

BOOK REVIEWS

6 Vietnamese Poets

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For many Americans, the photograph of naked, screaming Kim Phuc fleeing a napalm attack defined the war in Vietnam. There is no such defining image for the people of Vietnam. What image would suffice for a nation ravaged by the harsh brutality of war for much of this century? From the depths of the inexpressible this poetry emerges, from the silence of pain and hope that suffering evokes. Poetry

remains a vital channel for the voice of the Vietnamese people, a record of their struggle, survival, and even triumph. *6 Vietnamese Poets* sounds a collective voice.

6 Poets came about as a result of a summer writing workshop that brought together American poets and noted Vietnamese poets in collaboration with the Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. The six poets, three men and three women—Pham Tien Duat, Y Nhi, Nguyen Khoa Diem, Lam Thi My Da, Nguyen Duc Mau, and Xuan Quynh—write poems of the war and beyond the war.

This is poetry born of contrast, as in Y Nhi's "Woman Knitting":

In the chill afternoon

A woman sits by a window, knitting.

She seems so patient, so anxious.

Patient, for she has the rest of her life.

Anxious, for these may be her last moments.

It is poetry that displays a fierce love for the country, its ancient culture, and its emergence into the twenty-first century. Throughout this rich volume, reverence for the enduring beauty of nature found alongside the ravages of war is a constant theme. Nguyen Khoa Diem writes:

The new moon stretches in the sky;

A field stirs in afternoon shadows.

The warm grasses muffle the frog's sharp cries

Paddies sway as softly as strands of silk.

And from Lam Thi My Da comes this four line poem of fierce contrast:

Last night a bomb exploded on the veranda

But sounds of birds sweeten the air this morning.

I hear the fragrant trees, look in the garden,

Find two silent clusters of ripe guavas.

Vietnam, as perceived by most Americans, exists in the dim light of newsreel footage or from Americentric Hollywood productions. It is pleasure, indeed, to hear the voice (yes, these poems are meant to be read aloud) of Vietnam from those who lived, survived, and moved beyond the war. Ultimately, *6 Vietnamese Poets* is the record of a resilient people in their ascendancy. For those of us who remember the war, and those too young, this book reveals Vietnam as one nation, whole. Pham Tien Duat writes:

Along the night road I hear the whisper, whisper,
The veins of the soil merging, my country's two
halves joining.

I see the halo of the moon, my country

Rising higher and higher through the circling fire. ■

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