

Catherine Cole (ed.), *The Perfume River: An Anthology of Writing From Vietnam* (UWA Publishing 2010)

Like many Australians, I visited Vietnam after it began to welcome tourists at the turn of the twenty-first century; as a teacher and writer I felt moved by the efforts of the predominantly young population to reconnect with cultural traditions, as well as with their efforts to rebuild their society after the Vietnam War (referred to by them as the American War) and to engage with contemporary global politics and commerce, on their own terms. I knew people who had made pilgrimages to sites of trauma, supplementing both countries' collective imagination. For these reasons, I read *The Perfume River* with a generous heart. Its plethora of narratives linked only by a connection with a country long-shrouded in mystery, are now open for discourse.

Catherine Cole, Melbourne RMIT's Professor of Creative Writing, first visited Vietnam in 1994 and since then, as her infatuation grew, particularly for its literary culture, she has regularly travelled back. In 2000 she won an Asia-link residency hosted by Tazo Publishing House in Hanoi. *The Perfume River* showcases the short stories, poetry and essays of more than thirty writers mainly chosen from among those she had worked with or met through this experience. The stories could be arranged along the fault lines of diverse Vietnamese contemporary realities, or sorted by their settings. The literal Perfume River runs through Hue, site of an ancient citadel, and a bloody battle during the 1968 Tet Offensive; thus perhaps, the evocative title of the book could be construed as deceptively restrictive. The 43 stories and poems, however, traverse the country from north to south, incorporating the experiences of urban and rural citizens, scholars and artists, expatriates, and refugees and their children living around the world. Some authors write back to Vietnam from diasporic communities, others write from within, some serendipitously developed relationships with Vietnam after visiting. Not all contributors spoke or wrote in Vietnamese. Lack of English translations of Vietnamese texts limited Cole's selection.

The anthology opens with Cole's introductory essay in which she analyses her fascination with Vietnam's French-colonial history, the paradoxes of the American/Vietnam War, and the country's ongoing attachment to literary culture. Shaden Tageldin's important research on colonial and postcolonial literary renaissances, shaped by migration and diasporic writing, reinforced Cole's ideas about 'fiction as an important site of memory from which to renegotiate the meanings of the past in order to imagine the future' and with particular reference to the legacy of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War (xii). From 1975-1985 this war was not a common subject of Australian contemporary novels; only Vietnamese writers bent on economic and physical reconstruction, and the transformation of their national identity, explored 'themes of loss, exile and nostalgia' (xiii). Cole's selected creative writing pieces offer unique perspectives of a young vibrant Vietnam reimagining itself through literature, as well as in public spaces, and a nostalgic but hybrid tourism incorporating ancient, colonial, communist and wartime realities. At the time of writing, Vietnam's population, a large percentage of whom were under 30, were highly literate and well educated. Cole suggests that inter-generational tensions derive more from changing ideas about aesthetics than a simplistic age divide. Older generations who may have studied Russian, Chinese or French language and

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literature, wished to hold on to customs at the same time that their society repaired itself and progressed.

The opening pages of best selling *The Sorrow of War* (1994) written by Bao Ninh follow Cole's essay. Ninh's book is now recognised as one of the great works about war, although its metatext might be seen as anti-war. Kien, the book's writer-soldier protagonist describes comrades who 'looked like lepers, not heroic forward scouts. Their faces looked moss-grown, hatched and sorrowful, without hope. It was a stinking life' (13). He sees his novel as 'his last adventure as a soldier' driving him 'to the brink of insanity' (45). To the consternation, perhaps, of the post-war Vietnamese government, Ninh's book became wildly popular in the East and West.

Cole must have been aware, at the time of publication, of Vietnamese Melbourne Nam Le's rising capital in the field of Australian creative writing, brought about partly because he disavowed his inheritance as an 'ethnic writer' to explore a virtuoso range of subjects and settings in his short story collection *The Boat* (2008), and partly because of the string of awards it won. Ninh, the protagonist of the third story selected for Cole's anthology, 'Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice', a Vietnamese Australian attending the Iowa Writers' Workshop, shares some circumstances of Le's life.

From here on, Coles offers such a diverse range of authors, genres, writing styles and competencies that it discourages too much classification. One suspects that translation does a disservice to poetry written in Indigenous languages, leaving behind the nuance and musicality of the original text. Lam Thi Da's 'A Sky in a Bomb Crater', second and first-person elegy to a young girl's sheroism in sacrificing her life to save a convoy, may have suffered this fate. Nevertheless, the poems convey a multitude of Vietnamese identities. In 'Strawberries for Sale', a narrative poem, Viet Lê describes the road trips of seasonal fruit pickers in southwest America, through the eyes of their children; racist taunts invade the main sections. Phan Huyen Thu's 'Hue' powerfully plays on the Perfume River as both conduit to and personification of Vietnam's suffering. Feminine imagery intensifies the poem's dark mood. Viet Lê's 'Haunting' focuses on the dislocated lives of expatriate Vietnamese people and the ghosts that follow them from one place to another – their mother's rape, the napalm images of children on American newsreel footage. The idea of unsettled ghosts is a common trope of Asian stories – a perceived reality that can disturb the psyches of those dying far away from their homeland.

Death and dislocation also provide common subjects for the stories. Andrew Lam's 'The Palmist' touches on the loss by drowning of boat people fleeing Vietnam during the war. Viet Lê's 'Hot Dogs for Dinner' suggests the tensions for resettled Vietnamese moving into hard manual labour in new countries; domestic violence, for instance. Vincent Lam's 'A Long Migration' traces a man's relocation from Guangdong in Southern China to Vietnam, Hong Kong and finally Brisbane, Australia where, in the last stages of renal cell carcinoma, nursed by his grandson, he reconciles conflicting versions of his life story. Lam's family fled Vietnam in 1975, when he was aged eleven. Educated at San Francisco State University in Biochemistry and Fine Arts (Creative Writing) he became a prize-winning journalist and his writing reflects this.

Cole's short creative non-fiction titled 'Long Live Peace' begins with her narrator's rant about Vietnam's lack of social regulation – children's heads as

‘vulnerable as chicken’s eggs’ in traffic. This frames her interview with a 92-year-old friend of Ho Chi Minh’s, who tells a story about ‘the French’ deliberately starving village buffaloes as an act of war: stories about French colonial atrocities abound in Vietnam; after the retelling of this one the old man forgives France as a nation. The Vietnamese-French legacy of fine food, art and literature pervades many of the stories. Influential Vietnamese people were frequently educated at the Sorbonne and have relatives in France.

Many writers pay homage to Hanoi. Asia-link fellow Jane Gibian captures traditional Vietnamese motifs in ‘Carp’ and ‘Planted’, domestic and commercial relationships playing out on the streets, in ‘Footpath’, and the flash and clash of contemporary urban images – kotex ads, squashed rat, wet rice – in her elegant ‘Vietnam Haiku’. In ‘Hanoi Cycle’ Australian Pam Brown writes cross-genre fragments, part poetic prose (‘fleshy green nymphaea bob ...’), part travelogue-style breathless observation (‘a rat throws peanuts around the flat’) and part theory (‘no parataxis in the narrative’), occasionally lapsing into the banal (‘we have run out of rubbish bags’)(168, 170).

Chi Vu intersperses ‘Vietnam: a Psychic Guide’, part epistolary, part travel homage to Old Quarter Hanoi, with short prose pieces on eclectic topics: ‘string conversations’, ‘grandma vanishings’, ‘city of face’ – the last abstract and poetic. The register in letters and emails vary from informal ‘all my photos came out shit’ (47) to lyrical ‘Dry thick skin cracked just like the streets of the city. Hanoi is a snake shedding its skin...’ (35). Vu evokes *Ho Hoan Kiem* lake precinct with its old guild street grid, ubiquitous motorbikes buzzing like fleas, postcard sellers and crowded kerbside recreation and food production, but reminds the reader that true journeys should involve hearts and minds. Any voyeur visitor with the temerity to ignore the adaptability of a society traumatised by war and poverty, in their rush to subjectify poverty, gets no change from Vu.

Many stories incorporate traditional allegories, reminding anyone who has been to Vietnam of how, despite the imposition of communist ideals overlaid by western pragmatism, its people have only recently left behind a past of giant carps, water kings, fairies, puppeteer platforms built over village ponds, before dramatic mountain backdrops. The narrative juxtaposition of folk stories about people being blinded and beaten, and traditional food and crafts, over modern savvy characters that go to internet cafes and use mobile phones works well, offering, by sleight of hand, postcolonial perspective. Fairies and dragons appear, their roles light hearted and elegiac, or dismissive but, nevertheless, present: ‘even if they could come, nobody believes in dragons and fairies any more’ concludes the narrator of ‘The Daughters of Au Co’ by Hoa Pham (255).

Some authors use post-modern techniques to explicate their subjects. Adam Aitkin’s evocative memoir probes the reasons his father married his mother, an ‘Asian woman’, by researching family history, experimenting with Plots A, B, and C, and intertextual references to Christopher Koch’s 1995 novel *Highways to a War*, Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*, and Marcel Proust’s ‘Swann’s Way’ translated into Thai by his uncle. He tests the construction of his hybridity, the notion of his Asian ‘face’ and where it might be welcome, and where and with whom a trans-Asian citizen belongs. In ‘Installation’, focalised through a hotel maid, Ho An Thai experiments with genre to interrogate the idea that ‘Vietnamese can use a smile to

cover any dilemma': crime, romance, or art installation? – the reader must decide. Steve Kelen's poems 'The No-Food Restaurant', and 'At the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum' shaped like a map of Vietnam, take a laconic outsider perspective: 'Uncle Ho was a cool guy, now he's an ancestor...' (62).

A Hoa Pham character refers to the four rules for publishing in Vietnam, and the six-year wait for the censor to clear any book. Taboo topics include sex and violence, government, and ethnic minorities. Strong censorship, especially on these subjects, makes publishing difficult in Vietnam; government enforcing the idea that literature should be instructive. Is this the reason, Kelen treads lightly around the 'Red Dzaio Village', home to Minority People, beloved by tourists, a bucolic Shangri-La where healthy children run between the indigo and rice plants, living a life as close to subsistence agriculture as the modern world allows? Or do his last two stanzas subtly convey the curse of opium and alcohol on the next generation?

...the child's dreaming
becomes a silky voice, the love of life's
an appetite to make another into powder.

In 'Visually Impaired', a physically explicit and yet subtle story on the subject of sexuality and power, a man bullies a *Tam quat* master into massaging his wife, each night removing more of her clothing, and insisting on more confronting positions. The master's dark glasses and initial reluctance to work on a woman have led the husband to think him blind. Pham Thi Hoai involves the reader in the complex interplay between the three, of manners and control, steadily building erotic tension. The confident unfolding of this psychological and yet very physical plot demonstrates Hoai's accomplishment as a successful writer of novels and translator of English classics. Explicit references to parts of the woman's body must surely have tested the censors.

'The Professor of Philosophy' by Le Minh Khue, a satirical tale of contemporary courtship, disappoints with its lapses into passive voice and instructive irony but, just as often, delights with humour and lively figurative writing: 'the roofline resembled a row of rotten teeth'; 'felt like a frog sitting at the bottom of a well'; 'graduates in your field are as crowded together as piglets in a pen' (64, 68, 69). Despite her diffidence, the story's protagonist finally brings to heel her war-jaded teacher, offering the reader hope and redemption. Love, it seems, can never be guaranteed.

Several other stories pick up the theme of securing a future for Vietnamese girls. 'The Concrete Village' by Le Minh Khue resembles a morality play or perhaps a quasi-communist polemical tale, in which the virtuous crippled protagonist resists modern freedoms corrupting her brother – alcohol, prostitution, opium, and karaoke – ending on a hopeful note that she will marry an older adopted brother. 'Believe Me' by Nguyen Thi Thu Hue reverses these roles when her protagonist, a Hanoi schoolgirl, loses her chance of love and marriage because she reveals her wild past to her fiancé while drunk. Hoa Pham's *Viet Kieu* girls, who visit family after resettling in other countries, embody six narrative voices that shift the scene from Hanoi, to San Francisco, from Sydney, to Melbourne and then Saigon, as she highlights stressors impacting on hybrid Vietnamese 'daughter' identities: Asian facial and body

dysmorphia, paternalism, incarceration, crises of loss and belonging.

In all these examples young Vietnamese women struggle towards individuation, in rapidly changing societies where the differences between urban and rural, old and young, and progress and tradition are up for renegotiation. Pham Thi Hoai also conveys a narrative voice of resignation in 'Sunday Menu', her narrator attempting to locate herself between two generations of family women, between 'difficult like Grandma' and 'insouciant like Mother', and between French, Sino and Vietnamese cuisines, when her mother opens a cyclo-driver restaurant (81). Black humour and *bon mots* lighten the impact of staff who piss in the soup, threaten the owner with a machete, and drop raw eggs down young girl's blouses, and customers who shit where they eat. An untidy death underlines the ironic denouement brought about during a week of civic beautification, neatly cross-hatched with Hanoi Library cookbooks and busy maggots.

Traditional Vietnamese society upheld art and literature as signifiers of civilisation long before European colonisers arrived, as the Temple of Literature in Hanoi demonstrates. Built by Emperor Ly Thanh Tong, a Confucian scholar, to honour men of literary accomplishment, it was one of the world's first universities, recording the names of those receiving doctorates from 1484 (174). Even now, before exams, students rub the head of a large stone tortoise in the temple grounds to bring them deep wisdom, and pray at the lazy student shrine. Historically, Vietnamese people, like Irish, regarded poetry as vocational. Pham Duy Khiem sets stories inside stories, like Chinese boxes in 'Tu Uyên or The Portrait of a *Tiên*'. In its interior story he refers to a poetic duel in which verses are exchanged.

Cole has selected authentic and well-crafted stories, written by authors from diverse backgrounds. Lapses in style and syntax might be put down to English translation, but most of the writing is accomplished. Humour and parody reap their own rewards but, in some instances, when authors deal with love relationships, they hold readers at arms length, offering an allegorical take on post war security.

Throughout the anthology, issues of exile and homecoming operate close to the surface.

'Where is home? Home is family, no? Now my family is here', Aziz instructs the young girl protagonist in N.B. Najima's 'At the Mermaid Stairwell' (287). While each author highlights unique aspects of Vietnamese culture and history – lost, forgotten, feared or modernised – each story resounds with a common theme that home is determined by proximity to one's people.

Gay Lynch