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Editor’s Note

My father stayed up late into the night listening to old Vietnamese songs. I remember those nights, the darkness like ink on the walls of the early years when my family first came to America. I remember those songs my father listened to for hours on end. There was one song I remember in particular called Tình Ca, "Love Song," a ballad written by the legendary songwriter Phạm Duy, not for lovers, but for country, for love of Vietnam. The song begins at first love:

Tôi yêu tiếng nước tôi
từ khi mọi ra đời, người ơi.
Me biên ru những câu xa tôi.
A à ơi! Tiếng ru mới đói.

I have loved the language of my country since the moment I was born,
my gentle mother singing lullabies from long ago.
A à ơi! Those lullabies sing to me all my days.

The words of that song often moved my father to tears. He was a strong and proud man, lived through and braved everything that life threw at him, and yet those words about his beloved Vietnam could break him. The song is nothing less than poetry in its power and glory. It ends with so much grace and heart that it seems it could keep all of life’s sadness and all its losses at bay:

Vì yêu, yêu nước, yêu nơi
Ngày Xuân tôi hát nên bài tình ca
Ruộng xanh tươi tốt quê nhà
Lòng tôi dâng nơi như là đạo hoa.
It is because of love, love for country, love for people,
That this Spring day I sing this song of love.
The green fertile fields of my homeland
Make my heart bloom like a bouquet of flowers.

It is with that love that I present to you the Fifth
Anniversary double issue of Perfume River Poetry Review. Assembling one issue is work enough, but a double issue is a Herculean labor of love. Nevertheless, I found it necessary to celebrate the theme of Vietnam with two collections. One issue explores our culture, honors our heritage, and gives voice to what it means to be Vietnamese—by blood, by birth, by heart or war. The second issue is a tribute to the veterans and survivors of the Vietnam War, whose stories need to be told and heard—now more than ever. As there must be time for war and a time for peace, there, too, must be an issue for war and one that allows poems to sing about Vietnam, its people, its culture and land.

I am overwhelmed with gratitude to all the incredible poets who contributed their work to this issue. I went purely with my heart in selecting poems, and so these are poems that touched me deeply with their beauty, generosity, sincerity, and unblinking honesty. I want to extend a special thank you to Stephen Addiss for allowing me to reprint his lovely translation of an ancient Vietnamese poem. Professor Addiss is hero of mine. He had worked with Phạm Duy, traveling throughout Vietnam to catalog its musical heritage, translating songs into English, and bringing Vietnamese music and culture to America in the 1960’s, a time when Vietnam was little more than a war to most Americans.

I also want to extend a special cảm ơn to my wonderful friend, Maria Nguyen, with whose help I was able to publish poems from the members of Văn Thơ Lạc Việt, the Vietnamese Literature Society in San Jose, CA. What a privilege it is to be able to publish poems written by Vietnamese in Vietnamese! Speaking of my people, I want to shine a spotlight on the new generation of Vietnamese-American poets, who contributed new voices and visions to this issue—and to American poetry: John Vương Quốc Vũ, who is my brother in name and in poetry; the immensely talented and accomplished Samantha Lê; Quang Vo, who was first published in Perfume River Poetry Review in our inaugural issue when he was just in high school and whose growth as a poet continues to astound me; Tommy Vinh Bui, a librarian with a heart of poetry and heart of gold, and never least, Duy Đoạn, who was just selected as the 2017 winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets. Hoan hô! Bravo! The future of American poetry is in good hands!

I’d be terribly remiss if I did not personally thank the Vietnam War veterans and survivors who contributed their poetry. I had tried to include their war songs with the other poems into one issue, but the weight and power of their work were so overwhelming that I had to compile them in a separate issue. This is not to say that their work is any less essential in the story of Vietnam. The Vietnam War is indeed vital in the understanding of modern Vietnam and America. These poems are acts of courage, unflinching in their honest depiction of war lust, regret, the brutality of battle, but also hope, healing, and redemption.
For me, Vietnam is a story of loss, loss that is more pervasive than just losing a war or a country and homeland; it is an Edenic loss that cuts deep into the human soul. I understand now why my father spent all those nights listening to those old songs. Having just lost Vietnam, it was the music and poetry of his homeland that gave him enough light to carry on into the next day. It is through poetry—and love—that we are able to make our way through such incredible loss. The poems in this double issue of Perfume River Poetry Review are the songs we sing to help us bear the things we carry to carry on.

*Cảm ơn*

-----Vương Quốc Vũ
A Birthday on the Perfume River

1. Dawn. The merest sliver of boat tips to the calm surface of this sông as a woman scoops up snails, perhaps enough to sell in flat baskets near the Dong Ba gate.

2. Noon. I cross Golden Water Bridge to enter the Imperial City. Amid ruins I find stone dragons, a pond of pink lilies, a hidden teacup.

3. Sunset. The dark river flows south. My luck continues with this gift for my future: my father’s war zone green again.

Candace Black’s latest book of poems, Whereabouts, was published by Snake Nation Press in early 2017. She teaches creative writing at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

1 Vietnamese word for “river.”
Chợ Nổi

Miền tây phiên chợ nhóm trên sông
Kẻ bán người mua náo nức lòng
Cô lái đò ngang thuyền cóc, ổi
Anh chèo xuống ngược nhóm dừa, bông
Đằng kia tươi nang cam, dâu, quả
Bên đó chất đầy mận, mít, hồng
Hương vị tình quê mùa quả chín
Mùi thơm ngào ngạt nhớ trông mong!

Floating Market
Translated by Vuong Quoc Vu

In the delta region, markets gather on rivers.
The hustle of sellers and buyers stirs the heart.
A girl rows across a raft full of ambarellas and guavas,
A young man rows through pineapples, melons, flowers,
Over there, heavy loads of oranges, berries, tangerines
And there, full stacks of plums, jackfruit, persimmons,
Tastes of my beloved country during the ripening season,
The sweet fragrances make me long for home!

Hoài Thương came to America in 1996. She began to write poetry in 2011.
What a Woman in a Small Boat on the Mekong Delta Must Know

A woman in a boat, little larger than a banana leaf, on a river running fast and wide, must know how to balance like an egret, standing up rowing with two long oars, facing forward.

She keeps a sharp eye out for other boats barging through gaggles of water hyacinths to reach the floating market. Maneuvering sinuously, a water snake now, she balances a heap of unruly pineapples.

(Did I say that miles away, up river, she tends to pineapples and a family in a house on stilts?)

She must be ready to sidle up to a buyer, without one pineapple toppling into the river, in swift knife strokes, to slice away pineapple spines, and to sell it, like no one else, as epitomizing pineapple succulence.

Retired from the University of Kansas, Elizabeth Schultz has published scholarly books, a collection of nature essays, a memoir, and five collections of poems. Another poetry collection, Water-Gazers, appears in August.
Nhìn Sông Buồn

Bao năm rồi vẫn nhớ
Mùa Tạ Ơn năm xưa
Nhìn vào gương tóc đổi
Nước Việt hết tang chưa?

Mẹ cha giới cùng mặt
Bạn bè lại dần thuởa
Lungs đà cóng chân mới
Trí nhớ nội dòng dưa…

Tình yêu rồi cũng buồn
Mộng đối đang thoát bỏ
Nghe thu buồn xao xác
Niềm đau như tiếng chuông

Thương quê, ơi xa xăm
Cưới thu đông chút tổi
Ai ngồi trên bến đợi
Nhìn sông buồn hận căm…

Looking Sadly at the River
Translated by Maria Nguyen

Many years have gone by but I still remember
That Thanksgiving of yesteryear
Looking in the mirror at my changing hair
Has Vietnam finished mourning?

My parents passed away
Friends gradually sparse
Hunched back and tired feet
With my swinging memory …

Love then also being let go
Life dreams escape away
Listening to the sad rustling autumn
As painful as the bell chime.

Missing my country, oh so far away
It’s late autumn and winter arrive suddenly
Someone sits by the dock waiting
Looking sadly at the river and feeling hatred...

Nguyễn Trung Chính was born in 1945. From 1968 to 1975, he was in the South Vietnam Air Force. He came to America in 1975 as a refugee. He worked for 30 years as an engineer for IBM. He is the president of Văn Thơ Lạc Việt, the Vietnamese Literature Society, in San Jose, CA.

Since 1980, Maria Nguyen has enjoyed promoting Vietnamese culture and language to the mainstream. By presenting Viet poetry in English, she wants to bridge the communication gaps among Viet generations.
My Writing Brush
By Anonymous (written in antiquity)
Translated by Stephen Addis

1.
My writing brush drafts a love letter.
The moonlight brightens my soul,
Our fates are decided by the heavens.
We have sworn to mountain and river that we will meet.
We have planned and hoped for a long time,
So I accept the length of the road.
A jeweled sword and silver ring are signs of the phoenix,
meaning marriage.
The gentleman travels far away,
Neither of us can forget the other
I say to the bird and fish messengers, please don’t fail.
My heart cannot be remiss, distant as clouds to the sea.
Now comes the mid-Autumn moonlight,
The bridal bridge will span the Milky Way.
Soon I will receive the rewards for my long wait,
For hanging the curtains and waiting for my beloved.

II.
My writing brush drafts a love letter.
I send it to a wise man and tell him:
I have been longing for us to be bound together
with silk thread
A melody involves itself with my heart;
I go to a far-off hill to search for cherry blossoms.
The moon, all night long, stirs the spirits of those
who live there
And I send this letter to my love far away.
But there in the garden the flowers are not yet blooming.
I send this letter by a songbird, but I fear the falcon.
I send this letter by a fish, but I mistrust its heart.

My letter simply says:
We are apart for so long I have no wish to comb my hair.
My heart bleeds, who causes my pain?
All year long, the twelve months alone,
Can you understand this sadness, my dearest?

A composer, musician, poet, painter and Japanese art historian, Stephen Addiss is the recipient of four grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and one from the National Endowment for the Arts. He has published 36 books or exhibition catalogs, including Old Taoist: The Life, Art and Poetry of Kodojin; The Resonance of the Qin in Far Eastern Art; and The Art of 20th Century Zen. His paintings, ceramics and calligraphy have been shown internationally in London, Japan, Taiwan, Korea and Beijing, as well as throughout the United States. He holds degrees from Harvard University and the University of Michigan and taught for 15 years at the University of Kansas before joining the faculty at The University of Richmond.

Harp of a Thousand Songs
By Nguyễn Thứ Lễ (1907-1989)
Translated by Tim Tomasi

I'm a drifter—here today, there tomorrow,
Up a mountain pass, down the road—making merry where
I can,

Looking for excitement in the sound of laughter and tears,
In harsh moments and easy times,

In bitter combat as well as dreams.
I love life with all its miseries,

With its pitiful sights, its cruelty, and its sweetness,
Its scenes of delight, tender love or frightful violence.

You might say I'm fickle, too easy going, erratic even—
Without aim, without dogma—but I pay your judgment
no mind.

For I confess I'm only a man lovesick for everything,
A soul eager to see in things Beauty beneath their form.

I borrow the Muse's brush to paint,
And with her thousand-stringed harp, I sing:

Sing of elegance in innocence, wildness, and silence,
Of Beauty in the sublime, the heroic,

The mountains, the rivers, poetry and thought.
I sing of the graceful figure of a woman walking;

The jubilant sunlight of a late spring afternoon;
The melancholy found inside a windy, rainy day;
The grandeur of huge waves crashing, and rushing waterfalls;
I sing of a slender petal floating—seen, then unseen—drifting on the air;

Poor lands where water stagnates in puddles becoming marshy swamp;
The real and unreal moments that whisper to us in our daydreams;
The energetic spirit competing in a busy marketplace:
I love them all, and study everything with passion.

My heart aches when I hear another's sorrow,
Becomes bold with the sound of fiery words.

I gladly praise life when my heart is happy,
I sigh, then moan softly, with kind, lovelorn girls,

I begin to sing in the middle of the flute's song,
I take comfort in the ringing temple bell.

With the Muse, I am an instrument full of melody;
With the Muse, I am a brush heavy with color:

I want to be a wizard performing magic:
Who tricks all the tints and tones of this world into his art.
Autumn Song
By Lư Trọng Lư (1912-1991)
Translated by Tim Tomasi

Darling, don’t you hear autumn
Throbbing in the dim moonlight?
Don’t you feel the longing
When an image of a distant warrior-husband
Rises in his young wife’s lonely heart?
My dear, don’t you hear the autumn forest,
Its autumn leaves rustling,
The startled yellow deer
Stepping back on dry, gold leaves?

Tim Tomasi, a retired physician who lives in San Jose, CA has published translations of Vietnamese poetry as well as his own, and is currently finalizing a new translation of the Vietnamese epic poem, The Tale of Kiều.

Family Plots

These are my favorites. Tucked into a field’s corner, overlooking rice paddies. Hamlets of the dead protected—or contained—behind low walls whitewashed to enhance tombs painted turquoise and yellow, sinuous roof lines of the dragon.

There’s comfort here: close enough for consultation, a crowded life’s prize of privacy’s remove.

Candace Black’s latest book of poems, Whereabouts, was published by Snake Nation Press in early 2017. She teaches creative writing at Minnesota State University, Mankato.
Spring Essence

Widowed, her mind was free
To walk through the rice fields,
Haunt the shores, climb mountains,
Wander forests, wade across rivers,
Picking up flowers and images,
Collecting driftwood and words.
Retired on the edge of the West Lake,
She filled to its brim her bag of poems.

Puzzle as Self-Portrait

Fate and my parents shaped me like a snail:
My backpack, breathing moonlight, sags with poems.
Happy, I forget all worries,
Never mind the gossip of the world,
Finding great peace again and again.
Everything can rest on just one little thing,
I've never stepped out on the road to fame.
Just like love, only poetry lasts.

Beatrice Mousli is a literary historian, poet and translator, writing in French and in English.
Flight

The tanks roll in,
smash the gates of the palace
On the radio that voice
grate, exalting,
unleashing

Terror on the streets
of Sāi Gòn,
torture in the camps
of Suŏi Māu

Death to life

On the East Sea,
our sampan weighed down
with hope
in search
of Mercy

Ships pass us by

Thieves lie in wait
Knife our men,
kidnap our women,
and rob our taels, casting us adrift

Days on ends

Nothing but blue on blue
Chance we measure
in every drop, rice gruel
never tasted better

And night
never more vast,
the stars
never more infinite,
our fate
never more black.
Black Boy

Mine is a life of dust. Mine is a face of shame. My eyes smolder in loss, my skin chars with defeat.

My hair is wound like barb wire, so my adopted mother shaves it off. My fingernails are falling off. My feet are festering sores of moth.

I'm a slave boy working to repay my debt. A duck boy herding lost fowl. A buffalo boy tilling rock in the unknown mountains.

I gaze at passing clouds and wonder why my father left me. I stare at a puddle and see why my mother abandoned me.

Toughs gang up and wrestle me to the ground. Two hold me down, one punches me out.

Black boy you don't belong here.

This is our turf, go beg somewhere else, black boy.

Your father bombed our country and fled like the dog that you are, black boy.

Mind is a rage ready to kill. I slice my wrist to stop the bleeding in my head. I cut my chest to ease the burning of existence.

Once, everyone saw me as bụi đời, the dust of life. Now they see me as người vàng, the golden boy with the ticket out, thanks to the Amerasian Homecoming Act.
Boat Girl

Bags of skin and flesh on bones
they come delivered
on a boat unmoored
by what tragedy, undone
by what savagery, adrift
for how long
no one knows.

On the deck of the dinghy lay
crumpled corpses
men, women, children
heads hacked in
half, clothes ripped
apart, torsos infested
with flies.

Mouths still
gaping for another
breath.

What, in heaven's name, could
have happened
no one knows, save
for the little girl crying out
for mama.

---

John Vương Quốc Vũ was born in Sài Gòn in 1972. He is the author of the photographic book Việt Nam Renovating Dreams. Vũ's writing is anthologized in Topography of War and Against Agamemnon War Poetry.

Morning Market, Sa Đéc 1981

The old man squatted on weary haunches
and sang a syrupy melody
about melancholia and fish sauce.
His central highland dialect, impossible
to decipher but was soothing just the same.

Bamboo ladle stirred the salty brew; fragrances
of the Mekong Delta perfumed
the monsoonal morning. A stray
dog sniffed at the man’s cracked heels.
It received a verse in his song.

“Tell him to give me one liter,” my mother said.
“Tell him I’m watching; so don’t cheat
or blend the good eating sauce
with the cheap cooking one.”
She turned her defenseless back to the crowd,
counting out xu and saving face.
“I heard the Lady,” the man replied.

A woman pushed her belly against my arm,
talking loudly—new money.
She chomped down on a green mango
and made a sunken sour face—too tart
for her freshly purchased taste
buds. She blew soy sauce
and sticky rice breaths into our faces. Empty
stomachs growled at her with shame.

My mother didn’t want to hear about the terracotta
toy pots. “You’ll break it,” she snapped.
Clutching her sleeve to avoid
the intimacy of holding hands, I pulled her
to the clay seller’s mat. “We don’t have money
to waste,” she chastised in a secret voice. Our poverty humiliated her.
The clay seller stood on crimson ground stained by spit. Her cheeks bulged with *trâu cau*—
the thousand-year-old tradition that sold
the myth of marriage, loyalty
and death—a concoction
of betel, areca nut, tobacco and crushed limestone; it painted her watery mouth blood color.

Raw gums folded over rotted teeth.
Words bobbed and drowned, but her chalky fingers knew the language of mud and water.
They snatched new sounds from the air to replace the dying ones.
As she spoke, a fly walked across both her eyes as if she had already decomposed, and we pretended not to see.

My Father on That Last Day of Summer, 1983

And every year, your birthday marked the end of summer. Dawn’s fishing boats under floods of orange hues, new sky with blue forcing through.
Your back stretched the weave in the nylon chair while my head rested against your knees. There…
between us, distances blurred into dreamscapes.
As the record player took its last spins, we watched the South China Sea wash back in.

*C’est si bon, de partir n’importe où…* Quiet.
Our moment was a needle tracking grooves.
It skipped on scratches but somehow music played, brass voice uncurled words while trumpets resonated.

As the needle slid back to its starting point, your shadow stretched to cover mine. I learned to recite your words like promises; I adopted your dreams as if they were my own.

I went on singing about times that never were, songs of you on that last summer day.

Born in Sa Déc, Samantha Lê immigrated to San Francisco at nine.
She holds an MFA from San José State University. Her publications include *Corridors* and *Little Sister Left Behind*. 
Aubade

"Em đi như cánh hạc vàng,
Ngần năm mây trắng ngỡ ngàng còn trôi"
—Nguyễn Hiền

To J.

This is how you walk, with burnished hair over your shoulders.

Late August and you haunt me like a yellow crane burning through my tending eyes—

like the tracks of tiny sugar ants dissolved in a morning cup of dew.

Today you wear the face once on your mother's hand mirror, and watch your brother's muscles harden into stratus clouds where a flock of cranes has carried your father.

Can you see your daughter? He replies with absence—

his dial tone face resurfacing in the flat line air.

At the Fish Counter in Viet Hoa Supermarket

I guess the fishmongers have mastered frantic Vietnamese from the housewives' eyes, their finger gestures:

two for a fish to be cleaned, three to remove all scales, four to split a fish in half. Those women, reminiscent of their mothers not long ago—

bartering with primitive scales, cautious of tipping the balance into the fishmonger's hands.

Now, standing in a supermarket where the fishmongers are tamed by the hours, the housewives watch the blades, steel workers without wages, slice their gray-eyed victims—sharp as their husbands' morning routines.

And the daughters—with faces pretty as shaved ice—learn their mothers' cues though the digital scales are in English.

Quang Vo is an International Studies major at the University of St. Thomas in Houston. A recipient of the Joy Linsley Memorial Poetry Scholarship and the Susan T. Scanlon Poetry Scholarship, he is currently serving as Laurels poetry editor.
An Acrostic

Viet, looks out again at the old car propped up in the driveway.
In the last few weeks, his father has been looking for a revamped engine. “Why can’t we buy another used car?” Viet asks.
Thiệu, his dad, says he grew up without one.
No, he never had a car at sixteen years old.
And neither did your grandfather. We walked miles to the school in the next village and back, at the end of the day. “But Dad! We live in America”!
Sure. Thiệu says without raising his voice. You will walk everyday to school and back, to add value to your heritage.

Pushpa MacFarlane fell into poetry and would like to remain there. She reads at open mic, presents World Poetry, reads in Hindi and Urdu, with English translations, and on air at KKUP 91.5 FM.

Hoi An Hulls

Cold melon in the evening
sets my thoughts at ease.
Of clouds, wind, leaves
All grandeur that would appease.
And when those juices
drip down the throat,
today’s vexations fade away.
Edenic delight feeds the yoke.
The fork my lance,
the napkin my shield.
Fend off the wounds of the day.
Eaten and gone with zeal.
Melon, melon in the evening.
How you transform wholly
ornate tradition closely adhered.
As if you ripened for me solely.

Tommy Vinh Bui’s afternoons are spent as a librarian plying literacy onto the masses. At night, he teaches himself Russian so that one day he might read Pushkin at Red Square by a gentle twilight snowfall. He is bewildered that the Vietnamese word for “blue” and “green” are the same.
Hoa Yên Pagoda at Yên Tử Mountain
By Nguyễn Trãi (1380-1442)
Translated by Lý Hữu Nguyên and Duy Đoàn

On Yên Tử mountain, on the highest peak—
It was only fifth watch, but already complete daylight.
The universe in full view on the open sea,
Everyone’s laughter in the midst of blue heaven.

Ten thousand rows of bamboo spears fastened the door shut.
How many stalactites hung from the cavern’s ceiling?
The ancient vestiges of Emperor Nhân Tông were still there.
A pair of pupils shone in the middle of the surrounding light.

Following Our Emperor’s Triumphant Return to the Capital
By Trần Quang Khải (1241-1294)
Translated by Lý Hữu Nguyên and Duy Đoàn

At Chuồng Dương Ferry, the arrogant enemy army, disarmed.
Imprisoned at Hầm Tử Gate, the Mongolian-Chinese invaders.
During peacetime we should work the hardest.
Our motherland will outlast ten thousand autumns.

Lý Hữu Nguyên served as an Armor Lt. Colonel of the ARVN. He is the translator of three anthologies of Vietnamese poetry from Tổng Chánh Publishers.

Duy Đoàn is the author of We Play a Game, winner of the 2017 Yale Series of Younger Poets. He serves as director of the Favorite Poem Project.
Đừng Lộn Xộn Với Chúng Tôi

Lạc Long Quân của đất Lạc Việt
Bay khắp bầu trời
khạc lửa hướng Bắc
dạm Hán run rẩy
Ngài xưởng miền Nam
tấn bố Hoàng Sa
nghi ngờ Trường Sa
tử tế và thương xót
người Chăm và Chân Lạp
Bà Tiên Âu Cơ
Nữ hoàng núi miền Nam và Tây Nguyên
nhận lời cầu hôn của Lạc Long Quân
sinh ra một trăm người con dâu tiện

***
Thế hệ sau tiếp nối thế hệ trước
Hùng Vương
Thục
Triệu Đà
Trưng, Triệu
Dưới ách cai trị rối đốc lập
Ngọ
Dinh
Lê
Lý
Trần
Tây Sơn
Nguyễn

***
Kiên quyết và kiên nhẫn
khéo léo
khoan dung
Là bạn bè, chúng tôi hoan nghênh
Là kẻ thù, chúng tôi chiến đấu
Hán
Tống
Mông cờ
Minh
Thành
Pháp
tất cả được bài học
Đừng lộn xộn với
người Việt Nam
con cháu của
Ngài Lạc Long Quân
Don’t Mess with Us
Translated by Maria Nguyen

Oh Almighty Dragon Lord of Lạc Việt
Who roamed up to the sky
spitting fire to the North
trembling the Hán horde
Who toured the South
strolling Paracels
resting by Spratleys
showing kindness and mercy
to people of Champa and Chân Lạp
Oh Dame Âu Cơ the Fairy
Queen of all Southern mountains and highlands
Who took the Almighty Dragon Lord’s hand
giving birth to the first one hundred children

***
Generations after generations
Hùng Vương
Thục
Triệu Đà
Trưng, Triệu
Under domination then independence
Ngô
Dinh
Lê
Lý
Trần
Tây Sơn
Nguyễn

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Strong-willed and patient
skillful
tolerant
To friends, we welcome
To enemies, we fought
Hán
Sùng
Mongol
Ming
Ching
French
all have been taught
Not to mess with
the Vietnamese
offspring of
the Almighty Dragon Lord.

Ngô Đình Chượng came to America in 1975. He can write poetry in both English and in Vietnamese.

Since 1980, Maria Nguyen has enjoyed promoting Vietnamese culture and language to the mainstream. By presenting Viet poetry in English, she wants to bridge the communication gaps among Viet generations.
Việt Nam

Việt Nam hai tiếng thân yêu
Hình cong chữ S mỹ miều sắt son
Thuở xưa dưới biển trên non
Một trăm quả trứng là con một nhà
Tổ tiên từ thuở sinh ra
Làm con đất Việt chúng ta tự hào
Thương yêu đùm bọc lẫn nhau
Năm châu bốn bể đón chào Việt Nam.

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Translated by Maria Nguyen

Việt Nam, the two loving words
The beautiful curvy S-shaped2
Long ago under the sea and high in the mountain
One hundred eggs belonged to one home3
Since the beginning of our ancestors
We are proud to be the Vietnamese
Loving and supporting each other
The world welcomes Vietnam.

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Cuong Pham came to USA in 2009. Since he was young, he likes to read and write poetry and short essays.

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2 The country of Vietnam is shaped like an “S”

3 According to folklore, a fairy from the mountains coupled with a dragon from the sea. From their union, the fairy laid 100 eggs. From those eggs came the Vietnamese people.
Gratitude

“You make a killer meatloaf,” he told me.
He ate it in a bowl with mashed potatoes on top.

He liked eating his food in a bowl,
as if it might fall off a dinner plate.

I asked him once—why?
He didn’t know.

No matter what I fixed:
Fried chicken, baked fish, pork chops,
eggs and bacon—
It all went into a bowl.

Maybe because while in the Navy
on river patrol in South Vietnam
he ate many of his meals with the villagers.

His job was to protect them from
the Vietcong and they were grateful.

They invited him into their homes—
Shanty pole houses built atop the river
in the Rung Sat Zone—
where he sat on the bare floor with a
family of eight or 10 and watched as
rice was cooked in a wok over an open flame.

On rare occasions, chunks of basa fish were
part of the meal, but usually it was rice—
just rice.

No interior walls.
No furniture.
Grass mats for sleeping.
Always rice for eating.
And always in a bowl.

Sue Mayfield Geiger freelances for several publications, both regional and national. Her short stories and poems have appeared in various literary magazines. She lives on the Texas Gulf Coast.
A Letter to the Vietnamese

It has been three years since my feet walked your fertile soil. Rows of plush rice fields were dotted with limber bodies bending in rhythmic patterns. Weaved cone hats nodded at the sun. Hardy bamboo shadowed ribbed buffalo in nearby pastures. Mist hovered low in shallow ponds.

My mission was to sing songs with children; contribute money to a worthy project. Instead I was offered countless gifts—ineffable. As I write this, I recall only one word of your melodic language: cảm ơn - thank you. Waving good-bye that sweltering morning, I moved with abundance. Still swirling, I greet you, an embodied cảm ơn.

You graciously made me accept endless bowls of phở and meals created from luxurious ingredients. Crocodiles, exotic pets, became a delicate stew. Extravagant French coffee sweetened every morning and evening. Rice and greens were your scanty vittles. Cảm ơn.

Children giggled “This Little Light of Mine” and jiggled the “Hokey-Pokey.” Quizzing me about American life, you spread fingers in peace. When camera was eager for your smile, you bowed viewing each humble image. Not bothered by the American War, since other wars had “lasted far longer.” I felt honored amid cutting remnants of your ancestors—

betrayed, killed, maimed or poisoned. Cảm ơn

Proud hands kneaded bounteous gardens, replenished rice barrels and assembled new schools. Vegetables—balanced on fragile heads, in two baskets stabilized by pencil thin shoulders or brimming from a box teetering on top tired scooters to market, somewhere. You chose to ride on, caring sustenance not despair. Cảm ơn.

You taught me to look straight ahead crossing a road when hundreds of motor bikes thundered down the cramped passage. Seated elders, teens, whole families weaved, wrapped around my shaking limbs. Side glimpses of swishes and bobs, I exhaled advancing safely to the other side. Cảm ơn.

I send this letter to you knowing that it contains love and gratitude. Continue to live straight like resilient bamboo; ride gentle on your bikes. You are always in my thoughts. I will be back, I promise.

Marianne Lyon has been a music teacher for 39 years. After teaching in Hong Kong she returned to the Napa Valley and has been published in various literary magazines and reviews. Nominated for the Pushcart Prize 2016. She is a member of the California Writers Club, Healdsburg Literary Guild. She is an Adjunct Professor at Touro University Vallejo California.
Tidelands

I.
My people arose from mountains and sea.
Joined by a marriage of dragons and spirit,
birthing life where waves caress shore.
My people hold onto the ability
to move between two worlds
in one breath.
Earth and ether,
sea and sky,
heaven and hell.

II.
I try to imagine what kept my grandparents alive
when the rice ran out.
When stomachs knot in hunger,
incense smoke clouds the air.

I try to imagine what kept my people afloat
on the boats that leaked
urine, feces, and death
into murky waters not wanting to be seen.

I try to imagine how it feels to be muted,
to have one’s voice stripped away,
as I ache for my father to utter a word.

I try to imagine what is born with each of my children
as they slip out of me
toward a world
I hope will be clearer
than the one
in which I was conceived.

III.
On this side of the Pacific, the American side,
old identities fade with time,
the way pictures lose color in the sun.
I stare at a photograph of my mother
in a red áo dài dress on her wedding day.
I cannot read her face,
a face that has been lost and remade,
as easily as names are changed.

I long for the two sides to meet
so I can be whole again.

Can words stitch back two worlds?
Which way is up or down, forward or backwards?
Everything tumbles in the waves
and washes up on shore,
smooth and pleasing as seaglass.

Elizabeth Nguyen Gutierrez was born in Hawaii after her parents
left Vietnam in 1975. She is a child psychiatrist in Sacramento and
writes as a way to express her soul.
The Sound of Music

Vietnamese is the sound of music rooted in the tone, and in the pitch in the bass, the note the rhythm of each melody

It's the soar of mountains above a land of riches, the squiggles of squid among a sea of sentences

It's the bass in the blood that holds together the beat It's the falsetto of a parallel that splits our family apart

It's the fate of war Nothing Ever Dies

It's the capture of Diên Biên Phú the siege on Huế the fall of Sài Gòn—a rise of kites among the shifting winds

It's father's monkey bridge strumming above the swishing oars It's mother's unmistakable voice calling home the tribes of 54

It's the hook where we hang our heart, the diphthongs we feed on, the triphthongs we thirst for

John Vững Quốc Vũ was born in Sài Gòn in 1972. He is the author of the photographic book Việt Nam Renovating Dreams. Vũ's writing is anthologized in Topography of War and Against Agamemnon War Poetry.