

Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine

Volume 9
Issue 2 *Poetry Issue*

Article 14

January 2024

Book Review Essay, *_Coming Home in Viet Nam_* (poems), by Dr. Edward Tick

Steven B. Katz
Emeritus-Clemson University

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive_thrive

Recommended Citation

Katz, Steven B. (2024) "Book Review Essay, *_Coming Home in Viet Nam_* (poems), by Dr. Edward Tick," *Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine*: Vol. 9: Iss. 2, Article 14. Available at: https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive_thrive/vol9/iss2/14

This Poem is brought to you for free and open access by The Repository at St. Cloud State. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine* by an authorized editor of The Repository at St. Cloud State. For more information, please contact tdsteman@stcloudstate.edu.

Book Review Essay

Coming Home in Vietnam (poems), by Dr. Edward Tick
Tia Chucha Press, 2021, 186 pages.

Reviewed by Dr. Steven B. Katz, Poetry Editor, *Survive and Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine*



Vietnam. Blue fading into green. But over blue, a large swath of bright red splotches, big red solids, spreading. But over green, black crooked trunks, or large swollen arteries, perforated, extending vertically, spreading. Perhaps exploding coastlines, bridges, forests as seen from high above, a bomber having just delivered its payload, now surveying and recording detonating results? Or perhaps at levels far below where life was lived, a permeable membrane, distended organelles of a cell, blown, bursting, far below as seen through a microscope? (See the thumbnail of a painting in Note 2 at the end of this review, and discussions below.) Viewed from high above or deep down below, either is an abstraction of detached, darkening primary colors, visually captured and conceptually belied—distanced or so “close-up” that we miss both the forest AND the trees. Unable to ascertain perception or relay relations, just a swirl of colors concealing the millions of minuscule muted dots of people scattered in tiny villages clinging to melting forests and mountainsides and streams, screams.

This image in the painting (Note 2) is *not* the view we get in Edward Tick’s collection of poetry, *Coming Home in Viet Nam*, of which this Special Poetry Issue on “Boundaries and Borders, and their Dissolution” contains a selection (here in Vol 9.2, and also Vol. 9.3, the omnibus edition of this entire issue). Tick’s entourage of American veterans and Vietnamese families closely move among and meet face to face the Vietnamese people themselves. Elders, Viet Cong vets, teachers, mentors, mothers, children—who go about their nearby well-worn routine of postwar life of happy survivors in impoverished villages outside the major urban population centers (Introduction, pp. 22-23). Content in natural pastoral blues and greens of skies and rivers, the beautiful drab dabs of the gowns of fields of little farms that clothe bodies and houses, the brushed strokes of trees re-burgeoning in air. (This is the cover of the book above, a painting by Tick’s Vietnamese god-niece, Pham Ut Quyen, soon to become friends with Tick’s Vietnamese goddaughter, Nguyen Thi Ngoc.) So we will leave the 8x10 abstract oil painting (circa 1974), gifted to me by South Vietnamese painter Luu DHat in 1976 (Note 2), hanging— a place of honor and privilege, a 360-degree view of the Vietnamese War, in the middle of my wall in the middle my room in the middle of my comparatively opulent house, where I sit writing. High up,

watching over me always as I work, the painting has an important role to play in this review— and turn to Tick’s book itself.

Coming Home in Viet Nam, like the reunited country, is divided by area/province, including some all-too familiar names, though until now we know nothing about them and their people (except the infamous enemies of war): Sai Gon, *Hồ Chí Minh* City, the Mekong Delta, the Central Coast which encompasses the notorious My Lai, the Central Highlands which contains the Old DMZ, and Ha Noi and the North. Representing these regions, these the Vietnamese stories become American stories, and American stories become Vietnamese stories. (The illustrations that divide the sections of this book are black and white. For those wishing to see some color photos, including the clothing the Vietnamese wear, see Tick’s photo essay, “Community, Diversity and Reconciliation in Remote Vietnamese Villages, also in *Survive and Thrive* [Vol 5.2, 2020, https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/survive_thrive/vol5/iss2/5]).

Dr. Tick is a poet-rhetorician-psychotherapist-scholar. He has been a healer for over 40 years, physically and emotionally journeying with American vets of the Vietnam War. Whether to Greece, where Tick took them to heal through under auspices of ancient Greek mythology and gods, to Native American sweat lodges vision quests in ceremonies of delirious steam; or to the quieted chaotic killing grounds of Vietnam. Growing out of his research, therapeutic practice, and sojourns, Tick has documented these sojourns and authored several books (including *War and the Soul*; *Warrior’s Return*; *The Practice of Dream Healing*, as well as several books of poetry). His life’s work: seeking to staunch with compassion, understanding, and knowledge the psychic bleeding of rivers, the shatter of flesh. With *Coming Home in Viet Nam*, Tick to my mind here has composed his finest, fullest, and most significant collection of poetry. Here’s a sample, not contained in this selection of *Survive and Thrive* (Vol. 9.2 and 9.3).

VE: The Return

In this hot, wet, green world
I return to wander amidst
time-carved mountains, wind-sculpted pagodas,
and countless faces whose wrinkles seem
carved by gods into masks of toil and joy.
These have been my beacons and prayer towers
calling me again and again
to strain my legs and lungs,
to climb as high as I can,
to seek what lies beyond this blazing sky
and beneath our crinkled skin.

This year my wandering will be
on the heights and at the base of these mountains,
perhaps to glimpse on a breeze, in a fishpond,
in a child’s black eyes or elder’s smile,
in a stray and humble wildflower,
what all my striving could never see.

(p. 37)

All the people that Tick writes about—Vietnamese families living together in modest huts and villages and a language of one-syllable words—are steeped in a deep tradition of hidden symbols of ancient wisdom, intellect, harmony, and peace, violated even by the Western penchant for putting syllables together e.g., "Vietnam" (Introduction, p. 25.) As Tick discusses, there are three voices in these poems: those of the stories of the Vietnamese people; the stories and voices of the brave Vietnamese veterans who have returned to face their former enemies, nightmares, and fears; and the voice of the poet. The stories, voices, verses are sad, joyous, meditative, direct, realistic, nostalgic, reflective, hopeful, and tender. It is abundantly clear that these stories, voices, verses from their haunted wounds all call out for *hòa bình*, peace. (This two-word phrase, *hòa bình*, is contained and pronounced in the first syllable "Hô" in *Hồ Chí Minh* [City].)

Sometimes I remember, to look, up, at the painting. However, like most Americans—those who served in Viet Nam in the military and returned with deep physical or emotional scars, and those who didn't serve and still suffer the conflict of guilt and shame mixed with conviction of the non-combatant, the conscientious objectors who refused to serve based on moral principles or cowardice, burnt draft cards and/or fled to Canada or the Caves above the beaches of Matala on the Libyan Sea in southwestern Crete—I don't want to remember: the fraught hot hectic calling in on wind-up portable radios of frantic air strikes by troops in dug-in ditches and completely surrounded and pinned down all around by invisible North Vietnamese gorilla fire. An entire scape of country full of unseen people ripped into bits hurling into space, death rising and falling from the trees and seeming skies, in pieces on the ground.

The badly wounded Vietnamese officer points out to the physically and guilt-wounded American veterans that soldiers must obey the commands of their superiors. But the U.S., half the population on the other side of the world in the late 60's/early 70' did not experience the war this way. The gradual political awakening, seeping in like blood: the constant din of grim news, the political lies, the ritual of daily death counts, ticking up, the cargo plane loaded full of frightened soldiers departing, rising; and the military caskets, landing, "back home" on the ground, draped with American flags, wheeled down. And the flags set on fire and stomped on by protesters in commons and streets and campuses all over the country, the police on horseback, the batons and the tear gas, the tearing of peace shirts, long hair, a generation of parents and children, four students shot by the National Guard, dead, Nixon's resignation, the very fabric of US society pulling apart, becoming undone. Even now with the Viet Nam War we live a shaky truce between memory and peace, history and repression.

But it's all coming back to me now, as I read Tick's excellent new book of poetry with its quiet urgency of humanity, its processes and reports of healing through stories of war and peace shared by the American and Vietnamese vets:

"The Vietnamese have been waiting to meet, share stories, and grieve together. As one Viet Cong veteran said to our group, 'I have to know if we ever met before under different circumstances.' And as the northern country people have said to us, 'Until your visit, the only Americans we ever met were your bombs. We want to know you'" (Introduction, p. 22).

And I, who was too young to be draft, and then became of age in the later stages of that war, not shipped out like armed cargo because of a high lottery number and bleeding stomach ulcers, am writing for the first time about my time during and since the Vietnam War. Another twenty years of experience hidden in the unconscious darkness that followed the assassinations of John F. Kennedy (November 1963), Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (April 1968), Robert F. Kennedy (June 1968), and my mother's early death (June 1968). I found, in Tick's collection, a more hopeful history, a different Vietnam previously completely inaccessible to me until now. *Coming Home in Viet Nam* has allowed me to take new stock of my own life, to remember what my mind wants to forget. (What higher compliment can I give?) It might do the same for those Americans who lived through this national tragedy (there are so many), or for those too young, "the elders" (who are not venerated yet) to pass memory down to them through tradition and stories, similar to the Vietnamese. Tick's book reframes the narrative for the Vietnamese, for Americans, and for me. *Coming Home in Viet Nam*, and the Vietnamese people Tick writes about, have given me a voice to tell my own story, rattled and riddled as it is.

Luu DHat was "South Vietnamese." As Tick points out, unlike most of the people in Viet Nam except the urban centers who like their counterparts in America and the West now feed on the gorge of capitalism (Introduction, p. 25), the villagers from all walks of life live in the richness of poverty rather than the poverty of riches. Luu DHat was high on the socio-economic ladder, was well off, and a ranking South Vietnamese government official. His life was upended as well (no one was safe). If he was traumatized, he hid it well. But he was one of the lucky few who with his family got to board one of the last helicopters ferrying South Vietnamese to the safety of an approved emigration to the United States, as the US withdrew from the first war it had ever officially lost. (The Korean War was "a police action," and is still an unsteady stalemate and constantly tensed DMZ along the 38th, as the world watches "Kim" develop nuclear weapons.) Luu DHat was highly cultivated, mature, and the dedicated founding member of an art collective called "Group Creation" in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, at Michigan State University. That was Spring 1977, just a very few very short years after the Vietnam War had "ended."

That is one aftermath, here, in the country of my memory.

We see in *Coming Home in Viet Nam* that the Vietnamese innocents, the women and children, the too-young and the now too-old who survived, that the war has not ended for them either. We see in the poems that the villagers do not forget. They do not forget the war and its effects—the pain, the maims, the wounds apparent and transparent—the details, the deaths. They do not forget their civility, kindness, grace. They do not forget their ancestors, their children, their culture, their values, human life. They also do not forget their warriors. However, they do not forget the American soldiers either. And not in the way you might think. The Vietnamese people, families, villagers not only do not forget; they also forgive. They forgive everything, including the deliberate, indiscriminate, or mistaken bombardments, the fires consuming human flesh, bodies, huts, villages, family, the past. The Vietnamese invite the Americans into their homes, to share what meal they have, trade stories of healing and newfound peace. Like many "poor people," perhaps because they know what it means to be poor, their generosity seems endless. But more, these Vietnamese overcome their animosity, their enmity, with understanding and kindness. They embrace and adopt these Americans, like orphans," as their own. Like the earliest code of many

Greeks, the earliest code of many Vietnamese who may be poor in material things, are exceedingly rich in *hospitality*. Another of the many surprises of Ed Tick's book of poems about these survivors and descendants in general: the recalcitrance and resilience of ancient wisdom and spirit, rather than grudges and regrets. Tick's poems are suffused with it, calmed-warm yellow sunlight of a star against a blood-red backdrop.

Luu DHat too was a South Vietnamese refugee, and a PhD student at Michigan State University. He was welcomed with open arms by his new American country. He brought much to the U.S.A.—money that was relished, Asian heritage that was tolerated, culture that was ignored, social status that was no more. But as a South Vietnamese refugee trying to save and recreate his South Vietnamese way of life, Luu DHat couldn't move fast enough. He quickly brought together student painters, poets, musicians, linguist/translators, as well as faculty and spouses (of Vietnamese French as well as American poetry) at MSU. Group Creation published a journal; presented and exhibits and musical performances and poetry readings all over the area (always all at the same event, as if there wasn't enough time left . . .)—at the Kresge Art Museum at MSU, and Jocundry's Book Store in downtown East Lansing. We broke many meals together (a common theme of Vietnamese culture), socialized often. We were a close but diverse Vietnamese community—a tiny village—in heartland of America. And Luu DHat loved us and clung to us as we did to him and each other for inspiration, consolation, and succor. We were all devastated, exhausted, defeated by the disastrous war; we were all mere students, nothing except passionate and a little crazed. Group Creation was a countermovement to “group destruction” that was reflected not only the Viet Cong but the darker side of U.S. history, culture, foreign policy, and global politics. Luu DHat *was* traumatized. I don't know whether he is dead or alive now, but take this opportunity to remember and honor him, weaving him into this review, another “veteran” of that war.

In Viet Nam, the war is engraved in the sides of blast-cratered rows of low mountains, in large swatches of burnt-out jungle; in the tunnels dug by the Viet Cong, and the left-over landmines and wired boobytraps that occasionally “remember”—triggered by a wandering child or peasant—to explode, taking an arm or hand or leg necessary not as “luxury” in a high tech prosthetic age, but as the only means of earning a livelihood. The “American War” is engraved in Vietnamese history, in the very soil of every wrinkled face. The land remembers everything too, knows the distinction between war and typhoon. The three million people who died on all sides, military but mostly civilian, mostly South Vietnamese. The land forgives too. Strange words to our ears.

When the US pulled out of that very unpopular and destructive war that makes the more recent U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan look like child's play, they left Vietnam. Behind. Ravaged and war-torn and already dirt-poor villagers. As Tick points out, mostly in isolated, self-contained little villages far from Hanoi and the South Vietnamese government (Introduction p. 22) the U.S. propped up with its own blood rocket fuel and missile-hardened bones and Agent-Oranged breath. Taking over from the exhausted French, the U.S. was there to protect, defend . . . Very few possessions the people had—a chicken or a pig, a pot, a few bowls, chopsticks, a dirt floor, a fire . . . South Vietnam was quickly overrun by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese government in Hanoi. The villagers went back to the strenuous and joyful business of rebuilding and living (Introduction p. ???). Yet another surprise: how little it takes for them to survive: a pig, a

chicken, can feed a family; a few pigs and chickens can save a village (Introduction, p. 23; also see Note 1 at the end of this review).

Lightly hanging over these poems like a fading gun-powder cloud, heavy halting hints of the utter destruction of a senseless war ~ ~ and a butterfly re-flutter after the aftermath, after years of the rain of pain pouring out, transforming by baptisms of rice paddies, by torrents of tears, the blue, the green, the red, the black, the yellow ~ ~ the shaky wooden huts over land and water now grown stronger on the tilting stilts of words, freed-up tales, and the shared experiences of once-vicious enemies, forming new bridges of friendship and healing. Not only the innocent Vietnamese people who Tick has met and studied with and befriended, but the North Vietnamese, and Viet Cong vets themselves, who expect, wait for, take Tick and Kate Dahlstedt, psychotherapist wife and partner of Soldier's Heart (<https://www.soldiersheart.net/our-story/founders/edward-tick-ph-d>) and the American vets they annually bring back to Viet Nam since 2000 (Introduction, pp. 21-22), who "soldier" back for solace and closure, into the heart of their now whole Vietnamese homes.

The U.S.A. thought it left not only the Vietnam war (as well as its people, and even its own veterans), but also its status as an *invincible* superpower, behind. Their own country forgetting the physically and emotionally scarred, the medically neglected, the untended, the homeless, veterans in a gory glory of blood gone bad, in humiliation, and disgrace. Veterans, unwelcome despised, even spit on. But the poems are as simple, peaceful, and profound as the Vietnamese people in *Coming Home in Viet Nam*. In many ways the book Tick has composed is a gift from the Vietnamese people to America. As North Vietnamese people said to them: "We know of your pain and suffering in the U.S. We are sorry you could not heal and come home in America. Please come home here" (Introduction p. 22).

~Steven B. Katz, July 2024



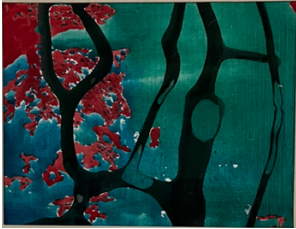
Note 1: At a Zoom birthday party for Ed Tick during the Covid-19 Pandemic, he enjoined us to participate in a modest but highly effective program for the Vietnamese people: the Mother Pig Charity Project in Viet Nam. From his email to me:

We began this project in the spring. With our brother-friend-guide Tran Dinh Song, with whom we have worked for 20 years, we chose the Central Highlands village of An Lac for our recipient. An Lac is very poor and has been devastated by climate change, the pandemic and previous epidemics. We offered water buffalo, chickens and other supplies. All were vulnerable. The village needs mother pigs!

I donated a pig. It began giving birth. "Please know that your gift has helped transform the lives of the good people in An Lac village. An Lac means Peace and Contentment. They live this way, wish it for us, and now we are united in the search to build a peaceful and loving world." Tick's book does this too. And so I join Tick's his efforts here:

<https://www.mentorthesoul.guide/philanthropy>.

Note 2: Perhaps the abstract oil painting by Luu DHat is not about death and destruction after all, but also, or rather, about reconciliation and rebirth. An overview from space revealing the whole fragile globe (as from the International Space Station rather than a bomber or cargo plane, or escaping helicopter, people hanging, falling from its landing gear). A reimagined rendering of the dissolution of the artificial boundaries that you cannot see from space, those naturally non-existent but human-made borders that keep “its” people contained and isolated from and afraid of each other. Perhaps the Luu DHat’s painting is about one Earth without walls after all.



Luu DHat, Abstract, circa 1975.
Oil on canvas, 8x10.
Gifted in 1977 by the artist
to Steven B. Katz.