ESSAYS •• LITERATURE

The Long Silence of Bao Ninh

Dec 14, 2018

A guest post by Rohit Inani who interviews Bao Ninh, enigmatic author of the enduring and classic novel, The Sorrow of War. *This interview was originally published in the September issue of* ***The Caravan***.

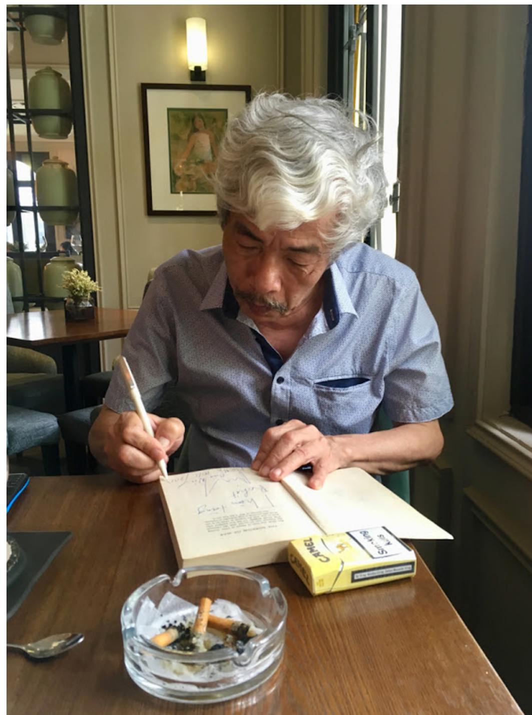


Photo credit: Rohit Inani

BAO NINH SETTLED INTO his chair and ordered for tea. He put a pack of Camel cigarettes on the table and looked out of the window. "It's not a

good time to come to Hanoi," he said.

May in the city is hot and stifling, and marks the beginning of a sweltering summer. As the temperatures soar, the crowds fizzle out. Later, the monsoon rains wash the city, igniting the "spirit of Hanoi," which, according to Kien—the protagonist of *The Sorrow of War*, Ninh's daring and wildly popular 1990 novel based on his experiences in the Vietnam war—is "strongest by night, even stronger in the rain. Like now, when the whole town seems deserted, wet, lonely, cold, and deeply sad."

We met at a cafe in downtown Hanoi, favoured by journalists, artists and middle-ranking officials of the Communist Party of Vietnam, which has ruled the country since the end of the war in 1975. Ninh rarely engages with the press or gives interviews, preferring a quiet and simple life in Hanoi, which he seldom leaves. Outside, on the street, a light wind blew and the sun shone on the window pane, occasionally capturing Ninh's attention. He lit a cigarette. "I appreciate your efforts and your interest in me, but there is not much to say," he said to me through his interpreter Nguyen Phoung Loan. "I'm a writer. I can write but I'm not very good at talking about myself."

Ninh is handsome, with a thatch of wavy, ash-grey hair and deep, glum eyes. "Shall we begin?" he said. "Don't have much time. I might have to undergo a surgery tomorrow." In the first week of May, Ninh was diagnosed with a cancerous tumour, the consequence of years of dependence on alcohol and tobacco, a habit he acquired after he returned home from the war, to a troubled post-war life, writing and drinking from night till dawn in his home, at the time a squalid pad in Central Hanoi.

Ninh, who will turn 66 this October, is Vietnam's most celebrated writer, best-known for *The Sorrow of War*, which was immediately deemed a classic of war narrative when published in English in 1994, earning comparisons with Erich Maria Remarque's famous *All*

Quiet on The Western Front, a novel about the experiences of German soldiers during the First World War. Based on Ninh's time as a North Vietnamese soldier, who served with the Glorious 27th Youth brigade—of the 500 who went to war in 1969, Ninh was one of the ten who survived; of these, six later committed suicide—the novel recounts the experiences of its anti-hero, Kien, a middle-aged war veteran chronicling his war memories while collecting the bodies of his fallen comrades in the jungles of Central Vietnam. In 1994, Ninh became the first Vietnamese writer to win an overseas literary prize when *The Sorrow of War* bagged The Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, trumping Italo Calvino's *The Road to San Giovanni,* among others. At the awards ceremony in Hay-on-Wye, Robert Winder, then the literary editor of *The Independent*, called the novel "historic," and remarked, while announcing the award: "Usually, history is the story told by the winners; Bao Ninh's book reminds us that, in war, everybody loses."

At the end of the Second World War, Vietnam, which had been a French colony, fought the French for independence, led by Ho Chi Minh and his communist front Viet Minh. In 1954, after the Viet Minh forces defeated France, the war was settled by the signing of the Geneva Accords, which also temporarily divided Vietnam along a latitude commonly referred to as the seventeenth parallel. Determined to unify Vietnam and drive out the "American imperialists," Ho Chi Minh—meaning the "bringer of light"—intensified his attacks on the South, which was at the time supported by the United States and led by the anti-communist leader Ngo Dinh Diem. This began the 20-year conflict in 1955 between the communist-ruled north and the south. The Cold War was also ongoing at the time and the Vietnamese conflict ricocheted inside the hallways of Pentagon. In 1965, fearing a communist victory in Vietnam, the United States dispatched the first combat troops to the country. The ensuing war raged for a decade and exacted a huge human toll, especially on the Vietnamese side. On 30 April 1975, at noon, Saigon

fell. As news of victory filtered to the north, people hit the streets, waving flags and cheering, "Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh! Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh!"

As the sounds of victory dimmed, Vietnam, finally reunited after decades of war, came to terms with the price it had paid to realise a long-cherished dream. The country had been devastated, its cities and towns ruined by unabated aerial bombings. Five million hectares of forests and vegetation were destroyed by high-grade explosives and chemicals, including an estimated 43 million litres of Agent Orange. Over three million Vietnamese people had been killed. And with plummeting Soviet aid at a time of international isolation, the nation's socialist economic model had completely collapsed. In 1986, after almost a decade of high inflation and widespread poverty, the Communist Party took measures to liberalise the economy, a move that became known as the Doi Moi reforms, and led Vietnam, two decades later, to become one of the world's fastest-growing economies. In 2008, *The Economist* called it "Asia's other miracle" after China.

The current generation of Vietnamese adults is too young to remember the war. On the margins of this shift stands Ninh, author of the country's most cherished war novel, who not only spoke to the generation that fought the war, but humanised its victims, and in doing so, broke away from Vietnamese officialdom, which remained a cocktail of patriotism, glory and propaganda. At the height of the war, radio broadcasts in Hanoi and most of north Vietnam described the war as "just," asked for the "devotion" of the North Vietnamese Army troops toward the Communist Party, and routinely referred to the south as a "puppet" administration of the United States. On 5 March 1969, a regular bulletin on Hanoi Radio, one of the few radio stations operating out of Hanoi at the time, called on the soldiers, whom it described as "compatriots," to show that "their absolute loyalty to the Party and the Revolution has helped ... develop ... resourcefulness and liveliness in fighting and

vanquishing the enemy." After the end of the war, the official party discourse focussed on the heroic efforts of the soldiers and their sacrifice for the country, but suppressed stories of their suffering and cruelty during the war.

"It was crucial when it came out and remains crucial today, when many Vietnamese either do not know anything about their wartime past or would choose to forget what they know," Viet Thanh Nguyen, the Pulitzer prize-winning Vietnamese American writer told me over email. But while an entire generation is putting its past behind it, attempting to find a new national identity, Ninh is reluctant to move on. In Hanoi, I interviewed several of his friends, writers and veterans, most of whom spoke of his two defining traits, traits that have remained unchanged for years: his silence, his sadness.

One afternoon, over vodka and endless cigarettes in the conference room of the Vietnam Writers' Association, an official culture association under the Communist Party, some of Ninh's closest writer friends sat at a long teakwood table and waited for lunch to be served. Most of the gathered were member associates.

"Ninh is always silent. He never talks about his book, his writing, anything. We all are used to it," Nguyen Chi Hoan said. "You never ask him why?" I asked. He laughed. "We don't dare ask him that! Here, we respect and appreciate his silence." Hoan pointed to Dao Ba Doan and urged him to speak. "He has spent a lot of time with Bao Ninh! Mr. Doan, tell us about Bao Ninh," he said, in jest. Doan, a poet, popped open a can of beer, took a long swill and then slowly jutted out his right arm horizontally, then swung it toward his head, the tip of his index finger stiff and perpendicular to his temple. "There is still a big sorrow in his head," he said. "Only Vietnamese can understand the sorrow in his mind." Others let out sighs and nodded in agreement. Then, breaking the silence in the room, the doors were thrown open. "*Ah! Ăn trưa ởđây!*"—"Ah, lunch is

here!" Doan said.

KIEN, THE NARRATOR OF *The Sorrow of War,* joins the NVA in 1969 at the age of 21, at a time when a patriotic wave is sweeping Vietnam in response to the enemy invasion. He joins Battalion 27, a unit comprising 500 mostly young men, and in the dry season of that year, the whole group is almost entirely decimated by napalm fires in the jungle. In 1976, after the end of the war, Kien returns to the Central Highlands as part of the Missing In Action body collecting team and, on board a Russian-built Zil truck, reaches the Jungle of Screaming Souls. At one point, still somewhat hopeful for the future, Kien asks the truck driver, "But isn't peace better than war?," to which he replies:

"This kind of peace? In this kind of peace it seems people have unmasked themselves and revealed their true horrible selves. So much blood, so many lives were sacrificed for what?"

"Damn it, what are you trying to say?" Kien asked.

"I'm not trying to say anything. I'm simply a soldier like you who'll

now have to live with broken dreams and with pain. But, my friend, our era is finished. After this hard-won victory fighters like you, Kien, will never be normal again. You won't even speak with your normal voice, in the normal way again."

Ninh, like Kien, enlisted with the NVA at the age of 17 after dropping out of high school in 1969. He was among the thousands of young men who answered the call of the Communist Party to fight the Americans and unify Vietnam. Ninh answered the call "just like any other Vietnamese at the time," he told me, cigarette smoke spiralling around his face. "You were eager and excited to do that." When he showed up at the recruiting camp, he was greeted by performers singing songs of glory, drumming up the patriotic spirit of the young fighters. By the time the war ended, the soldiers who survived returned to the North as victors. They were hailed as heroes by the government, but Ninh came back devastated. "Each day brought new nightmares; even my parents feared me. I was keen to forget the war, but it refused to release its grip on me," he told a gathering at the Southeast Asian Literature Forum in Taiwan this March.

In the novel, as Kien recalls his fallen comrades, he comes to grip with the horrors of war, and while moving month after month through the "mountains and jungles, water-soaked and dull… muddy as all hell," ghosts are resurrected as the wandering dead, who come to haunt the living. "The dead step from every corner, every house, every jungle trail, creating a narrative

structure that feels like a tide coming in and washing out—relentless—more like labyrinth upon labyrinth than any solid Aristotelian form," noted the Canadian novelist Madeleine Thien, writing about the novel on the PEN America website.

Ninh rejects narrative conventions in *The Sorrow of War*, adopting a highly non-linear structure, shifting between past and present in an effort to collapse and immobilise time. Later in the novel, Kien begins to write a book and eventually finds that "the act of writing blurs his neat designs, finally washing them away altogether, or blurs them so the lines become intermixed and sequences lose their order."

Viet Thanh Nguyen elaborated on this aspect of the novel over email:

> *"Linear, coherent storytelling in regards to the war and the revolution are the features of government-sanctioned storytelling, in films, novels, and especially historical museums. This kind of storytelling pins all the blame on enemy outsiders and internal traitors, and paints the soldiers, guerrillas, and revolutionaries as optimistic, noble patriots.*

Bao Ninh's novel tells a radically different story about how these young patriots were utterly destroyed by the war. That much is coherent. But when one is utterly destroyed, can one be coherent? That core trauma is ultimately revealed by the end, and we finally understand why the novel could not be narrated in a linear fashion. This is a terrific move by a novelist who understands, implicitly or explicitly, how trauma works."

"The war is like an obsession for him," Pham Xuan Nguyen, a writer and a popular literary critic in Hanoi, told me. "Whatever he writes, it will be about the war. Ninh is the kind of person who needs to be thrown into such events like the war … to become a writer. And this war—if I'm not exaggerating—has chosen him to write about it."

Pham occasionally paused as we talked, as if trying to find the perfect words to describe the indescribable: the post-war years in Vietnam and his longtime friend, Ninh. "For Vietnamese soldiers, when you returned, there were two things that caused them trauma," he

said. "First was the question of why they were still alive when their comrades had died. Second, is life in peacetime better than death in the war?"

In *The Sorrow of War*, after Kien returns to Hanoi, he looks back at his years, and reminisces:

> *From now on life may be always dark, full of suffering, with brief moments of happiness. Living somewhere between a dream world and reality, on the knife-edge between the two. I've lived all these lost years. No one to blame for that. Not me, not anyone else... There's a new life ahead of me, and a new era for Vietnam. I have to survive. But my soul is still in turmoil.*

THRUST INTO THE WORLD amidst the sounds of bombs exploding, Ninh was born in 1952, on the day the French attacked his village in the Nghe An province, west of the gulf of Tonkin. After the defeat of the French army and their subsequent withdrawal from North Vietnam in 1954, his family moved to Hanoi. His father—who was a lifelong communist and a party member—was the director of the Vietnam's Linguistics Institute. Ninh considers his father an influence, and he came of age in a house that

resembled "a jungle of books," Nguyen Quang Thieu, a poet and vice president of the writers' association, told me. "It was mostly children's books that I read while growing up." Ninh said. "It was the time of the Cold War and there were not many translations of foreign literature available. Mostly I read the Russians. Some from China. Jack London. I enjoyed reading Erich Maria Remarque. Nguyen Tuan was my favourite writer."

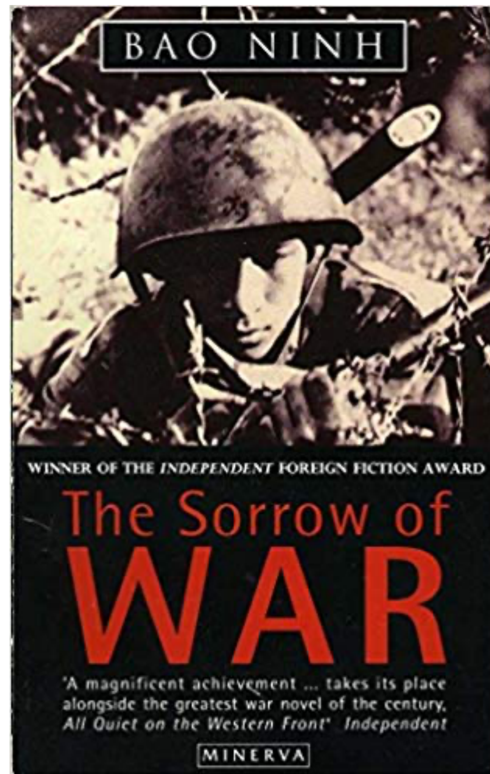
I asked Ninh whether he had had any literary ambitions at the time. "I'd have become a different person. Not a writer. I was seventeen. Who would have thought I will become a writer one day?" he replied. "War is the opposite of literature, of writing." He paused and fidgeted with the cigarette pack. "It's hard to determine how you become someone in your life... Had I not gone to the war, I wouldn't have much to say, much to write about."

In 1975, after spending years on the war-ravaged Ho Chi Minh trail, and being witness to some of the most intense and brutal fighting, Ninh ended up with the NVA regiment that had earlier bombed and captured the Tan Son Nhut airport in Saigon. He returned to Hanoi in 1981 and began writing after a few years. For a brief time he worked odd jobs in the city's old quarter, sometimes selling bicycles, Phan Thanh Hao, a poet and one of his translators into English, told me.

Ninh struggled to write. "I was not good with words and could not express the pain deep in my heart," he told the gathering in Taiwan. "It took me a decade to gather the courage to put *The Sorrow of War* down on paper." Ninh briefly enrolled in a writing course at the Nguyen Du Writers School—named in honour of the famed Vietnamese poet—and it was here that he wrote his most famous book, as part of his graduation project.

After Ninh finished the manuscript, it began circulating in Hanoi in a roneo form—a stencil duplicate similar to photocopy—and was published in 1990 under the title *Than Phan Cua Tinh Yeu* or *The*

Destiny of Love. The book immediately became popular in Vietnam, even winning the Writers' Association prize the following year. "You can understand the enthusiasm for this book in Vietnam. It is free of propaganda and politics. It does not romanticise the war, and yet the author looks back to those 'caring days, when we knew what we were living and fighting for and why we needed to suffer and sacrifice,'" the author Michael Fathers wrote in *The Independent* in 1994. It came to the attention of Phan Thanh Hao, who decided to translate the book into English. Immediately after, the novel became controversial for its portrayal of the war and was banned in Vietnam by the Communist Party, which even retracted the literary prize. In 1995, a former NVA veteran told the *New York Times*, "I became very angry at Bao Ninh. Why did Bao Ninh write about the war so everyone could see its naked face?"



The English-language manuscript—which, according to some accounts, was smuggled out of Vietnam by a young British translator in Hanoi—landed on the desk of Geoffrey Mulligan, then an editor at Secker and Warburg in London. He rang up Frank Palmos, an Australian war correspondent, and asked if he knew Bao Ninh. "Of course," Palmos said. "I had coffee with him just yesterday in Hanoi." Mulligan commissioned Palmos—who had covered the Vietnam war and published a book about it, *Ridding The Devils*—to write an English version based on the raw translation by Hao. When the book appeared in Europe and North America, it caused a sensation, for this was the first time that Vietnamese soldiers had been shown to have suffered as much as the Americans. "It was a way of letting the world know that even if we had won the war, deep inside us we knew we didn't," Phan Thanh Hao told me.

*The Sorrow of War*was acclaimed as a bestseller in the West, and brought Ninh financial security at the time, while in Vietnam and most of Southeast Asia, pirated copies of the English and Vietnamese editions were

available everywhere—"in bookshops, in sidewalk stalls, sold by children roaming the streets," as Thien writes in the article quoted above. At the same time, Ninh was not only battling his war time trauma, "drinking and smoking like hell," Pham Xuan Nguyen told me, but also struggling in vain to convince the authorities to lift the ban on his book. "He never understood why his book was banned by the government, you know," Nguyen Quang Thieu said. "He was just sad—and he still is—about what happened to his country, his society, himself. And he wrote about it."

In 2006, 15 years after its publication, the ban was lifted, and the English edition reappeared across bookshops and newsstands in Vietnam. Even though Bao Ninh was never threatened with prison, he was watched, followed and intimidated by the authorities. Thomas A Bass, the American professor and writer, wrote about it in *Index on Censorship* three years ago: "The Vietnamese use a variety of euphemisms to describe this gap in Bao Ninh's literary career, but the correct term is censorship … In fact, he was rewarded for his silence, but he was censored, nonetheless."

In 1995, Ninh's short story *Savage Winds*, about a village in South Vietnam during the war, was published in *Granta* and attracted controversy in Hanoi. He was yet again denounced by the government, and at times, even closely watched. "Often we would come to a cafe then immediately run off to another venue as we were being followed," Nguyen Qui Duc, a writer and literary translator, told me. Ninh was also emotionally exhausted, his days consumed by loneliness, smoking and heavy drinking, much like the character Kien in *The Sorrow of War,* who, after returning to Hanoi "had to live with this parade of horrific memories, day after day, long night after long night." In 1995, the French writer and journalist Janine Di Giovanni visited Ninh in Hanoi, and later wrote in *The Guardian*:

I arrived in a bleak

Hanoi housing project to meet this gifted, wasted writer. I was haunted by his lyricism, his stirring passion, his quiet and desperate sadness. I never forgot the image of him when I left his squalid flat – slightly drunk at 11 in the morning, laughing at nothing and no one, deeply nostalgic and horribly and irrevocably maimed by the things war does inside your head.

At one point in my conversation with Pham Xuan Nguyen, he alluded to a fire burning inside the writer. "Some Vietnamese writers try to remove the burn or cover that fire, so that it would not burn out. *The Sorrow of War*is part of that fire." he said. Ninh, he believed, "offered an answer to the Vietnam war. And to this day, he believes that he hasn't provided the full answer."

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TODAY, OVER FORTY YEARS since the fall of Saigon, Vietnam seems to have moved on. Over 60 percent of Vietnam's population is under the age of 35 and too young to recall the sacrifice of their parents' generation that fought the war. Vietnam's first post-war generation is coming of age in a market economy, with their ambitions fixated on the pursuit of a prosperous

future. Flush with youth and hope, the war, to them, is part of the distant past.

"It's war. It just happened. Like every other war," a young university student, who whiles away his free time waiting tables at one of Hanoi's popular cafes, told me. He gently placed a glass of mint julep on the table. "Some people talk about it. I don't think about it much." He came back after sometime. "How's the drink? You like it? I made it!"

In 2014, in a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center—an American think tank—on emerging and developing economies, 94 percent of Vietnamese polled were optimistic about a better future for the next generation, and 95 percent were supportive of a free market economy. "War in our mind is a part of history. Many people sacrificed their life to protect our country. It brought pain, suffering and famine ... but because of war Vietnam now has happiness, fulfilled life and peace," Le Xuan Huy, a young, bespectacled university student, told me. We were at Swing, a retro-style cafe in Hanoi, which transforms into a live music cabaret by night. On that night, it was already booked for what Huy described as a "mini show" by members of a university club called "Voluntary Arts Team" from the Academy of Journalism and Communication, a top college in Hanoi.

A boy band played on the stage while three girls in alabaster dresses crooned to popular Vietnamese songs. Young lovers entwined fingers and leaned their heads on each other's shoulders as the lights dimmed. "*The Sorrow of War* is a meaningful book. The truth about the war was told through it," Huy said. "I think this book will be a good book for some historian to read and research about." Before he could say any further, the singing resumed again, and this time a a young couple took the stage. The crowd hollered and teased the two lovers. "Ah! Look at them!" Huy said, and slowly downed his Malibu. "Everybody should relax and live together in peace," he said, getting up to leave. "War is

really bad."

Even though Vietnam has achieved impressive economic progress, the Communist Party controlled government has, at the same time, increasingly monopolised power and has used it to silence every act of dissent. In July, Human Rights Watch called upon the Vietnamese government to clean up its "abysmal rights record" and demanded the release of all political prisoners, which include bloggers, pro-democracy and pro-environment activists, and journalists. According to Amnesty International, there are at least 97 prisoners of conscience currently held up in Vietnam's prisons, where, Amnesty reports they are regularly subjected to torture and ill-behaviour. Last October, a university student blogger named Phan Kim Khanh was sentenced to six years in prison for "conducting propaganda against the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam."

In 2016, Ninh was rumoured to be the favourite to win the Vietnam Writers' Association annual prize, Vietnam's most prestigious literary honour. But after a few Party officials expressed concern, his name was dropped at the last minute. "It was a group of middle ranking officials who wanted his name dropped," a prominent writer and an association member told me. "The chairman or the secretary general, they don't have any problems with Bao Ninh. Even the former Chairman of the party, who I knew personally, told me once that he never had a problem with him."

Since the publication of *The Sorrow of War*, Ninh has not brought out another novel, even though he has written consistently, mostly short stories and essays, some of which have been translated in English and published in anthologies such as *Night, Again*, edited by Linh Dinh. Some years ago, he began editing a weekly literary supplement in Hanoi published by the writers' association. "I still write all day long," Ninh told me. "I write to kill time."

Believed to have finished a second novel—apparently

called *Steppe*—about the war, Ninh is reluctant to publish it, or even talk about it. In 2006, upon being asked in a rare interview with *The Guardian* why he was hesitant to put out this book, he said, "I stopped myself. I kept holding myself back… I compared everything I wrote to everything I wrote in the past, and it's not natural like it was before."

"Is it called *Steppe*?" I asked Ninh.

He laughed. "That's what I say to people but I haven't written it." After pausing for sometime and trying to find an answer, he said, "It's not easy to publish a novel in Vietnam at the moment."

In Hanoi, Ninh's unpublished work has acquired a mythical quality. As Bass wrote, after his brief visit to Ninh in 2008, "I have not personally verified the existence of these manuscripts, which have assumed a status in Vietnamese literature comparable to Captain Ahab's great white whale—doubted by many, believed by some, seen by few." His friends and contemporaries in Hanoi, who, in frustration and desperation, have tried to find either Ninh's manuscripts or an answer to his reluctance to publish, were met, unanimously, with his silence. "He would just look away and smile. Then, silence," Nguyen Quang Thieu said.

Once, Pham Xuan Nguyen invited Ninh for a round of drinks and asked about the second book. He was met with the same response, but Pham decided to take him on. "You are a one-book writer. One-book writers are not real writers. You have to write another book." Ninh shot back at him, in anger, "When the book is published, you will see how it explodes." This was some years ago.

"Some say that he was afraid to give the manuscript of the second novel because he believed it to be inferior to *Sorrow.* But I don't believe so," Nguyen Quang Thieu told me. "I told him that the time today is different than the past. The situation is quite different now. You can publish the book. He just smiled. And

didn't say a word. He stops himself. I don't know why."

The novel, apparently to be based in South Vietnam at the tail end of the war in 1974, is about a family that moved to the South as the NVA arrived, and their escape from Vietnam. "Maybe for this reason, he could not publish the book. Who knows," a member of the Writers' Association and a close friend of Ninh told me. "It is about understanding the victims of the war. Easy for us to understand. Easy for the government to understand. But running from the Communists is much more difficult to understand."

"I don't want to ask him more about the second book. I don't want to make it difficult for him anymore. I accept his silence," Thieu said. "He is worried for the situation of the writers in Vietnam. Worried about literature in Vietnam. He is also worried about the attitude of the government toward writers and artists. He would like to see more freedom."

Ninh refused to talk anymore about his second novel, brushing it off with his signature silence. "It will be better for you to meet so many other writers. Not just me," he said. "I have not thought of that book"—referring to *The Sorrow of War*—"for a long time." All writers, he added, end up writing books they have to forget. "Please keep writing about that book, and let me not discuss it."

He got up to leave, saying he was getting late for his appointment with the doctor.

"All the best for the surgery," I said.

He laughed. "I'm a soldier, I'm not scared of anything."

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