

*Subarno Chattarji*

Representations of Vietnam  
in some poems of John  
Balaban, Kevin Bowen, and  
Bruce Weigl

**M**ore than twenty years after the fall of Saigon, the Vietnam War continues to bedevil the American imagination and its foreign policy. The former is evident in the large body of films, television programmes, novels, and poems. The latter manifested itself in Ronald Reagan's declaration that Vietnam was a war fought for a 'just cause', and George Bush consigning the 'Vietnam Syndrome' to history after the Gulf War. Distinct revisions in dominant political and cultural spheres are embodied not only in Reagan and Bush, but also in iconic figures such as Sylvester Stallone's Rambo. Various modes of national and collective recuperation predicate the need to counteract the 'Vietnam Syndrome', the moral outrage and defeatism that permeated sections of American society in the Sixties and Seventies. The aftermath, as Jean Elshtain writes, is often construed as one of 'universal victimization':

Vietnam is even now in the process of being reconstructed as a story of universal victimization—of the Vietnamese by us; of our soldiers by the war—and by us when we didn't welcome them home; of our nation by the war at home and *the* war; of wives and girlfriends by disturbed veterans; of nurses by the war and later nonrecognition of *their* victimization.<sup>1</sup>

Such a construction conflates different experiences and thereby obliterates the distinctive and moral aspects inherent in each. Poetic representations by veterans present visions of personal trauma and political critique. While their work questions prevalent recuperations of the war,

a part of this body of poetry is complicit in the construction of the veteran as 'victim'. Recent poetry by American veterans, however, reveals a distinct reaching out to the 'other', a desire for sympathetic connections with the Vietnamese, and offers imaginative and moral critiques of those structures of justification. This essay deals with a few poems that embody new perspectives and empathies.

The transition to a point of view that encompasses Vietnamese experiences arose partly out of a desire to expiate guilt and partly out of a genuine solidarity. Several war veteran poets, W.D. Ehrhart, Bruce Weigl, John Balaban, Kevin Bowen, among others, have been back to Viet Nam, and memorialized those experiences. In a way, these veterans seem to be guided by Balaban's exhortation at the end of his memoirs: 'Go visit Vietnam, I'd tell the troubled vets. Go visit, if you can, and do something good there, and your pain won't seem so private, your need for resentment so great.'<sup>2</sup> In the realization that their pain is not private in the claustrophobic sense they thought it was, that their enemy, the 'gooks', suffered from and still live through the trauma of war, American veteran poets begin to bridge a chasm of ignorance and pain. Some of the best poets sketch not merely a political solidarity (as was done so often and simplistically by the antiwar movement), but a human one, the ability, as Grace Paley puts it, 'to imagine the real—the lives of other people.'<sup>3</sup> This imaginative ability is often combined with a sense of guilt. On his way to Viet Nam, Larry Rottmann, veteran-poet, muses on the motivations for his journey back:

I wanted to meet these folks. To hold them. Touch them. Smell their life and sweat. I want to know they are alive, especially the children. I need to be reassured that we didn't kill or poison them all.<sup>4</sup>

In a country cut off from U.S. aid and trade links till very recently and ruled by an orthodox Marxist government, the disappointments are aplenty and reassurances more complex than the ones desired by Rottmann. Solidarity is often thwarted by realities and legacy of a brutal war, as in Ehrhart's poem, 'For Mrs. Na', where he begins with the hope that although he is sorry for the war, he can consign it to a dead past. Confronted with Mrs. Na, he realizes that it is a living presence, and that an apology is a pathetic substitute for loss:

But here I am at last—  
 and here you are.  
 And you lost five sons in the war.  
 And you haven't any left.

And I'm staring at my hands  
 and eating tears,  
 trying to think of something else to say  
 besides "I'm sorry."<sup>5</sup>

Poetic attempts to transcend a purely egocentric and ethnocentric view of the war represent an imaginative leap that would have been inconceivable during the conflict. Stephen Sossaman concluded his review of *Winning Hearts and Minds* and Michael Casey's *Obscenities*, with the following observation:

American veterans can probably never adequately assess the Vietnamese people's experience of that war; had we been sensitive enough to their culture much of the war would never have happened. It is enough that veterans begin to test and assay their own experience.<sup>6</sup>

Sossaman's analysis, published in 1973, could not have foreseen that the 'test[ing] and assay[ing]' of veteran poetics and experience would expand to acknowledge, if not include, Vietnamese perspectives.

The poetry of Balaban, Bowen, and Weigl resists the convenient erasure of inconvenient histories vis-à-vis the Vietnam War and recovers them for sober recollection. An aspect of this erasure is evident in the obliteration of the Vietnamese and their sufferings in political and popular culture representations. The Vietnamese, particularly the Viet Cong, were/are caricatured as fanatical 'gooks'. In the dominant discourse Vietnam is projected as an event that happened solely to America (the term 'Vietnam Syndrome' is symptomatic of this phenomenon). The poems I analyse in this paper moralize the language of war and politics. They refuse to merge into the silence and revisionism that has overtaken influential sections of American historiography and popular culture. They express solidarity with the Vietnamese, a process and attitude

almost totally absent in other representations.<sup>7</sup> The reaching out is tentative and incomplete. However, it represents the acknowledgement of the 'other' in humane terms and without the simplistic idealizations found in some of the antiwar protests and stateside poetry. Denise Levertov's 'What Were They Like?' is one example of protest poetry that transforms the Viet Cong into holy warriors and projects Ho Chi Minh as a benign father figure. Her poem fails to take into account the atrocities committed by the Viet Cong (no matter how justified their fight for freedom) and the political contradictions inherent in Ho's policies. The poems of Bowen and Weigl in particular are troubled by this desire to idealize the 'other' and exculpate guilt, but they are also more skeptical, nuanced, and open to the contradictions and disappointments of the encounter with the 'other'. Their poems offer a valuable ethical and moral alternative in terms of memory, conscience, and representation of the aftermath of a terrible war.

The move towards a more resilient remembrance, the burden of responsibility in postwar America is best embodied in the poetry of John Balaban. He occupies a unique position in that he did not go to Viet Nam as a soldier, but spent two years, 1967-69, as a conscientious objector, working as an instructor at the University of Can Tho in the Mekong Delta, and then as a field representative for the Committee of Responsibility to Save War-Injured Children. He was in Viet Nam during the Tet Offensive and witnessed the devastating effect of war on civilians, particularly children. In his memoir, *Remembering Heaven's Face: A Moral Witness in Vietnam*, he consciously distances himself from fellow Americans:

I was after all a conscientious objector to military service. Somehow I wanted Vietnamese to know this, as if they would appreciate the moral difference between my presence and that of 500,000 other young Americans who were pouring into the country: I had come not to bear arms but to bear witness.<sup>8</sup>

There is an element of naïveté in his status as a CO, but his work with the Committee of Responsibility (an agency that did excellent work with injured Vietnamese children), his genuine empathy with the Vietnamese, their culture and language (he is one of the few veteran poets who speaks fluent Vietnamese, and has translated their oral folk poetry, the *ca dao*), allow him to write poems of sympathy and quality about a sad,

brutal period of history. Although Balaban was not personally responsible for acts of war, he does feel a 'burden of personal guilt'.<sup>9</sup> In his memoir he recalls watching a wounded toddler shriek with pain, 'until I was ashamed to be alive, to be human, let alone to be an American, to be one of those who had brought the planes to this sad little country ten thousand miles away'.<sup>10</sup>

Balaban's 'The Book and the Lacquered Box' delves with imagination and empathy into the atmosphere of 'other' lives during the war. It begins with the speaker-observer and his companion being enticed by rare books:

The ink-specked sheets feel like cigar leaf;  
 its crackling spine flutters up with a mildewed must.  
 Unlike the lacquered box which dry-warp detonated  
 —shattering pearled poet, moon, and willow pond—  
 the book survived to beg us both go back  
 to the Bibliothèque in the Musée at the Jardin in Saigon,  
 where I would lean from ledges of high windows  
 to see the zoo's pond, isled with Chinese pavilion,  
 arched bridge where kids fed popcorn to gulping carp,  
 and shaded benches, where whores fanned their make-up,  
 at ease because a man who feeds the peacocks  
 can't be that much of a beast.<sup>11</sup>

The book and 'lacquered box' as artifacts conjure a world of delicacy and refinement, yet they are threatened with violence and disruption. 'Crackling', 'detonated', and 'shattered' disrupt notions of civilization and peace normally associated with works of art. These words relate not only to the war at hand but, in the references to the 'Bibliothèque' and 'Chinese pavilion', to earlier histories of occupation. Architecture and buildings provide a context of imperial domination from within which the poetic gaze turns outward to survey normal life in the guise of kids feeding popcorn and whores fanning themselves. The collocation of innocence and necessity, finesse and violence is extended in the last part of the poem:

A boatride,  
 a soda, a stroll through the flower beds.  
 On weekends the crowd could forget the war.

At night police tortured men in the bear pits,  
 one night a man held out the bag of his own guts,  
 which streamed and weighed in his open hands,  
 and offered them to a bear. Nearby, that night,  
 the moon was caught in willows by the pond,  
 shone scattered in droplets on the flat lotus pads,  
 each bead bright like the dew in Marvell's rose.

The war is a perennial absent presence, and torture is coterminous with the 'crowds' who 'forget the war'. Torture, as Elaine Scarry observes, is 'Brutal, savage, and barbaric, [. . .] and explicitly announces its own nature as an undoing of civilization, acts out the uncreating of the created contents of consciousness.'<sup>12</sup> The poem, while presenting the horror imposed by the client government in South Viet Nam, is a conscious act of making. It names and inscribes terrors and deprivations within a context of placidity and beauty. The epigraph to the poem, from Andrew Marvell's 'On a Drop of Dew', emphasizes this context:

So the Soul, that Drop, that Ray  
 Of the clear Fountain of Eternal Day,  
 Could it within the humane flow'r be seen.<sup>13</sup>

The poem entwines the lives of people with the pastoral, which throws into sharp relief the contrast between the decay and torment of Saigon and a desire for normality and peace. Balaban does not idealize the people or the landscape. The poignancy of the poem lies in the portrayal of beautiful possibilities and desires cohabiting with real and palpable traumas. The poetic gaze and voice are both engaged and balanced; there are no 'tiny anonymous people' here, neither are they valorized as heroic. Balaban's unique perspective allows for insight and empathy in a poem that inscribes comprehension of and solidarity with the 'other'.

Kevin Bowen's collection of poems, *Playing Basketball with the Viet Cong*, 'reinscribes the humanity of a former enemy'.<sup>14</sup> The title poem displays a genuine sympathy with the Gauloise-smoking, ex-Viet Cong, who comes to the poet's house in Boston, and shoots baskets. 'Graves at Quang Tri' dwells on the price of war from a Vietnamese point of view. The problem of soil erosion and the continuing menace of unexploded mines, are two facets of postwar Viet Nam that Bowen mentions. 'A Conical Hat' offers a rare insight into what it was like fighting for the

Viet Cong:

Across the table all night  
 I watch the stories  
 come alive in his eyes;  
 I can almost see the bulb burning;  
 a man pedals a bicycle underground,  
 in the shadows of the bunker  
 he makes power for lights and suction  
 in the operating room.  
 Lungs burn, he inhales  
 fine red bits of earth.  
 They are digging to expand the tunnels,  
 make more room for the wounded.

The underground network of bunkers and tunnels that sustained the guerrillas were testimony to the tenacity of a people who would not give in. As recollected by the former guerrilla, the past is a set of stories for the listener-poet, but it is significant that the poet-speaker, the 'I', 'watch[es] the stories/come alive in his eyes'. There is a direct, empathic connection:

One day he walks  
 straight off the earth,  
 right into the brown, wrinkled  
 hide of an elephant,  
 carves meat for a starving platoon,  
 takes machete and scalpel,  
 makes cut after cut  
 until he's covered  
 in blood and muscle,  
 fighting for air.

The digging of tunnels, the making of 'cut after cut', are analogous to the poetic endeavour of recovering a war that co-existed with the soldier-poet's past, but did not really exist in his consciousness. From a war point of view the tunnels were a dangerous military impediment, but the poet now perceives human lives sustained by and in the tunnels:

Ten years, his wife  
 slept in the mountain caves,  
 after bombs, repaired roads,  
 made posters, paintings  
 to record each detail.

“Ham Rong Bridge, 1970,” he shows me.  
 A woodcut on rice paper.  
 Two women in conical hats  
 load rocks along a road.

These stanzas offer a memory of war from the Viet Cong perspective, and the ‘woodcut on rice paper’ is a representation of history as artistic detail. At one level, however, the poetic representation veers towards a heroic mode available in some stateside poetry. While imperialist America bombs Viet Nam, its heroic revolutionaries dig in, repair roads, and even have time to make woodcuts. It is the sort of image North Vietnamese propaganda posters presented without any sense of irony. The language of political rhetoric might have different referents, but on both sides it tended to simplify and exaggerate issues. Bowen’s poem is redeemed from this tendency to valorize the enemy by the last stanza, where even the stereotypical conical hat has symbolic connotations not usually noticed by outsiders:

His eyes burn as he looks  
 through the woodcut.  
 I thank him, I will need this hat,  
 the cool circle of its shade.

For the former Viet Cong soldier the woodcut is not merely an artifice: it is a symbol of sacrifice, war, loss, and, perhaps, hate. The waste and sorrow of war cannot be transcended easily, and while he meets his former enemy in amity, and offers the hat as a gift, the gesture is troubled by the past. The poet is aware of this: ‘the cool circle of its shade’ is what he needs to shield himself from what his countrymen did to the Vietnamese. The hat is a symbol of peace as well as a protection from searing memory. In accepting the hat the poet reaches out to the ‘other’ and enters another circle of memory with all its troubling associations. The



poem inscribes an act of solidarity and responsibility, and in so doing represents ‘a just and genuine reconciliation’.<sup>15</sup>

Going back to Viet Nam helped many veterans to ameliorate the sense of exile they felt in the U.S. It was an extension of the homecoming theme discernible in earlier veteran poetry, a projection of Viet Nam as a redemptive landscape. The latter is a theme exaggeratedly presented in some stateside poems in their delineation of the loss of innocence trope. Veteran poets are much more cautious, and if they do valorize Vietnam, it is a qualified endorsement. Their focus is on the possibilities of reconciliation. As Kevin Bowen put it, going back to Vietnam ‘stirs the mind, rekindles the imagination, and reopens the heart to hope. It cannot change the past, but it can reconnect the past with the present’.<sup>16</sup> Some of Bruce Weigl’s poems attempt to establish connections and rekindle hopes that the war had snuffed out.

In ‘Dialectical Materialism’, Weigl describes a Viet Nam at peace, the kind of world Rottmann desired when he looked forward to his visit; people live everyday lives and have not all been bombed or poisoned out of existence:

Through dark tenements and fallen temples  
we wander into Old Hanoi,  
oil lamps glowing in small  
storefronts and restaurants  
where those, so long ago my enemy,  
sit on low chairs and praise the simple evening.  
[ . . . ]  
The people talk and smoke,  
men hold each other’s hands again in that old way  
and children,  
their black and white laughter all around us,  
kick the weighted feather  
with such grace into the air  
because the bombs have stopped.<sup>17</sup>

It is a sympathetic portrait of a city that was heavily bombed, particularly during Nixon’s Christmas bombing in 1972. The scene is a type of pastoral: peaceful, harmonious, simple. It not only contrasts with the frantic horrors of war, but with stereotyped notions of the enemy. The shift from cultural typecasting and ignorance to awareness is evident in

the line, 'men hold each other's hands again in that old way'. In Viet Nam the sight of men holding hands was common and not necessarily an indication of sexual preference. For American soldiers, raised in a dominant culture and trained in a military that emphasized manly virtues, the Vietnamese were effeminate and, most likely, homosexual. Charles R. Anderson observed this cultural prejudice and shock amongst Americans in Viet Nam:

there was still another characteristic about the Vietnamese which completely repulsed the grunts. Asian peoples are much less inhibited than westerners about displaying their affection for friends of the same sex. Among Asians, holding hands or walking arm in arm in public does not arouse suspicions of homosexuality. The grunts, however, were shocked at such behavior. They needed to believe their allies and those whose freedom they were supposedly defending were better than "a bunch of queers."<sup>18</sup>

Weigl may not have shared this attitude but he is aware of a climate of ignorant condemnation and reverses it here. The reversal of cultural stereotype and obvious sympathy does not, however, conceal an element of voyeurism. The observer is an outsider, pleased and relieved that the former enemy is getting along so well. If Viet Nam and the return to it are constructed as redemptive landscapes, it is necessary that the enemy should be at peace, that the hardships of war be concealed, since that will return the observer-poet back to responsibility. To Weigl's credit, the poem does not shy away from the troubling legacies and questions of the war. At the Long Bien Bridge they meet a man taking water to his corn, and he is a more, though not sufficiently, individuated figure:

When we ask our questions  
 he points to a stone and stick  
 house beyond the dikes  
 one thousand meters from the bridge  
 our great planes  
 could not finally knock down.  
 He doesn't say  
 how he must have huddled

those nights with his family,  
 how he must have spread himself  
 over them  
 until the village bell  
 called them back to their beds.  
 There are questions which  
 people who have everything  
 ask people who have nothing  
 and they do not understand.

'He doesn't say' is a key line in that the poet is aware of life events, traumas, memories that he can only dimly imagine. He is the perennial outsider, and the reticence of the Vietnamese farmer outlines a world of terrible suffering and dignified perseverance. As a veteran-poet Weigl is aware of a subtext of anguish; he is also conscious of difference, of an inability to bridge cultural chasms, and the last four lines encompass this lack of comprehension. These lines are self-reflexive: they mediate precisely the questions of voyeurism and placid, uninvolved observation that were raised in stanza one. Finally, the poet is aware of the contrary visions he and his enemy bring to the war. Perhaps these attitudes arise out of cultural difference: 'people who have everything/ask people who have nothing'. While Vietnam is projected in the U.S. as something that happened to America, there is a whole world that suffered the war as well, and Weigl attempts to inscribe that reality. The desire to 'imagine the real' is entangled with the poet's personal agenda: the need to be reassured, to expiate guilt. This does not undermine the credibility of the desire, but it does indicate the tangled web of memory, trauma, and exile that the poet translates onto the 'other' in his representation of that 'other' world. Some of these themes recur in 'Her Life Runs Like a Red Silk Flag'.

The poem offers a more intimate, person-to-person interaction and understanding than in 'Dialectical Materialism'. The point of view is neither distanced nor voyeuristic:

Because this evening Miss Hoang Yen  
 sat down with me in the small  
 tiled room of her family house  
 I am unable to sleep.  
 We shared a glass of cold and sweet water.

On a blue plate her mother brought us  
 cake and smiled her betel black teeth at me  
 but I did not feel strange in the house  
 my country had tried to bomb into dust.<sup>19</sup>

The genuine sense of empathy co-exists with unease, an overstatement of feeling at home. Miss Yen's recollection in the next few lines about her childhood in Hanoi during Nixon's Christmas bombing has the force of personal testimony that disrupts the glib acceptance of responsibility on the poet's part. Her account of war reopens the wounds of trauma and conscience:

She let me hold her hand,  
 her shy unmoving fingers, and told me  
 how afraid she was those days and how this fear  
 had dug inside her like a worm and lives  
 inside her still, won't die or go away.

Her fear is analogous to veteran trauma whereby the war becomes a continuous living presence. For the veteran-poet who returns to Viet Nam this account offers a unique perspective on his own troubles. In recent years, particularly since the official rehabilitation of the veteran, he has been reconstructed as a 'victim', first of the war and then of neglect on returning home. Soldiers were traumatized by the war, and bewildered, angry, and alienated on their return, but to construe the soldier as 'victim' elides certain other problems. As Kali Tal points out: "Soldier as victim" representations depend upon the invisibility of the soldiers' own victims, namely Vietnamese soldiers and civilians.<sup>20</sup> Weigl highlights the hitherto invisible, gives voice to the victim and, paradoxically, only the victim can offer real forgiveness:

And because she's stronger, she comforted me,  
 said I'm not to blame,  
 the million sorrows alive in her gaze.  
 With the dead we share no common rooms.  
 With the frightened we can't think straight;  
 no words can bring the burning city back.

The poet acknowledges a weakness arising from guilt, and takes on

his country's burden. The absolution offered is not sentimentalized, and the 'million sorrows', the dead and the frightened permeate the present consciousness. A healing and reconciliation that buried or re-wrote the past (as some of the official reconciliation does) would be inadequate in its failure to establish sympathetic connections. The poetic reconciliation is open to the contradictions and pain of the past and its memory in the present:

All night I ached for her and for myself  
 and nothing I could think or pray  
 would make it stop. Some birds sang morning  
 home across the lake. In small reed boats  
 the lotus gatherers sailed out  
 among their resuming white blossoms.

In the midst of trauma, Weigl presents the lotus gatherers as a revitalizing vision. The 'resuming white blossoms' are emblematic of a pastoral often evoked as a counterpoint to the blighting experiences of war. One wonders, however, whether the residue of horrible memories can be counterbalanced by the pastoral. There is another problematic thread running through the poem: the constant emphasis on the 'I'. Although the poem articulates the pain of another, vulnerable being, that utterance is placed within the context of the speaker-poet's desire and imperative need for forgiveness. Miss Yen, in her ability to forgive, seems to understand this need; she combines remembrance with forgiveness. In an interview, Weigl expressed awareness of a culture of egotism, which also explains the self-centred nature of some veteran poetry:

they [the Vietnamese] don't take the war as personally as we took it. It's easier for them to forgive. Because ours is an egocentric culture whereas theirs is a much more selfless culture. If you're Vietnamese, you're always attached to some larger thing: a family, hamlet, village, et cetera. It's not just 'I'.<sup>21</sup>

Weigl generalizes and thereby simplifies the differences, but the lack of Vietnamese egotism in the poem is striking. It may not be easier for Miss Yen to forgive, but she can because she transcends (if only for a moment) her world and reaches out to another one. In fact she displays

greater strength of character and capacity for solidarity than the poet-speaker does. The latter is egotistical, weak, and passive, but the poet inscribes the possibilities of hope and renewal. That he does so within uncompromising contexts of indelible pain and trauma makes the poetic effort all the more resonant and valuable.

This brief discussion of veteran poetic representations of Vietnamese war experiences indicates problems and possibilities inherent in the project. Most of the representations are still located in American traumas and guilt (Balaban is, perhaps, an exception). They are occasionally voyeuristic and often naïve in their projection of postwar comradeship. However, veteran poets represent an aesthetics of engagement, a strenuous refusal to turn away from the horror and trauma of war memory. This aesthetic is evident in poems expressing solidarity: there is no easy sentimentality that can transcend the barriers of culture scarred by war. Kevin Bowen's 'A Conical Hat', Bruce Weigl's 'Dialectical Materialism', and Ehrhart's 'For Mrs. Na', are examples of the poet's ability to offer new insights in the aftermath of this sad war. Ehrhart perhaps best sums up this new poetic in his conclusion to 'The Poet as Athlete':

Consider poetry, how good poems  
offer us the world with eyes renewed.  
Now see the swimmer I am watching:  
all discipline, all muscle, lean and hard.

The swimmer's 'discipline' 'lean and hard' is analogous to an aesthetic that pares down language to delineate horrific events or endless trauma. There is a self-obsessive element in the focus on individual traumas, but this is counterbalanced by a commitment to witness so that the future may be less bleak than the past. It is not a comforting or beautiful picture, neither is there any sense of convenient closure. The poets offer moving testaments to the desire and possibility of a Rortyan solidarity. Richard Rorty's idea of solidarity as a willed act provides a valuable context for my discussion of these poems:

It [solidarity] is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people.

Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalise people different from ourselves by thinking, “They do not feel as we would,” or “There must always be suffering, so why not let them suffer?”<sup>22</sup>

The ‘solidarity’ poems may be perceived as self-serving; there is an undeniable element of the need to express the ‘other’ in the hope that such an inscription will lead to reconciliation and closure (a project tied to the largely conservative ‘healing and reconciliation’ agenda available in dominant American culture). What makes these poems distinctive and important within such a culture is their ultimate refusal to participate in histories of mythification and amnesia. In vocalizing the pain of the ‘other’, veteran poets create a nominal space for solidarity and shatter the illusion that the Vietnam War happened exclusively to Americans. The poems introduce a human and moral dimension largely absent in political discourse. Poetic representations of Vietnam remain marginal when compared to other cultural productions such as film (one has only to look at the world-wide popularity of *Rambo*), but in their very ‘marginality’ they offer integral and critical modes of memorializing the war. ‘History,’ Anne Michaels writes in *Fugitive Pieces*, ‘is amoral: events occurred. But memory is moral; what we consciously remember is what our conscience remembers.’<sup>23</sup> While I would dispute the first assertion, since it is humans as moral or immoral agents who fashion history, Michaels highlights the vital notion of moral memory that I ascribe to and value in the poems I have discussed. American veteran representations of Vietnam are located within personal traumas, guilt, and desires, but they also address the memory and conscience of a nation that continually seems to dismember those harsh and traumatic memories. Perhaps the poetry represents a beginning towards a collective and moral remembrance of a brutal and sad war.

## Notes

1. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1987), 218.
2. John Balaban, *Remembering Heaven’s Face*, (New York, London: Poseidon Press, 1991), 333.
3. Grace Paley, ‘Writers and War,’ *The Writer in Our World*. Highlights of *TriQuarterly*

Magazine's 1984 Symposium, Northwestern University: Audiocassette, Side D.

4. Larry Rottmann, 'A Hundred Happy Sparrows: An American Veteran Returns to Vietnam,' *Vietnam Generation*, Volume 1, Number 1, Winter 1989: 113-140.

5. W.D. Ehrhart, 'For Mrs. Na,' *Just For Laughs* (Silver Spring MD: Vietnam Generation Inc., & Burning Cities Press, 1990), 23-24.

6. Stephen Sossaman, 'American Poetry From the Indochina Experience,' *Long Island Review*, No. 2, Winter 1973-74: 30-33.

7. There are exceptions such as Lady Borton's *After Sorrow* and Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake*, but these are rare examples in a dominant culture of amnesia.

8. John Balaban, *Remembering Heaven's Face*, 17. In his refusal to bear arms Balaban moves beyond the archetypal witnessing of war offered by Wilfred Owen and Sassoon.

9. Jeffrey Walsh, ' "After Our War": John Balaban's Poetic Images of Vietnam,' in Jeffrey Walsh and James Aulich, eds, *Vietnam Images: War and Representation* (Basingstoke and London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1989), 145.

10. John Balaban, *Remembering Heaven's Face*, 104.

11. John Balaban, 'The Book and the Lacquered Box,' *Locusts at the Edge of Summer: New and Selected Poems* (Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 1997), 5.

12. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 38.

13. The next line, 'Remembering still its former height', inscribes the memory of a better world, just as Balaban outlines the possibilities of beauty and civilization. In Marvell's poem contraries are held in balance. See Andrew Marvell, 'On a Drop of Dew,' *Complete Poetry*, ed., George deF. Lord (London and Melbourne: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1984), 6-7.

14. Carolyn Forché, 'Introduction' to Kevin Bowen, *Playing Basketball With the Viet Cong* (Willimantic CT.: Curbstone Press, 1994), 7.

15. Carolyn Forché, 'Introduction,' *Playing Basketball*, 9.

16. Cited in Jayne S. Werner and Luu Doan Huynh, eds, *The Vietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives* (New York and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 267.

17. Bruce Weigl, 'Dialectical Materialism,' *Song of Napalm* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988), 66.

18. Cited in Jacqueline Lawson, 'She's a Pretty Woman for a Gook: The Misogyny of the Vietnam War,' in Philip K. Jason, ed., *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 23.

19. Bruce Weigl, 'Her Life Runs Like a Red Silk Flag,' *What Saves Us* (Evanston, IL: TriQuarterly Books, 1992), 13.

20. Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 138.

21. Cited in Eric James Schroeder, *Vietnam, We've All Been There: Interviews With American Writers* (Westport CN., and London: Praeger Publishers, 1992), 194.

22. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), XVI.

23. Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1996), 138.



**Subarno Chattarji** holds a D.Phil from Oxford University and teaches at St. Stephen's College, Delhi. Professor Chattarji's book on American poetic representations of the Vietnam War is forthcoming from Oxford University Press, UK.