

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

Artists Born of War

BILLBOARD [1:00]

Hello, I'm Marc Steiner, and welcome to the Center for Emerging Media's series Shared Weight, a documentary series about the impact of the Vietnam War, 30 years AFTER it's end. ONE MEMBER OF OUR JOURNEY WAS WRITER WAYNE KARLIN WHO'D BEEN A MARINE HELICOPTER GUNNER IN VIETNAM. HE JOINED US IN A SEARCH TO FIND WHAT DRIVES SOME WARRIORS TO BECOME WRITERS TO BECOME THE COMBAT SINGERS OF THEIR GENERATION. WE DID interviews with writers whose war experiences, compelled them to express themselves, AND GAVE birth to the artist in them. FIRST, the news from National Public Radio.

SEGMENT 1: [14:59]

MARC: I'm Marc Steiner, and welcome to the Center for Emerging Media's series Shared Weight. LAST YEAR MARKED THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE END OF THE VIETNAM WAR. I MADE A JOURNEY WITH SEVEN OTHERS TO DISCOVER WHY THAT WAR HAS HAD SUCH A LASTING IMPACT ON AMERICA, AND ON VIETNAM, ON THE WORLD, THE FIRST PERSON I TURNED TO COLLABORATE ON THE SERIES WAS WAYNE KARLIN. WAYNE'S A MARINE COMBAT VETERAN AND A WRITER. HE HAS EDITED TWO VOLUMES OF WORKS BY VIETNAMESE AND AMERICAN WRITERS. PART OF OUR JOURNEY WAS AN EXPLORATION OF HOW AND WHY NOVELISTS AND POETS ARE COMPELLED TO DEPICT THE WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH. TO HELP THINK ABOUT THOSE QUESTIONS I TURNED TO WAYNE. WHY SO MANY YEARS LATER, DO HE AND OTHER WRITERS HE KNOWS, VIETNAMESE AND AMERICAN, STILL WRITE ABOUT THIS WAR?

WAYNE : LAST YEAR I WATCHED A VIETNAMESE FILM ABOUT THE WAR BY THE GREAT FILM DIRECTOR, DANG NHAT MINH . ONE SCENE IN PARTICULAR, HIT ME WITH GREAT FORCE. A SOLDIER TELLS A BOY, THAT THE BOY'S FATHER, THE SOLDIER'S FRIEND, WAS KILLED IN BATTLE . THE BOY LOOKS AT THE SOLDIER, AND ASKS: WHY ARE YOU STILL ALIVE?

WHY AM I STILL ALIVE?

It is the question in particular that all of us who have written about the war have to ask.

In the last week, the last two days, of my tour IN VIETNAM, I was on flight duty as a helicopter gunner. For a reason I've never known another Marine named Jim Childers traded places with me on a mission and was shot and killed.

Why am I still alive? Over the last year, I went on a journey to explore my own origins and motivations as a writer, and the motivations of other artists whose beginnings were rooted in their participation in the Vietnam war.

MARC: What was the particular responsibility of the writer who had been to war? Was there one?

In the midst of a new conflict that the country seems compelled to define, AND TO compare or contrast to the war that ended thirty years ago, we spoke with writers and film makers in Vietnam and in America, artists who had one thing in common: their art had been forged in the fire of that war.

WAYNE : Since the end of the conflict, some of the most remarkable literature ever created in America, and in Vietnam, has emerged—work that like the war itself holds up an uneasy mirror to both countries, in which each can see their noblest aspirations and their deepest depravities. What was the individual motivation, the compulsion to create this art? I spoke with Tim O'Brien, perhaps the best-known American fiction writer to come out of the Vietnam war, in Honolulu, at a conference marking the 30th anniversary of the end of the war. Thirty years.

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WAYNE: [Actuality] A North Vietnamese army veteran, a writer, who I met in Vietnam, who suggested to me that um- that I should get over it, you know not-not write about it anymore that um-you know that-the war was over 30 years and so on. Should you in particular get over it.

Tim: ...The answer is no, and not just in the should, but it's also in the can...I don't know how I could get over it. In a way, yeah, of course, you move on, plod forward into this indefinite future that we all have, but you plod toward the future bearing the necessary baggage of prior experience. ...it would be like saying to Toni Morrison stuff any of the black stuff, or Joseph Conrad forget the ocean, or John Updike forget the suburbs. It's as if to say Shakespeare Hey man no more kingshit, you've been doing this King stuff a lot, let's do some Queen stories, or some Prince stories. He's going to look at you and she's going to look at you with a dumfounded kind of gaping . . . that's my backyard you're telling to forget. That my life and moral choices and my awakening of sense of moral deeds, and my nation's. To abandon that for the sake raw newness, differentness, that ought to be a word, by the way, is to say stop being a human being, be a goat. Goats day by day can abandon yesterday, because they can't remember it. (laughs) It's just a new cud. (laughs)

WAYNE : I asked Tim why he felt the need to capture the war in writing, to become a writer:

[2:22]

Tim: ...it's a hard thing to explain intellectually. But as you go through a day of bewilderment and lost-ness and-and I mean lost in all kinds of ways geographically and spiritually. No sense of end to it all; there's a kind of lost-ness. And at the end of the day when the other guys would horse around-you know after we dug our foxholes for the night they would you know joke around and so on, I'd spend the last half-hour of twilight writing these little anecdotes about an event of that day, or a thought I may have had. Or just simply to describe a moment of astonishing beauty. A lagoon at sunset or the color of a-of a mountain ridge, that- putting it on paper--I guess it's the same that-that- the same impulse that makes us want to take pictures at birthday parties or at weddings.

NARRATOR: From Tim O'Brien 's SHORT STORY: "Good Form".

I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth. Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief. Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe . His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him. What stories can do, I guess, is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again.

[MUSIC: HEY JUDE]

TIM: Late-late afternoon, a company of us walking across a rice paddy and one man began singing Hey Jude, then another, then another, then a whole company of a hundred men singing this white man's song in an Asian country in one way incredibly beautiful, the juxtaposition of this lovely melody with uh this foreign place. In another way strange, and strange-I mean-by strange I mean not necessarily in a good way.

[MUSIC FADE]

Another image, another rice paddy, another late afternoon- not so beautiful-one man began opening up on uh-it had been a bad day, we lost a couple of guys-began to open up on a water buffalo, maybe a hundred yards away. And then another guy and then another guy and then the whole company firing at this buffalo that who knows how many M-16 rounds it absorbed.

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And the image will last with me I'm sure to the grave. Long after I probably forget my own name and my wife's name, and my son's. I know a little bit about what that represents: that's 'Nam, absorbing round after round after round, and somehow enduring.

MARC: HERE'S ANOTHER EXCERPT FROM TIM O'BRIEN'S SHORT STORY: "HOW TO TELL A TRUE WAR STORY".

He stepped back and shot it through the right front knee. The animal did not make a sound. It went down hard, then got up again, and Rat took careful aim and shot off an ear. He shot it in the hindquarters and in the little hump at its back. He shot it twice in the flanks. It wasn't to kill; it was to hurt. He put the rifle muzzle against the mouth and shot the mouth away. Nobody said much. The whole platoon stood there watching, feeling all kinds of things, but there wasn't a great deal of pity for the baby water buffalo. Curt Lemon was dead. Rat Kiley had lost his best friend in the world. Later in the week he would write a long personal letter to the guy's sister, who would not write back, but for now it was a question of pain. He shot off the tail. He shot away chunks of meat below the ribs. All around us was the smell of smoke and filth and deep greenery, and the evening was humid and very hot.

WAYNE : Why do we need to validate memory? The statement implied that memory itself was threatened—not, one knew, made fragile by time, but by the need to revise the unpleasant experience of that unpopular war, to fit it into more comfortable niches and stereotypes.

MARC: One of the country's most convenient lapses of memory, in fact, concerned those Vietnamese who allied themselves with us, and who lost more than a war—they lost a country. One of the best writers from the Vietnamese American community, Andrew Lam, was also at the conference. HIS FATHER WAS A GENERAL IN THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMY. WHEN HE KNEW THE SOUTH WOULD FALL, HE REMAINED TO FIGHT, BUT SENT ANDREW, HIS MOTHER, HIS BROTHERS AND SISTERS TO THE UNITED STATES.

ANDREW: ... even though I left Vietnam at 11, I always somehow had a very, very vivid memory of that country, in fact more than my older siblings. They would be shocked when sometimes when I say remember this and that, and they didn't.

It happened so abruptly, there was no planning to leave. So when we were told to grab our bags and flee out of the house. You know—the house was left as the way it was, I just kept everything I had remember up until that time as if it's a photo album, because my only possession of Vietnam was memories. The way I saw it was that since it's gone I'm gonna have to memorize everything I had seen and experienced up until the age of 11.

WAYNE : The strength to endure; the need to capture it in writing. Andrew Lam's father was a general in the South Vietnamese army; when he knew the South would fall, he sent his family to the States, though he remained to fight. Andrew, 11 years old, went from being the privileged child of a powerful family to living in a cramped one-bedroom San Francisco apartment shared with two other families.

Andrew: 'Thanks-giving', said Mr K, my seventh grade English teacher, 'repeat after me, Thanksgiving'. 'Sanks-giv-in' I repeated, but the word tumbled and hissed, turning my mouth into a wind-tunnel. A funny word, 'Sanks-giv-in', hard on my Vietnamese tongue, tough on my refugees' ears. 'That's good' say Mr K, full of encouragement, 'very good- Thanksgiving'. As I helped him tape students' drawings of turkeys and pilgrims and Indians on the classroom windows, Mr K patiently explained to me the origins of the holiday. 'you know the story, newcomers to America, struggling, surviving, and finally thriving in the New World, thanks to the kindness of the natives. I could barely speak a complete sentence in English, having spent less than three months in America, but Mr. K's story wasn't all that difficult to grasp- still, I didn't particularly see what this holiday could have to do with me. My family and I had arrived in America several months earlier, at the end of the Vietnam war. My father, a high-ranking officer in the South Vietnamese army, was missing, having adamantly refused to join us when we fled on the C-130 cargo plane heading out of Saigon, two days before Communist tanks rolled in. Father, who had stayed in Vietnam, determined to fight to the end in the jungle, was the center of our lives, and his absence left a horrible void. We

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had arrived in America with nothing but rags in our backpacks, and a few ounces of gold that our mother had tucked into her money belt. An impoverished Aunt took us all in, soon, there were ten people all crowding into Auntie Lisa 's tiny two-bedroom apartment at the end of mission street in San Francisco . In the refugees' home there was an oppressive silence that hung as heavy as the monsoon rain. We ate in silence, in the dining room, that served as a bedroom at night, we waited silently in line for the bathroom, slept silently, side-by-side, as if saying anything would bring us all to tears. Indeed, Mr. K, what was there to be thankful for? Ah, but there was. A few days after Mr. K explained Thanksgiving to me, something marvelous happened. My father called- he would soon join us, having changed his mind and escaped aboard a crowded naval ship. When Father arrived, he was skinny and haggard, no longer the war-hero of my memories, but he nevertheless brought jubilation into our lives. I remember hearing my Mother laugh, hearing the adults gossip and argue. Sometimes I would close my eyes pretending that we were all still living in Saigon . One morning, I looked in the mirror and was surprised to see a boy's face smiling back at me,

WE'LL BE BACK IN A MINUTE WITH SHARED WEIGHT'S ARTIST BORN OF WAR.

SEGMENT TWO [19:29]

MARC: I'M MARC STEINER AND Welcome back to "The Artist Born of War". Part 2 of the Vietnam radio documentary series, "Shared Weight." WE JUST HEARD MARINE COMBAT VETERAN AND WRITER WAYNE KARLIN TALKING WITH FELLOW VETERAN, TIM O'BRIEN , AND VIETNAMESE AMERICAN, ANDREW LAM ABOUT WHAT COMPELLED THEM TO BECOME WRITERS. WAYNE CONTINUES HIS CONVERSATION WITH ANDREW LAM IN HAWAII .

WAYNE : Go into um into your background, and-and your writing in particular. I see that you started out with a-what is it-a biochemistry?

Andrew: Biochemistry.

Wayne : Biochemist-yeah-which is a more uh sort of stereo-typical or you know traditional Asian-American-Vietnamese way of-of entering in. Why and how did you become a writer?

ANDREW: I followed the tradition of a lot of my friends in uh-from the Vietnamese community. You know we wanted to make our parents happy, and my Mom had wanted me to be a doctor Up until that point when I went to college I you know, had obeyed her because she was my Mother (laughs) you know and ah-we're a Confucian-bound family, and even though I loved reading all my life I never really fully accepted the idea that I might want to be a writer someday. And when I went to college, I took the pre-requisites of humanity courses I did really well in them., but still they were not enough to convince me. And when I graduated, something else happened; I fell in love. And I thought, well I'm going to write about this, you know, my first romance, the great romance of my life. And what had turned out to be a romantic novel, or so I thought, um turned out to be quite cliché, so I kept writing but I kinda like oh my God you know, this is not working out as I thought. And then something else happened. I started about what it's like to lose someone who had been your life, you know with whom you spend your, you know, routine with. You created a language with, and a way of living with. And when you lose that person it's like losing an entire universe, a micro-universe. And yet those feelings were some-some things that I had felt before, when I was 11. And what they were was that I was being exiled once more. And yet, the adult who experienced the-the pain of separation from his lover finally understood what had happened to him as a child who had lost Vietnam, in the sense that I understood, that the personal is never that far from the historical. And that's when I realized I wanted to write, and write seriously. And (laughs) broke my parents' heart in return by announcing it to them. And they were shocked. Because there were no Vietnamese making a living as a writer yet. And that was my father's challenge to me. He said, well, can you name a Vietnamese of your generation, you know, the first generation who came to the United States and wanting to write in English... And he said just name one. And I couldn't name one for him. And finally I just looked at him and say, well I suppose I'll be the first.

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WAYNE : In Hanoi , we spoke to Bao Ninh , a man who once O'Brien would have tried to kill, as he would have tried to kill O'Brien, or Andrew Lam 's father..or me. A veteran of the 500 man 27th Youth Brigade of the People's Army of Vietnam, Bao Ninh went to war in 1969, and is one of the ten who survived from that unit. His novel, *The Sorrow of War*, has been compared to *All Quiet on the Western Front*: it is a devastatingly honest portrayal of war, and of how war affects individuals and their countries. Bao Ninh 's character,

Kien, is a writer, a veteran, who feels compelled to tell the stories of those he fears "deliberately forgotten."

WAYNE : [ACT.] In the novel there's a scene when the soldiers come back by train. After April 30th, 1975 . And they are told not to talk about the terrible casualties that they took. And they are told not to ever talk about the bravery of the other side, of the southern part of the country. They know that these things are true, but they are told to keep silent. I say this because in a way for Americans, it was the same way. We were not told directly by loudspeaker "Don't talk about this," but we soon saw nobody really wanted to hear the way it truly was. Is this the same reason that you felt you had to become a writer, that you had to write about the war?

[16:19]

BAO NINH : ...it was the same for the Vietnamese as it was for the Americans. No one told me you have to shut your mouth, don't do this, don't do that, but when we came back home, you know it seemed to me that the message was that I should keep silent. And. you know, that kind of silence can be much more irritating than when you are directly told to keep silent. And you are right when you say sometime you have the truth inside you, but you feel you have no right to speak it out, and that in fact motivates you to speak it out. And I have to say that on the Vietnamese side, there were many, many true things, many truths about the Vietnam war that were hidden.

NARRATOR: FROM BAO NINH'S THE SORROW OF WAR:

...At the start there had been a common emotion of bitterness. There had been no trumpets for the victorious soldiers, no drums, no music...the general population just didn't care about them. Not did their own authorities...The authorities checked the soldiers time after time, searching them for loot...At every station the loudspeakers blared, blasting the ears of the wounded, the sick, the blind, the mutilated, gray-lipped malarial troops. Into their ears poured an endless stream of the most ironic of teachings, urging them to ignore the spirit of reconciliation, of the "bullets coated with sugar...and especially to guard against the idea of the South having fought valiantly...But we "meritorious" and victorious soldiers knew how to defend ourselves against this barrage of nonsense. We made fun of the...admonishments, turning [the] speeches into jokes, ridiculing them.

WAYNE : I ASKED IF HIS reason for becoming a writer because "so many truths were hidden??

BAO NINH : The literature of the Vietnam War at that time ...only showed the ghost of the war, just a ghost shadow of the war. At the time I was very bitter about Vietnamese literature at the time....I felt the Vietnamese people seemed to be waking up from a long dream and they saw the truth. And the ordinary soldier, especially the war veterans also woke up from a long dream, woke up and wanted a change. And when I say soldiers, I mean the ordinary soldiers, not the high-ranking officers. I saw the people waking up and that inspired me to write.

NARRATOR: From *The Sorrow of War* by Bao Ninh :

Kien coaxed himself: "I must write!"

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Collar up, coat wrapped securely around him, he paced the quiet Hanoi streets night after night, making promises to himself...

"I must write! It's going to be like smashing granite with my fists, like turning myself inside out and exposing all my secrets to the world...I must write! To rid myself of these devils, to put my tormented soul finally to rest instead of letting it float in a pool of sorrow and pain!

WAYNE : In Hanoi , we spoke with three women writers who brought a somewhat different perspective into the discussion. Novelist Da Ngan was from the South of Vietnam; during the war she was a member of the National Liberation Front, the forces we called the Viet Cong.

DA NGAN: ...the situation in the South was very different from the North....There people only had to fight against the American bombers. But in the South, we had to fight not only the planes, but the soldiers who came to the village...and such war for women is very hard. You have to work in the fields for food and you have to take care of the eldest and youngest in the family and at the same time you have to try to fight against the enemy from the sky and on the ground...it seems to me I experienced all the bitter tastes of the war....

...After the war ended I come back to daily life. I had to earn money for my family and also had to bring up my children while working as a journalist. So, frankly, I hadn't much time for writing novels, because the post-war life was very hard and I seemed to be drowning in a sea of wreckage, struggling against all the difficulties of daily life. When I began to write, I wrote about the things that I understood best. That I was haunted by the most. So my theme, the theme of my writing is the fate of the women. Many writers like Bao Ninh describe the lives of soldiers, the hardness of the war. But my theme is the fate of women in the war.

MARC: IN A SCENE FROM "THE HOUSE WITHOUT A MAN," BY DA NGAN, THAO, A WAR WIDOW, MUST DECIDE WHETHER TO MARRY A MAN WHO WAITS FOR HER ACROSS THE RICE FIELD. THE STORY DEPICTS THE PLIGHT OF THOUSANDS OF WOMEN WIDOWED BY THE WAR STUCK IN POVERTY AND LONLINESS BECAUSE OF TRADITIONS THAT FORBID REMARRIAGE.

Two Thao also had a soldier on the family altar—[that is, dead]—but...did not have the chance to bear a child with her husband. Every time she reminisced about their bitter love, she thought of the times they had been intimate and found she could count them on the fingers of one hand. When she was still young, her intense love for her husband had prevented her from finding a replacement for him among his comrades-in-arms...later, after the peace, they had all charged off to the cities or had gotten stuck in Cambodia while she stayed...focused on her one true love...Her widowhood became an immutable fact and she the pious inheritor of the family tradition of remaining single...she reverently sang the song of pious chastity as though it were the house hymn....

[Now]The image of the man across the fields flickered before her, distant and forlorn...still she continued, until she dazedly realized that her feet had almost reached the edge of the water, cold and silvery-white in the demonic light of the fireflies, and it would take only one small shrug of the body and all the meaninglessness inside her would dissolve into lightness...But then she had sat down and remembered to be careful when she leaned over to splash water on her face.

Her family had succeeded...[with]their various principles of tradition and propriety and sacrifice, but there was one more principle which no one had allowed to pass her lips: a woman's own inimitable nature. They had neatly plucked out of [her] heart her natural passion for love, not understanding that this is the most important thing of all, for it is from this that everything else can be had.

WAYNE : The poet Du Thi Hoan had spent the war working in a factory in the port city of Haiphong , a city, she remembers, often bombed by B-52's.

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HOAN:The Communist Party and the government always praise the soldiers' contribution and it's true that the victory of the war is mainly because of those soldiers. But they forget about the contribution and also the suffering of the people on the home front. Their contribution was an essential part of the success of the war. When the war ended, many fallen soldiers were given the medal of resistance; they will live forever in the history of the anti-imperialist wars. But the families of those soldiers--fathers, mothers, sisters, were ignored, their contribution unacknowledged. I wrote that poem back in 1988 or 1989...the responsibility of the writer, is to remind people about what they have forgotten and what they have deliberately forgotten.

MARC: FOR MOST AMERICAN SOLDIERS, THE WAR WAS A YEAR OUT OF THEIR LIVES, THOUGH THAT YEAR MIGHT REVERBERATE FOR THE REST OF THEIR DAYS. THE VIETNAMESE COMBATANTS WERE IN THE WAR FOR ITS DURATION AND SO WERE THEIR FAMILIES. DU THI HOAN'S POEM "PRAYER" REVEALS THE IMPACT OF WAR AS IT MOVES FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION.

The day I screamed my birth cry

My father went to the battlefield

He had time only to see me tossed and turned, crying

From that day we heard nothing but silence

So my mother tells me

At night

My grandmother would grope her way to the roof terrace

Looking to the sky,

she would pray

Three chopsticks

Folded in her hands

Kowtowing

In the nine directions of the earth

In the ten directions of the sky

Pleading for my father's safety

My mother would say

That it is late at night

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When the angels ascend

And so we hoped

These laments would be carried to the Pearl Emperor

And then grandma died

And my father still hadn't returned

Only his face smiling

From a photo that fit into my palm

Tonight

The night flower blooms in silence

A shadow falls

from the roof terrace

My mother

Folds her hands and looks to the sky

Angels

If it is now you ascend

Bend down and

Take my mother's sighs

Tomorrow

My brother turns seventeen

And bears his knapsack to the army.

WAYNE : Le Minh Khue had carried her own knapsack at that age. When she was sixteen and a high school student in Hanoi , Khue joined the paramilitary Youth Volunteer Brigades, groups of teenagers sent south to keep the Ho Chi Minh trails , the network of hidden jungle trails the North Vietnamese used to resupply their troops in the South, open. The Americans would bomb, and afterwards Khue and her comrades would emerge from caves and bunkers and fill in the craters, defuse or explode the unexploded bombs. Many died. Khue survived to become a war correspondent, and now one of Vietnam 's best short story writers. For Le Minh Khue it had been a very personal war. The girls who kept the Ho Chi Minh Trails open under our bombing and strafing not only risked their own lives, but had also to become intimate with the dead—their job at times

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was to build the coffins and bury the dead, their own, and the corpses of soldiers Images of the young dead haunt Khue's writing.

KHUE: I remember Wayne Karlin 's question of why am I alive? Why did so many people die? And that reminds me of many of my friends who were killed during the war and I think that perhaps they were luckier than me, because I am alive and I had to witness all of the suffering of thirty years of war and the post-war life and they don't have to suffer all these things. As Da Ngan said, surviving can be very hard. Over the last thirty years, each day is a different war. Of course, I feel badly about losing my friends. They died young, they died bravely, and they never had the chance to experience happiness.

MARC: WE'LL BE BACK IN A MINUTE WITH SHARED WEIGHT: ARTIST BORN OF WAR.

SEGMENT 3 [16:29]

MARC: We return to Wayne Karlin on his journey to discover what compels some men and women to become writers after a war. He has just spoken with writers Bao Ninh , Da Ngan, Du Thi Hoan, and Le Minh Khue..

MARC: FROM THE SHORT STORY, "A DAY ON THE ROAD" BY LE MINH KHUE.

...Both of us had just turned 17. Cay was a country girl who had an innocent appearance and a very pretty face that often made the soldiers turn around to look. She had never eaten ice cream. What's an iron? Will lipstick make your lips itch? All day, Cay bothered everyone with her questions. But she was very brave...On that evening, the enemy flares lit up the dock, making it possible to see every grain of sand. We were exhausted from carrying dirt, from hoeing, from leveling the earth. Only when a B-52 dropped a bomb would we take shelter. I was sitting by myself when I saw Cay run by and I called her over...At that moment, Cay screamed and twisted her body in a very strange way. I hugged her, calling out her name. I shifted a bit to let the light from the flares fall into the shelter. One side of Cay's face was covered with blood. She wouldn't wake up. When I was able to call out for help, some people from the next shelter came over, but she was already dead. Shrapnel from a bomb had penetrated our shelter. One hit her side and another her temple. That was a death which obsessed me for many years.

...Cay died when she was 17 years old, before she had ever tasted so many things, with so many unanswered questions in her innocent eyes.

MARC: LE MINH KHUE WRITES ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES AND AFTERMATHS OF WAR. SHE WRITES THROUGH THE LENS OF A REVOLUTIONARY WHO FOUGHT FOR HER COUNTRY AND AGAINST THE AMERICANS, WHO WONDERS WHAT THEY FOUGHT AND BLED FOR.

KHUE: [continuing] But I believe if they had lived, they would suffer like I have. Most of my writing is not directly about the war. I prefer to describe the indirect aspects of war, and generally, I prefer to write about the spiritual legacy of our country. I think that war, the aftermath of war is like Dioxin [the main ingredient of Agent Orange]; it will take a very long time to get out that dioxin, that poison out of our system...

WAYNE: I'd met Le Minh Khue in 1993, during a program in Boston where American writers who had been in the Vietnam war worked and lived with Vietnamese writers who had fought on the other side of the war. A deep friendship formed between the Americans and the Vietnamese writers that summer, fueled by the intensity of emotion that occurs when people who had looked at each other, first, as personifications of their most basic fears and hatreds, and, later, as figures who populated whatever mythological niches the war had settled into in their minds--suddenly become human beings to each other. "We remembered there was a time we would have killed each other," wrote George Evans in a poem written about that meeting. The juxtaposition of that realization with the realization of how much we liked each other, how much we had in

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common, how terrible it would have been if we'd succeeded in killing each other, brought us to moments of what I can only describe as a grief so intense that it changed us so we could never again see each other--or ourselves--in the same way. For me, that basic emotional shift became tied to a moment when in a conversation over the breakfast table with Le Minh Khue she found I'd been a helicopter gunner for a time and I found that she had been near Khe Sanh, often under attack from our aircraft, clearing bombs on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We had become friends by then and at that moment I pictured myself flying above the jungle canopy, transfixed with hate and fear and searching for her in order to shoot her, while she looked up, in hatred and fear also, searching for me--and how it would have been if I had found her then. To waste someone, we called killing in the war, and the word had never seemed more apt. I looked across the table then and saw her face, as if, after twenty years, it was at last emerging from the jungle canopy. She looked across at me and saw the same. That look, that sudden mutual seeing of the humanness we held in common--is of course what all good stories should do.

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KHUE: I want to speak about the tragedy of our country thirty years after the war ended. What I mean by this is that the culture of Vietnam was heavily devastated... and that devastation has had a bad affect on every aspect of our live. And I say that the way we live with each other, the way we try to reconstruct the culture failed. Our culture is at the root of every life. Once devastated it will take a long time to be restored...

MARC: IN "THE CONCRETE VILLAGE" by LE MINH KHUE, THE MAIN CHARACTER, NA, MOURNS HER GRANMOTHER'S DEATH, BUT ALSO HER BROTHER'S GREED, AND THE DEVASTATION OF HER VILLAGE'S NATURAL BEAUTY. AS VILLAGERS BECOME CAUGHT UP IN A FEVERISH, MONEY-MAKING SCHEME TO SELL SPECULATORS A PARK THAT WAS MEANT TO COMMEMORATE THE DEAD. FOR NA, HER GRANDMOTHER REPRESENTED ALL THE GRACE OF A LOST CULTURE, HER BROTHER, ALL THE SHALLOWNESS AND CRASSNESS THAT SEEMED TO BE REPLACING IT.

Na looks into her brother's shameless face. There are so many like him now, she thinks. People who are no longer human. But what are they then? It wasn't fair to call them animals. Animals didn't now how to be cruel.

"Take care, my brother," she says. "You still have a long life in front of you."

"Hey, my sister, what do I care about my little piece of life? Old grandma is dead, and there's no one who feels pity for me anymore. The only feelings the old man and old lady have are for money."

"At least you still have me," Na whispers, her eyes brimming with tears. All Roi has, she knows, is his own self-pity.

She lights incense sticks and bows down to say goodbye to her grandma's spirit. She leaves. The grove of kapok trees and its hill has been devastated and leveled and is about to be covered with concrete. Soon lines of motorbikes will pour out, spewing their chaotic noises. Will grandma be at peace in the other world?

KHUE: ...As the times change, surely all the aspects of life will change. But we need to spare some part, we must keep the spiritual life, the most precious spiritual life so that we can keep our nationality identity, our cultural identity - that is the root of life. But in Vietnam, because we lack a spiritual life now, it's a tragedy.

MARC: WAS THIS THE FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE AMERICANS AND THE VIETNAMESE WHO FACED EACH OTHER IN WAR. WAYNE KARLIN REFLECTED FOR A LONG TIME HE RAISED THE QUESTION TO FELLOW VET AND WRITER, TIM O'BRIEN WHEN THEY SAT TOGETHER IN HAWAII.

WAYNE: ...We did a series of interviews...with Vietnamese writers.... None of them regretted the outcome of the war, you know none of them wished they had lost. But there was a kind of a common thread...a sense that the sacrifices of the war

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The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

had become trivialized...that their society is becoming too self-centered, greedy and...wasn't worthy, if you will, of the sacrifices...Is there an equivalent or even a different emotion, a tension among Americans who write about the war do you think?

TIM: . . . a lot of it has to do with the question you began with, this issue of the cost of war. I worry that it's not forgotten intellectually, but that it's not forgotten-it's not remembered in suffering, is not remembered in the detail in the graphic moment by moment by moment unfolding of a tragedy and- women- the sound of a woman crying over the death of a child. That one woman's wail, alone, not multiplied by 300,000 or 3 million, alone, is a horrid cost for any political objective. I don't care what it is-end slavery-- I'm not saying you don't pay the price. But I'm saying that is a horrid price alone. Then start multiplying it and I worry that a good many of us forget the wail of losing a son or a daughter. The horror of it. Being a brand new father myself, I could-if my son were to perish in any war over any cause, it's hard to imagine what it might be where I would say, "Yeah I-I'll take that wail. And I'll cry for eternity, for that. And -that's at the heart, I think, of your question, is that it's easy to forget. The wail of one Gold-star mother or one Vietnamese villager whose daughter lies burned and dead at her feet. [10:30] And that's just one. And, man, I think a lot of us forget that wail.

WAYNE: Why are we still alive?

What drew the Vietnamese and Americans together was more than the historical or personal accident that we had been in the war. It also had to do with the fact that we had chosen to write about the war or its aftermath, that we shared a compulsion to use our art as an instrument of witness. The war had shown us in the most vivid way possible the kinds of choices human beings had to make and the consequences of those choices, the damage left behind. We'd become writers, like all writers, because we thought we were good at it. But we'd also become writers because we knew in the deepest sense the way in which simplifying human beings and human situations to the priorities of power or convenience or fashion could lead to death and degradation. We had become writers, in other words, for the reasons any good writers do: we wanted to tell stories that showed the complexities of the human heart, its capacity for both love and brutality; we wanted to show the human faces, under the leaves, under the noise of the rotors, under the hatred and fear that distorted those faces into configurations of hatred and fear. We knew, deeply, those of us who were in the war, that to not write about these things was the beginning of moral death and physical murder... Each story brings us a human face. Each story brings us our own face. The stories enter us, become a part of us; afterwards we can never look at each other in the same way again. In the commonality of loss and pain, defeat and occasional triumph that make up all good stories, we see each others' human faces, emerging from the leaves of the jungle canopy, from the blankness of the sky.

DA NGAN: ...Now, as the war fades into the past, the more frightened I am when I remember it. The older one gets, the more one thinks about it... I think war is like some disease of the human race. And I ask myself why mankind is not intelligent enough to learn to live in peace? ...In any war, in any place in the world, the death of the soldier is very easy for him but very difficult for those that survive him. It is the survivor who suffers. I think that is what the American and the Vietnamese writers have in common. We write to share our loss and to wish for war never to happen again...

MARC: SEARCHING FOR THE ARTIST BORN OF WAR WAS ONE OF THE JOURNEYS OUR GROUP VENTURED ON DURING OUR TRIP BACK TO

VIETNAM AND TO OUR OWN FUTURE. NO MATTER WHERE WE TURNED AMONG THE AMERICANS AND THE VIETNAMESE THE CONNECTIONS THAT DREW US CLOSER TO ONE ANOTHER WERE DEEPER THAN THE ONES THAT TORE US APART DURING THE WAR. IN THE LAST HOUR WE MET SOME OF THE BATTLE SINGERS WHOSE VOICES ROSE OUT OF WAR. IT'S OUR CHOICE TO HEAR THEM OR NOT.

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

IN OUR NEXT EPISODE WE MEET WOODY CURRY. SOME HAVE SAID IF YOU MARRIED RICHARD PRYOR AND DEEPAK CHOPRA YOU'D HAVE WOODY CURRY, AN AMERICAN COMBAT VETERAN WHO RETURNED TO VIETNAM WITH US RE-IGNITING HIS LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE VIETNAMESE

WOODY: While I was in the United States the only thing I had about Vietnam was memories, so that was what I was bringing over here with me. Memories, and the memories were frightening. But then when I got here, the first day I went outside and started interacting with Vietnamese, all of that went away. I still remember all of those things but they seemed distant now. They were always present.

MARC: FROM COMBAT TO DRUGS AND THE STREET AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION TO RUNNING RECOVERY CENTERS WE MEET WOODY CURRY. FOR THE CENTER FOR EMERGING MEDIA I'M MARC STEINER. AND THANK YOU FOR LISTENING.

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