamese refugees—again, mostly southerners, many of whom had worked for the defeated regime—fled the country as

“boat people.” Those who survived the dangerous journey would go on to build vibrant diasporic communities in places like Southern California, Canada, Australia, and France.

The twenty stories collected in this anthology all address aspects of this conflict that consumed Vietnam for much of the latter half of the twentieth century: the effects of exposure to Agent Orange, one of the most toxic chemical weapons used by the United States, on one peasant farmer and his family; the bond between a North Vietnamese soldier and his fiercely loyal pet dog; the use of psychics in the continuing search for the bodies of missing soldiers; the lingering effects of conscription on romantic and family relationships in the countryside; the treatment of veterans in an economically depressed postwar society. The stories presented in this volume range from the intensely personal and specific to narratives that deal with larger national trends of remembrance, trauma, and healing.

In Vietnam, these stories are some of the most frequently anthologized and popular pieces of short fiction about the war. Their original publication dates cover a wide range, from 1967 to 2014, offering readers the opportunity to explore how Vietnamese narratives of the war have (or in some cases, have not) changed through the decades. Some of these stories originally appeared in mainstream Vietnamese newspapers and literary magazines like *Thanh Nien* (*The Youth Daily*), *Nhan Dan* (*The People's Daily*), and *Van Nghe Quan Doi* (*Military Literature Magazine*), and others were published in popular anthologies such as *Tuyen truyen ngan doat giai cao: 30 nam doi moi, 1986–2016* (*Selected Award-Winning Short Stories: 30 Years of Reforms, 1986–2016*) and *Truyen ngan hay ve khang chien chong My* (*Best Short Stories About the American War*). Many are frequently taught and critically discussed in Vietnam, and several are considered canonical. Yet none of these stories, despite being so popular and widely read in Vietnam, has ever appeared before in English. *Other Moons*, therefore, represents a unique opportunity for American

audiences to learn about how the Vietnamese people continue to think about, commemorate, and generally process the conflict that consumed their country for so many years.

Many of these stories provide a firsthand glimpse of the experiences of Vietnamese soldiers both during and after the war. The canonical story “A Crescent Moon in the Woods” by Nguyen Minh Chau depicts a group of tired North Vietnamese Army truck drivers sitting around a fire and telling war stories until one of them captivates the group for hours with his deceptively simple tale of love, fate, and courage. The narrator of Nguyen Van Tho’s “Unsung Hero” walks readers through the details of his life on a remote jungle base—days spent fishing, foraging, tending a small vegetable garden, and recovering from the occasional bout of malaria. For Vop, the tragicomic main character of Mai Tien Nghi’s “The Louse Crab Season,” memories of his time as a soldier are almost idyllic compared to the ignominious treatment he experiences in his hometown after an accident leaves him castrated. Similarly, in Nguyen Trong Luan’s “The Corporal,” the narrator relays the story of Xuan, the daughter of a poor peasant in his hometown who spent years fighting bravely in the war only to return to her village, marry a “dull-witted” man, and eke out an existence foraging for manioc roots. Despite her commendable military service, Xuan’s lack of education and social connections limit her options in finding a comfortable job, suggesting the continuation of traditional class tensions—the peasant agrarian class versus the land-owning educated elites—in postwar socialist Vietnam.

The counterpart to the soldiers’ experience is the drama that unfolds on the home front while they are away. In “War” by Thai Ba Tan, “Ms. Thoai” by Hanh Le, and “The Most Beautiful Girl in the Village” by Ta Duy Anh, the setting is the domestic front, where wives are expected to wait patiently and faithfully for their husbands to return from the battlefield. When things do not go exactly as hoped—in the case of “Ms. Thoai” a rape, in “War” an unexpected

pregnancy that may have been immaculate, and in “The Most Beautiful Girl in the Village” a marriage that never materializes—the characters’ lives are changed forever. These stories present a compelling moral landscape in which the suffering of the women is treated as both tragic and heroic, while the men are portrayed as stubborn and cruel. For these characters, it is not the horrors of actual combat that linger years after the fighting has ended but the obsession, resentment, doubt, jealousy, and pain of perceived betrayal that end up defining the rest of their lives.

In our selection of the stories, we have made a concerted effort to include authors from a variety of personal and professional backgrounds. The group of writers represented here are a mix of both well-known, full-time authors (Bao Ninh, Nguyen Van Tho, Suong Nguyet Minh) and writers who carve out time to create their fiction around the demands of their day jobs. Mai Tien Nghi is a middle school math teacher. Nguyen Thi Am works for a company that sells agricultural products. Luong Liem is the full-time director of a local association for victims of Agent Orange. Lai Van Long is a beat reporter for the *Ho Chi Minh City Police News*. Most of these writers are veterans of the war with the Americans, though several are from the later generation, born in the mid- or late 1970s, such as Nguyen Ngoc Thuan, Nguyen Thi Mai Phuong, and Truong Van Ngoc. Some of them are members of the prestigious national Vietnamese Writers’ Association—the Party-sanctioned organization that decides who is “officially” considered to qualify as a *nha van*, a writer—while others are relatively unknown outside their local province, far removed from the official publishing apparatuses in Hanoi. The majority still live and write in Vietnam. The exceptions are Nguyen Minh Chau and Hanh Le, neither of whom is alive today, and Vo Thi Hao, who now lives in asylum in Germany.

Readers may notice that out of twenty authors included in this anthology, only five are women. This gender disparity reflects the

fact that the vast majority of Vietnamese fiction about the war is written by men. Although women did serve in the army in various capacities during the war, the rate of conscription was much higher among men. Therefore, most authors who are veterans of the conflict and are concerned with exploring war-related themes in their short fiction are male. However, several female Vietnamese authors have had considerable international critical and commercial success writing about the war: two of the most internationally popular works of Vietnamese nonfiction about the conflict were written by women—Le Ly Hayslip’s memoir, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, and *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*, the diary of National Liberation Front doctor Dang Thuy Tram, who was killed in an American attack in 1970—and the most internationally popular war novel after Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War* is female author Duong Thu Huong’s *Novel Without a Name*.

Some readers might also note that the anthology does not include voices from “the losing side,” the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), or those who supported the former South Vietnamese government and American intervention in the conflict. There are several reasons for this. First, these narratives are already widely available to English-speaking audiences in the form of exile or diasporic literature published outside of Vietnam. Diasporic Vietnamese literature often favors the ARVN/South Vietnamese perspective. Those who fled the country as refugees in the postwar years tended to be people who had supported the South Vietnamese regime or worked with the Americans and their ARVN allies. There is also the practical reality of the tightly regulated publishing landscape in Vietnam. Still today, over forty years after the end of the conflict, stories sympathetic to the ARVN side are not published in Vietnam, let alone widely read or anthologized. Some short fiction by former ARVN soldiers has been self-published online, though usually under a pseudonym, making it difficult to even find the author for the purposes of securing a “right to

translate” agreement. Despite the logistical hurdles, this might be an opportunity for a future translation project: an anthology of online dissident writing about the war.

We have also made a point to include voices here from the three main geographic regions of Vietnam, the north (*mien Bac*), the central region (*mien Trung*), and the south (*mien Nam*). With Hanoi usually considered the cultural and political center of the country, Vietnamese literature and state-controlled publishing have tended to favor the war writing of northern writers, work that often focuses on depictions of pastoral village life and traditional village culture. Southern and central writers often present a different experience of the war by focusing on issues unique to their own experience: life alongside the American soldiers, brothers forced to fight on opposite sides of the conflict, the seizing of private property in the postwar period. Nguyen Ngoc Tu’s “Brothers,” Nguyen Thi Thu Tran’s “An American Service Hamlet,” and Lai Van Long’s “A Moral Murderer” are all examples of stories written by southerners that enrich the corpus of Vietnamese short fiction about the war because they address issues not normally found in short fiction written by northern writers.

Bringing a short story from its original Vietnamese into English poses a number of challenges. To begin with, the Vietnamese language does not have simple, generic pronouns like the English “you” or “she” or “they.” Instead, Vietnamese speakers use a system of relationship-dependent pronouns—*anh*, *em*, *chi*, *chu*, *chau*, *ong*, and *ba*, among others—that change according to the respective ages of and the relationship between the speakers. But attempting to translate these pronouns into English would have resulted in something like, for example, “How is sister today?” or “How are you today, sister?” We felt this sounded unnatural and stiffly formal, whereas the pronouns in the Vietnamese original often convey familiarity and friendly rapport between speakers. We have chosen, therefore, not to represent the original Vietnamese pronouns

in dialogue with an attempt at literal translation. The only exception is the title for “Brother, When Will You Come Home?.” Without the Vietnamese pronouns, of course, we lose some of the associative information the characters communicate. Thus, when necessary, we have tried to indicate the relationship between speakers in other ways. This usually meant the addition of small identifying phrases to the description of some characters, like “brother-in-law” or “my sister,” or adjectives like “older” and “younger.”

We have also had to wrestle with the inevitable fact that some Vietnamese phrases lose their associative and cultural richness when rendered into English. One example is the term “*ve que*,” which appears at the beginning of Nguyen Trong Luan’s “The Corporal” and acts as the initiating frame for the rest of the story. *Ve que* is a common fixed phrase in Vietnamese that translates as “to return to one’s hometown.” The Vietnamese would never say “*di que*,” or “to go to one’s hometown.” The concept is always conveyed using the verb *ve*, “to return,” suggesting the speaker’s deep connection to his or her ancestors and the land where he or she originated. The English word “hometown” also does not carry the same cultural weight as the Vietnamese word *que*, which is often used as shorthand to mean “the countryside.” *Ve que*, therefore, implies returning to a simpler, less hectic, rural life.

This is just one example of several challenges we encountered during the translation process. The editorial note at the front of each story is meant to help cover any lost associative ground similar to this, as well as to provide some cultural and historical context. We have opted to include the notes rather than attempt this contextualizing work within the text of the stories themselves in the service of offering a reading experience in English that hews as closely as possible to the experience of reading the story in its original Vietnamese.

Written Vietnamese can also sometimes feature small regional differences. For example, the word for “bowl,” as in “a bowl of rice,”

is different in the North versus the South, as is the word for “spoon.” Northern Vietnamese tends to use more formal phrases of greeting and expressing thanks; southern Vietnamese is generally considered more informal. We have tried to maintain these regional differences in the tone of our translations as best we could, though the editorial note for each story will also help regionally locate the author for readers unfamiliar with these more subtle linguistic differences.

In all of these translations, we have tried to remain as faithful as possible to the Vietnamese original. Preserving the integrity of each author’s artistic vision was always the priority. This included maintaining the aesthetic uniqueness of each author’s use of language and voice. In some cases, the resulting English sentence or phrase felt redundant or wordy, and we were forced to make minor adjustments to the sentence structure or the phrasing to make the English more readable. However, these adjustments were always informed by the author’s style and in keeping with the aesthetics of their cadence, tone, and word choice.

One final note on the text: we have opted not to include the diacritic markings on Vietnamese words that remained in the English translation. We believe these markings would have proved distracting to most readers, and those who are familiar with the Vietnamese language can easily infer the appropriate diacritics for each word.

OTHER MOONS