

QUAN MANH HA AND JOSEPH BABCOCK, EDS.

Other Moons: Vietnamese Short Stories of the American War and Its Aftermath.

Translated by Quan Manh Ha and Joseph Babcock. Foreword by Bảo Ninh.
New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. 239 pages.

“Writing about war is writing about peace,” writes Bảo Ninh in the foreword to the anthology *Other Moons*, translated and edited by Quan Manh Ha and Joseph Babcock. Published in July 2020, the collection features highly acclaimed Vietnamese authors such as Nguyễn Minh Châu (“A Crescent Moon in the Woods”), Bảo Ninh (“White Clouds Flying”), Nguyễn Ngọc Tư (“Birds in Formation”), Tạ Duy Anh (“The Most Beautiful Girl in the Village”), and Sông Nguyệt Minh (“The Chau River Pier”), who weave into their narratives vivid fragments of memories about the American war in Vietnam and its lasting repercussions. Characters portrayed in every story wear their trauma inside out in different ways. But from their crippling afflictions and experience of brutality, however, still germinates a vigorous beauty of hopes (the “other moons” of the book’s title). This unflinching beauty resists being destroyed by war and violence, since it is nurtured by an invincible longing for freedom. And from such war ruins, seeds of peace spring up again, as if to say, “The Sorrow Wasn’t Just Ours” (which is the title of one of the twenty stories).

Memories of the war widely known by the world as the Vietnam War have been overwhelmingly represented by Americans or Vietnamese Americans, whose optics often elide how the war and its aftermath affect Vietnamese people. This collection offers a heteroglossia of narratives about Vietnamese people who struggled through the war against their will.

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The opening story, “Unsung Hero,” while portraying the heroic death of a dog named Lu in his brave attempt to save a kid from storms of gunfire, makes visible the vulnerability and anonymity of lives in such a bloody war. “Brother, When Will You Come Home?” is a poignant story about families searching restlessly for bodies of their husbands and sons who never returned after the war ended. Unlike most Orientalist imaginations or Vietnamese representations of the Vietnam War, which often portray Americans GIs as violent and heartless enemies, “An American Service Hamlet” represents them as innocent victims of war machinations. Or as Vop, an uncelebrated veteran in “Louse Crab Season” reminds us, after every terrible thing that happened in the battlefield, neither heroes nor villains could return home unscathed.

In no story featured in this collection have war atrocities fallen into oblivion. Instead, they keep reverberating in peacetime. Trong in “Storms” continues to hear artillery fire during his familial meals and while he sleeps. The veteran-narrator in “Love and War” imagines his wife as the cannibal who bit his leg off during his sleep after he returned home legless at the end of the war. A miserable mother in “White Cloud Flying” sets up an altar with a photo of her martyr-son on the aircraft tray table to commemorate his death in war. The pain of a mother losing her son to the brutal war is also excruciatingly represented in “Birds in Formation.” To disconcert the reader even more, this story features a broken kinship in the family, where two brothers allied themselves with the opposing sides in the war. Hauntingly, like many other Vietnamese mothers in the same plight, the senile, wretched mother in this story keeps asking her other son who survived after fighting fiercely in the North versus South Vietnam warfront, “Why did you shoot my son?”

While war stories mostly feature men’s experiences, *Other Moons* manifests otherwise. Narratives in this collection portray Vietnamese women as warriors in war and in peace. Women in these stories epitomize beauty in the brutality of war, emotionally sustaining men’s hope and faith in their collective struggle for freedom and happiness. They fight beside men, amid the violence and monstrosity of war. Women like Nguyet in “A Crescent Moon in the Woods” or Hang in “A Person Coming from the Woods” simultaneously become a gentle glamor, a romantic moonlight, that

comfort men's spiritual unrest. Woman warriors in Vietnamese stories don't surrender to adversities, they rise above them ("Mrs. Thoai," "The Most Beautiful Girl in the Village," "They Became Men"). Their virtues of resilience, faithfulness, and sacrifice shine in these stories. While war and violence may destroy these Vietnamese women's youth and appearance, the beauty of their daring souls persists, because surviving such a war as female warriors is already beautiful, which makes anything else seem mundane.

Only two decades after the Vietnam War ended, American veterans came back to Vietnam for their "trauma tourism" and were amazed at Vietnamese people's magnanimous gestures and facile forgetfulness of the tragic war. "How come Vietnamese people heal so quickly?" American veterans asked. As someone who soldiered through the terrible war and its calamities himself, Bào Ninh reflects in the foreword that "resentment is poisonous, because it would make Vietnamese people unable to live a normal life . . . and [their] children would never be able to live happily." Vietnamese people have distilled these valuable lessons through centuries of fighting against foreign invaders who "were far more powerful than the Vietnamese, militarily." And after each war, Vietnamese people had to bury the dead, suppress their sorrow, and try their best to rebuild everything from ashes.

As 2020 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of US-Vietnam normalization, celebrating a strategic and comprehensive partnership between the two former foes, this collection of stories, rendered with sophisticated and evocative translations by Quan Manh Ha and Joseph Babcock, provides more complex narratives behind that glossy sheen of a pastless future. A tearful chapter of history may be closed, but we may not forget the "extremely sad" life of Hoa Binh—a girl born crippled by Agent Orange—in "Storms." Her name, which ironically means "peace," haunts us deeply with a question about the cost of her excruciating existence. And we may never close this book without wondering who would be able to heal that deeply scarred narrator and perpetual outcast in "A Moral Murderer."

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