

Coming Home in Viet Nam, by Edward Tick. San Fernando (CA), Tia Chucha Press, 2021. 187 pages.¹

By Gianluca Cinelli

Coming Home in Viet Nam, as the author explains, is composed “from the stories [he] heard, witnessed, and facilitated over [his] twenty years of journeys throughout Viet Nam” (22) and different voices resound through the pages: that of the Vietnamese veterans, both from the North and the South, who endured the war and its aftermath; that of the Vietnamese civilians, especially women and children, who had to cope with the destruction caused by the war, both physical and moral; and that of the American veterans, who returned to Vietnam after many a year in search of atonement, reconciliation, healing, and inner peace. In the Introduction, the author asks:

Who are the Vietnamese people who successfully resisted not only the American incursion but also two thousand years of invasions and occupations by larger and stronger countries, such as China, Japan, and France? Who are these who do not carry the invisible soul wounds that are endemic among American veterans that we call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Moral Injury? Who are these who instead live in forgiveness and acceptance, and who welcome and offer healing and love to those who invaded and destroyed? And what are their stories that we need to know in order to complete our full human history of that war, to make it one story, to reconcile? (20-21)

The collection is built as a journey through geographical places in Vietnam. However, the reader soon finds out that those places are no mere points on a map. They are, rather, the stations of a spiritual journey, an inner exploration through Vietnam as a special place where incredible things can happen and change the meaning of history. Transcendence and transfiguration are the foremost poetic devices that Tick uses in his writing. He catches bits of a changing reality in which the past of war and violence emerges as a haunting memory only to be caught up by the new glance of the healing-seeker. It may be

¹ Poet, psychotherapist, international activist and journey leader, Ed Tick has worked for forty years healing the invisible wounds of war and violent trauma. Co-founder of Soldier’s Heart, Inc. and subject matter expert on Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Moral Injury for the U.S. Military, he is author of four nonfiction books as well as two previous books of poetry. See details about the book at: https://tia-chuchas.myshopify.com/products/coming-home-in-vietnam?_pos=1&_sid=497f4c685&_ss=r&variant=39399942815805.

the glance of a peasant, the flutter of a goose, the rustling of canes in the winds: what matters is that life grows back where once was only death. Rice grows by bomb craters, and the huts have been rebuilt next to the carcasses of the tanks. Tick's poetry is made of images that overlap each other like photographic plates. Work mends the damages of war and nature grows back on the ravaged battlefield, but the real miracle consists in meeting the other after the war to find out that even former enemies can become friends through compassion, as in the poem *Fifty Years after the War* (40):

It was a divine limbo
when our inner poverty and their outer hunger
were the twins born of war
that threw us toward each other

Such an encounter is not necessarily physical, for it may occur in the silent time of prayer or the solitary quietness of meditation. These poems are about encountering the former adversary and, more significantly, facing the enemy within, the hatred that lingers on and poisons the soul over the years, robbing the surviving veterans of sleep, peace, and meaning.

Coming Home in Viet Nam is a choral composition. We can hear the voices of those whom the author came across during his healing journeys in Vietnam. This produces two powerful poetic effects: on the one hand, the reader can *see* these people as if framed in photographs. On the other hand, the reader can *feel* what the war has done to them and their world. Healing from war, Tick suggests, is no mere trajectory from point A to point B. It is a rather a circular movement that brings the traveller both forwards and backwards, as the exploration requires to look inside one's own mind and soul only to find out that the glance is not that of an external and detached observer but the very gaze of the inner eye of feelings and emotions, as in the poem *Hyacinths* (59):

You return now, a black silhouette,
a thief in the night,
floating upriver to the place of your birth.
The journey ends where it began.
The journey begins at its end.
You and I are the single breath
sucked in, sucked out, in, out.

There is profound spirituality in these poems that I would describe as Zen: impermanence, co-existence of life and death, the relativity of the human experience as a part of nature, meditation, and acceptance of the necessity as a source of inner peace are only a few of the features of this collection that make me think about Zen. The American poetical tradition also emerges here and there (sometimes recalling Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River*), especially in the short and unadorned triplets with no punctuation, which Tick often uses to convey a feeling of temporal suspension and awe, for example in the poem *Booby Traps* (70):

The GI

My flesh and my blood
torn by your tripwire grenade –
me here forever

The VC

Hanging beehives
released to attack you before –
share my honey now

Together

On silt-green waters
our old and secret stories
drip from smiling lips

Coming Home in Viet Nam is a book about friendship, which is something to achieve through love, understanding, and goodwill. War may break the spirit and the human bonds, but like life that blooms again over the battlefield, friendship can be born again out of hatred and enmity, as in the poem *Tet* (113):

Please visit my shop.
Don't buy. Let me brew you tea.
Tell me your stories.
We will talk and talk and talk.
Friendship is the truest wealth.

Friendship heals because friends compassionately forgive: “You wish to help me heal? / please let me / forgive you”, one 90-year old survivor of the My Lai massacre says in the poem *The Gardner* (117).

According to the author, “poetry is the language of the soul” (24). Poetry reaches beyond cultural patterns and stereotypes as far as its roots go deep into the archetypal substrate of the human imagination. The endless cycle of death and rebirth, which we experience in nature, shapes our minds and moulds the most ancient and basic images and narrative patterns we live by. Healing from the spiritual wounds of war is being reborn after the death of the soul, and it only takes being awake and aware of the things we do in the time we have.