



## War, Memory and the Future

*Viet Thanh Nguyen*  
*Photographs by Sam Sweezy*

Even as an American child, I was always aware of the presence of the dead. Although my Catholic father and mother did not practice ancestor worship, they kept photographs of their fathers and their mothers on the mantel and prayed to God before them every evening. In the eighties, news of my grandparents' passing into another world arrived one after the other, accompanied by more photographs in black and white, of rural funeral processions marching through a bleak land, of mourners dressed in simple country clothes and white headbands, of wooden coffins lowered into narrow graves. I knew the fathers and mothers of my father and mother only through their photographs, where they never smiled and where they posed stiffly.

Visiting the homes of other Vietnamese friends in California, I always paused to study the photographs of their relatives, invariably captured in black and white. These photographs, emblematic of a lost time, a lost place, and, in many cases, lost people, were universal signs of our place in the world as refugees, found in every household as keepsakes of memory, hallowed signs of our haunting by the past. Photographs are the secular imprints of ghosts, the most visible sign of their aura, and the closest many in the world of refugees could come to living with those left behind. For many refugees,



the clothes on their backs and a wallet full of photographs were all the things they carried with them on their flights. In the strange new land they found themselves in, these photographs transubstantiated into symbols of the missing themselves.

Living among refugees and their memories makes me believe that knowing when a war begins is easier than knowing when a war ends. While we can dispute the exact beginning—a pistol shot, the lust for a neighbor's land, the first glimpse of a beautiful face—we need only go back so far in time and memory before we know a war did not exist. Yet the same war does not conclude so clearly. Forget the armistices and peace agreements. Forget the erection of monuments, the creation of memorial days. So long as we speak of a war with passion, it is not yet over. So long as someone remembers a war, with feeling, it is not yet done. Perhaps only when the last living witness of a war has left this world for another might we say that a war is laid to rest.

But has it. After all, memory persists, surpassing the dead who once remembered things first. The dead leave us their memories, and the living will do with these secondhand memories what they will. So perhaps wars do not pass when witnesses pass on. Not yet. War's long half-life in memory means that a war remains emotionally radioactive, disfiguring the living well

after the shooting has stopped. War's disfigurement is also often literal, as the Vietnamese sometimes wish to remind each other and their foreign visitors. Their American War is over, but in some museums, the grotesque afterlife waits on a shelf of bottles. A generation of monstrous fetuses deformed by Agent Orange. Hydrocephalic heads and eyeless faces pressed against glass.

And yet, just as often, war's disfigurement is invisible, at the level of tissue and cell, in the dimension of neurons and images only a survivor sees. The walking wounded are among us, and one day the invisible will become visible. For Freud said: what we do not remember, we will repeat. What we do not work through, we will act out. In Viet Nam, the Revolution has acted out by selling out. The Revolution says *nothing is more precious than independence and freedom*. This is written on billboards, engraved in monuments, scribbled everywhere on the body politic. But put your finger on Viet Nam's pulse, on the main artery of Ho Chi Minh City, née Saigon, a boulevard that was in American days called Tu Do Street—Freedom Street. Now it is known as Dong Khoi—the Revolution. Most of the faces pressed against glass on this street are those of window-shoppers studying the wares of other new names: Louis Vuitton, Marc Jacobs, Adidas.

Just like capitalism, revolutions also have icons and brand names. For Viet Nam, the icon is Ho Chi Minh and the brand name is Uncle Ho. Uncle Ho wished for his ashes to be scattered over the country, but his followers decided otherwise. His life once symbolized the Revolution, his waxen body now embodies its afterlife, entombed in a crystal sarcophagus. Visitors crowd to see Ho in his Soviet-designed mausoleum in Hanoi's Ba Dinh Square, where in August 1945 he declared Viet Nam's independence from France, modeling his words on the American Declaration of Independence. The foreigner can measure the reverence of the People for Uncle Ho by seeing how the Vietnamese, who never queue for anything, silently and orderly move in single file past his embalmed body, his face not quite pressed against glass. No one is allowed to take pictures.

There is good reason for the prohibition. Photographs take on lives of their own, separated from the dead. This is the case with images of revolution as well. Given the passing of generations, revolutions become romantic. Loss

is distilled. The bitter are exiled. Deaths become numbers. The enemy turns investor. Memorials grace battlefields, monuments loom invisibly in city squares, the blood washes away, and on film, a different kind of revolution unrolls. See the movie about young Che, before he becomes a revolutionary, dashing around Latin America on a motorcycle. The movie does not mention what he says about Viet Nam during its war, that the country was an *inspiration to the entire world against imperialism and the United States of North America*, that its people served as a heroic lesson for any revolutionary who wishes to become *an effective, violent, single-minded, cold killing machine*. This revolutionary will bring war to the enemy's *home and places of diversion*. For Che, revolution is total war. When isn't it, except where amusement parks teach history.

I worked in such a place of diversion when I was sixteen, Great America of the Silicon Valley. I was a refugee, born in Viet Nam, made in these United States. I manned a ride in Yankee Harbor called the Revolution and wore a tricorn hat without irony. The only screaming to be heard was from fun-goers suspended upside down as the Revolution slowly turned. In today's Viet Nam, you can also have revolutionary fun. Fire a machine gun for a dollar a bullet. Crawl through guerilla tunnels widened for westerners. Buy a model



of a Huey helicopter, beaten from Coke cans. Buy bullets. Buy dog-tags. Buy authentic war-era Zippo lighters engraved with the anonymous poetry of American soldiers. *When I die I'm going to heaven, because I've already been to hell.* The lighters are made by Chinese. I don't know who makes the Ho Chi Minh sandals fashioned from rubber tires. With these you can walk in your enemy's shoes, but I've never seen anyone do so.

Not surprisingly, the Vietnamese prefer to vacation the way most people in the world do. They visit the seashore, go shopping in Korean-owned supermalls, ride pony carts around Lake Ho Xuan Huong in the mountain resort where the Emperor once hunted tigers. The ones who can afford it go to Angkor Wat, go to Vientiane, go to Europe. Those who can't afford the world go to the amusement park in Saigon, the one with an ice palace, a big, shadowy warehouse, refrigerated and resonant with the screams of children sliding down ice chutes. It's so cold an attendant in the foyer hands you a parka. Inside are ice sculptures of the world's wonders, lit in neon. The Sphinx, the Pyramids, the Eiffel Tower, the London Bridge, the White House, scaled down to a tall man's height. Then exit into sunlight and heat, the humidity so dense it feels to the first time visitor that someone is exhaling on every inch of your body every second of the day.





I begin to get used to the weather after four visits and twelve months. I stop complaining. Empathy has a degree of this, treating the strange as the mundane. The nose stops smelling, the tongue stops rebelling, the skin stops feeling the difference between what I call home and this place where I was born. But by this measure, the forgetfulness of difference, I am not yet fully empathetic. I still notice things. People notice me. When I visit Uncle Ho's birthplace in an out-of-the-way village, a small hut with a floor of packed earth, the Vietnamese version of Abe Lincoln's log cabin, the other visitors stare at me. Army cadres in olive green uniforms and ridiculously big hats, they must think I am the only one not Vietnamese. Too tall, too big, too pale. Then, leaving town on the midnight train, fourth-class berth, I notice our wood benches have been oversold. How couldn't I. Passengers sleep underneath the benches and in the aisles, stirring when the train lurches and stops in a dark city. A middle-aged woman clambers aboard, sits on a plastic stool in the crowded aisle facing me, and when the train departs, leans forward to rest her forehead on my chest for the next hour. I don't move. I don't say a word.

I count myself among those Americans who often don't know what to make of this country and want to know what to make of this country. There



was an American generation concerned about this country. They saw it on television. They saw it in black and white photographs. They demonstrated against the war. The most idealistic and adventurous visited the country during the war, Mary McCarthy getting it right. She came to Hanoi, admired North Vietnamese sincerity. But like others, she was uneasy with a revolutionary language she also saw as necessary. *Air pirates. War of destruction. American imperialists.* Homeric epithets, she calls them. And when she sees wartime Saigon, she says it is a *stewing Los Angeles, shading in Hollywood, Venice Beach, and Watts.* Already Americanized. So decades later, when Americans of her generation visit Viet Nam, why are they surprised to see that Saigon is still Los Angeles, that Hanoi's Homeric epithets have become hollow epitaphs to a once vibrant Revolution. Disappointed, yes. Surprised, no. Didn't the Vietnamese fight a war to do the same thing as Americans. Win the self-determination to say nothing is more precious than independence and freedom, then live their lives neither really independent nor truly free.

But while McCarthy described the present, her contemporary, Martin Luther King, Jr., predicted the future. *If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read "Vietnam,"* he says. *The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit. If we ignore*

*this sobering reality, we will find ourselves organizing “clergy and laymen concerned” committees for the next generation. They will be concerned about Guatemala and Peru. They will be concerned about Thailand and Cambodia. They will be concerned about Mozambique and South Africa. We will be marching for these and a dozen other names and attending rallies without end, unless there is a significant and profound change in American life.*





Americans mostly know King for his dream, but these words are from a prophecy, an augury for the most part unheard and unremembered. Why else are we concerned about Iraq and Afghanistan, two countries he forgot to foresee but which he left room for in his bleak roll call. Viet Nam is not Iraq and not Afghanistan. They are not Viet Nam. Yet the analogy keeps returning for Americans like their own Homeric epithet. The repetition of Viet Nam as quagmire, syndrome, and war speaks not to Vietnamese reality or Afghan analogy but to American fear. We speak of losing today's wars as if defeat will be the worst thing, but remember what McCarthy said of the Viet Nam War. *The worst thing that could happen to our country would be to win this war.* Doesn't the same hold true now. Win in Iraq and Afghanistan today, more of the same tomorrow. Use these to name King's unnamed countries: Somalia, Pakistan, Yemen.

*This is the role our nation has taken, he says, the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible, by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments. I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values.*

This is the most important reason to remember the war, the fear of repetition, of acting out, of getting on the wrong side of the right revolution, not because of three million dead. It was one conflict in a long line of horrific wars, so remembering for the sake of remembering is not enough. Even in Viet Nam, the postwar generation doesn't care much about the war, an object of their elders' nostalgia, of American guilt and resentment. The young want to chase their own desires, make their own mistakes, create their own sorrows. They want to leave Viet Nam. Whenever they discover that I am a foreign professor, they give me their email addresses, ask me how to win a scholarship to study abroad. I can't tell them to stay here. At an elegant restaurant on Dong Khoi, the young hostess in her golden ao dai is dismissive when I tell her that Saigon is exciting. *Saigon*, she says, *is boring.* By my fourth visit, I agree. The difference between her and me is that I can leave. For those who must stay, how can a peaceful revolution happen.

This question binds America and Viet Nam, the problem illustrated by small stories and grand narratives. Here is one scene: the night market of the mountain resort. A woman vendor walks through the bazaar, her arms laden with totes sewn from rice sacks. Ten thousand dong for each tote, less than fifty cents. In my American youth, my mother and father sold these same twenty-pound rice sacks in their grocery store, full of rice, for ten dollars retail and a twenty-five cent profit. I don't want the vendor's tote but I want her picture, so I offer to buy a tote if she'll let me photograph her. Why not, she shrugs. I tell her I can buy the same tote in my L.A. neighborhood, at a Sunset Boulevard boutique, for seven dollars. She smiles, puzzled. What's more confusing, a tourist wanting a picture of her doing something boring or the mundane math I am offering, I can't explain what it all adds up to in a language I can use and she can understand, my parents' refugee past and her proletarian present, total war and total capitalism. I take her picture.

King puts it this way, that *the problem of racism, the problem of economic exploitation, and the problem of war are all tied together*. His prophecy doesn't always roll off the tongue. *These are the triple evils that are interrelated*. The language is only occasionally Biblical, never uplifting. He asks us not to turn our eyes up to the mountaintop but down to the plain. The factory, the field, the ghetto, the unemployment line, the draft board, the rice paddy, the lotus blossoming in a pond of mud, the Vietnamese landscape that even American soldiers called beautiful, and America, what the Vietnamese call the beautiful country. These are the geographies where the memory of war belongs. The difficult memory of how it is a war that takes place not only over there, but also over here. Of how it is not a war that is done but yet continues, because a war is not just about the shooting but about the people who make the bullets and deliver the bullets and, perhaps most importantly, pay for the bullets, our wars being a tax on the distracted citizenry, nickel and dimed, complicit in what King calls the *brutal solidarity* of white brother and black.

And the war machine rolls on, like water, like the flood.

Although King spoke of America, he may as well speak of Viet Nam, both revolutionary countries which have not lived up to their revolutions. Revolutions manufacture memories to justify the hardening of their arteries.



As inheritors of revolutions, we have to know how we make memories and how we forget them so we can beat their hearts back to life. The memories that fascinate me the most are what Chris Marker calls *those memories whose only function had been to leave behind nothing but memories*. Mythical origins are like these memories. Thus I return again and again from what feels like my native land to what people call my homeland.

In doing so, I recall what Marker also said about the *function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining*. Yes, remembering and forgetting entwine together, the double helix of our DNA, making us who we are, one never without the other. Viet Nam and America, too, weave together, their shared war and revolutionary histories sewn into the lining of forgetfulness, a garment we must turn inside out to see how it was made, and where. In the era of globalization, everything is a product of the world and everything we produce returns to the world, memories as much as goods a part of the environment.

So I followed my memories to their source, or perhaps I merely followed the memories of my father and mother. For them and for the Vietnamese, the homeland is not simply the country of origin, it is the village where one's father was born and where one's father would be buried. My father's father died where

he was supposed to, as my father will not and as I will not, in the province of his birth, his mausoleum thirty minutes from Ho Chi Minh's birthplace. I went there to pay my respects, only to discover that my father's father was not buried there.

The mausoleum, near the compound built by my father's father, and where my uncles and most of my cousins still live, was smudged by soil and the smoke of incense, its foundation besieged by weeds. The date of my father's father's death was inscribed at the mausoleum's peak, and beneath it, two tombs. My aunt and the wives of my uncles pulled weeds, swept away the dust, lit incense. Above the tomb of my father's mother was a black-and-white photograph of a sad face that had also peered at me from my parents' mantel. But next to her, the tomb of my father's father was empty. No name was above it, no body rested inside, no stone slab sealed it. Full of earth and rocks, the tomb, its base cracked by the work of time on shoddy material, was a bed of weeds. What remained of my father's father was buried elsewhere, kilometers away, far from the living, in a muddy field near the railroad tracks, laid to rest fifteen years ago.

I know this man only by his title, my father's father. I would never be expected to call him by his name even if I had known him. So it was that I lit incense at his tomb, my uncles doing the same in their father's compound, in front of his photograph. Only when I was home in California did it strike me that I did not know the name of my father's father. But I remember his face vividly from the photograph on my parents' mantel, and not long ago, this image—his image—was placed next to that of his wife, above his tomb.

What happened was this. The Vietnamese believe a person should be buried twice. The first time, in a field removed from home and village, the earth is allowed to eat the flesh. The second time, the survivors must disinter what remains. They wash the bones with their own hands, and then they bury the bones once more, this time closer to the living.

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Counting Citizens