

# The Stars, The Earth, The River

By Le Minh Khue

Wayne Karlin, ed.

Translated by Bac Hoai Tran and Dana Sachs

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231 PAGES

The first in a projected series of contemporary Vietnamese writers in English translation, *The Stars, The Earth, The River* by Le Minh Khue augurs well for Curbstone Press. The translators, Bac Hoai Tran and Dana Sachs, provide an even-handed, modern text, rendering the transparent language (never calling attention to the “I” of the author) into a text accessible to American readers, and preserving a journalistic and correct style sometimes referred to as the style of Socialist Realism. Wayne Karlin, the editor, provides a first class introduction to these fourteen stories, selected, it would appear, for content that would appeal to an American audience: scenes and experiences from the Second Indochina War; veterans’ problems and concerns: the Westerner as the source of financial security, and simultaneously, as destroyer of Vietnamese culture; remains of MIAs; a failing Revolution. Even so, the stories are a window into *doi moi* Vietnam, and the emergent problems attendant to economic liberalization.

The stories are arranged to show the progress from the youthful idealism of “The Distant Stars” to the ennui of “The River.” From the total commitment of a young girl to her country’s war for Independence and Reunification to the tired ex-soldier who returns to his rural childhood village and the essential things of life, we feel the gradual erosion of hope for the future and see, instead, a return to the Golden Age and pastoral *otium* of the Le Loi reign of the fifteenth century. Between these stories lies a wasteland of broken lives, frustrations, and unfulfilled promise. We find twelve stories that dramatize frustration, poverty, anger, greed, unrequited love, family dissolution, the intrusion of foreigners, hypocrisy, and rampant immorality.

It is, indeed, a bleak world that confronts the many different narrators of these stories: editors suppress stories of valor and heroism in the name of economic efficiency; a young man from Hanoi sits out the War and rushes, at its conclusion, to the South and its material comforts; children wish for the death of elderly parents; people forsake propriety and traditional values in search of wealth and comfort; poverty is rampant; women find themselves where they have always been in a Confucian society, victims of lust and indifference, unable to find a soul mate or to actualize their ancient roles as dispensers of love, virtue, tenderness, and hope. To the eye of the Westerner, the problems are traceable to a failed ideology, corrupt officials, and an ineffective government. Except for those errors publicly acknowl-

edged by the government, such as the Rectification Campaign which apologized for the crimes committed against some landlords during the land reforms of the 1950s, the narrators find their unreconstructed fervor for the goals of the Revolution tested, but never to the point of openly criticizing the government. The major problems result from the inflammatory juxtaposition of Western values (money and comfort) to a greedy generation that forgets its history of sacrifice. It is human error, an unregenerated population, not system failure, that threatens the narrators.

The stories span twenty-one years, from 1971, when a nineteen-year-old Le Minh Khue wrote an autobiographical and propagandistic account of experiences on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, to 1992, two years after the government decided that economic liberalization was one thing and freedom of expression for writers was quite another. Twelve of the stories were written after Renovation. We have only

one story from the eleven year period after the War until 1986. In that story, we see two former soldiers, Tan and Vien, separated by fate: one finds comfort and security with an older husband, while the other has married badly and lives in degraded conditions with her wild children and absent husband. It is a thinly veiled, moralistic story about the inherent dangers of a bad marriage. The omission of this period blurs somewhat our perceptions of the author’s development and deprives us of a glimpse of a good writer during the period of Reunification and the building of a Socialist country.

The book makes two major contributions. First, we get to sample the works of a politically “correct” writer who happens to be an editor for the government sponsored Vietnamese Writers Association Publishing House. This observation is not meant to

be negative. It does not detract from her keen powers of observation, her ability to tell a very complex story like “A Small Tragedy” neatly and effectively, and her ability to evoke the folk roots of her culture with her modern use of fable and legend. She brings a new perspective to those readers who, limited to works in English translation, know Duong Thu Huong and Nguyen Huy Thiep, both “incorrect” writers. Second, these stories hold the mirror up to contemporary Vietnam. They are quite valuable to those who want to know what it is like to live in Vietnam in the 1990s. Although her most famous story is “The Distant Stars,” there are three others of significance: “The River,” “The Almighty Dollar,” and “A Small Tragedy,” each a very different emotional experience, since it is, after all is said and done, the emotional life of contemporary Vietnam that Le Minh Khue is most concerned with and which prompts her best utterance. ■

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