ForeWord Reviews

HISTORICAL

Vietnam Visions: The Cemetery of Chua Village

Doan Le
Duong Tuong
Duong Tuong, translator
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Review

The image of Vietnam is indelible in the American psyche, but it is a static specter synonymous with war. This compact and magical collection of ten short stories opens a new window on a modern Vietnam. In the mid-1980s, the country shifted towards a free-market economy, which affected the traditional structure of society and also gave artists greater freedom of expression. This book deals with this concept of change, both on the larger social scale and in the microcosm of the individual.

In The Real Estate of Chua Village, a proposed highway through the center of the town turns a sleepy community into a hive of land brokers. Old Man Hon, the votive goods maker, even concocts a plan to sell deeds to land in the afterlife, where, too, everything will become commercialized. He muses, The King of the Afterlife will turn his cauldron of boiling oil into a sauna business, and rent out hell itself as a source of combustible fuel.

Writers in Vietnam enjoy greaterbut still limitedcreative freedoms. In the Winter 2000 issue of [i]The Literary Review: An International Journal of Contemporary Writing[i], Linh Dinh,

editor of [i]Night, Again: Contemporary Fiction from Vietnam[i], discusses how writers censor themselves: In this climate of intimidation, only certain realities are depicted. … A writer living in Vietnam knows by heart what is allowed, and often tailors his productions accordingly. Here, this author does not entirely shy away from controversial topics, but approaches them by sometimes employing a wonderfully subdued sense of magical realism. Her technique has a spare line verging on reportage. In the title story, ghosts in a graveyard hash out issues of social misrepresentation, hierarchy, and filial duty. In Achieving Flyhood, after the circus performer narrator is yet again denied a housing allotment in a completely corrupt system, he becomes a house fly, a tiny creature with presumably no shortage of housing. The transformation is presented as an unexpected, yet plausible, occurrence: A breeze whispered by me. I felt my wings, gauzy and glistening myriad colors, quiver gently. … What fun! The politics of the human world, however, follow him even into flydom and create an allegorical, if light-handed, forum for social criticism.

Beyond the intimate and perceptive portraits of everything from the moment a woman comes into her own in The Wooden Cottage to the beautifully moving story of a mans undying love and loyalty in Guots Love, what is most striking about Doan Les work is her narrative voice. It is clear and immediate, almost familiar. The introductions are consistently arresting, such as Whether one happens to be alive or dead, it is a very good thing to find oneself surrounded by kindly neighbors, and Even as great a personage as Franz Kafka dared only to metamorphose into a cockroach. Sometimes the conclusions take strange hairpin turns, which might be more an issue of cultural dissonance in the reader than a weakness in the writer.

Doan Le was first a film actor in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and later became a scriptwriter and director of the Vietnam Agency of Feature Films. In addition to being a poet and author of several novels and story collections, including [i]The Tutelary God of Loto Village[i], she is a painter. [i]The Cemetery

of Chua Village[i], the bulk of which was first published in Vietnam in 1999, is the seventh selection in the publishers [i]Voices from Vietnam [i]series. Rosemary Nguyen, a translator and interpreter for twelve years, is the chief translator of this edition. Auxiliary translators were Duong Tuong, who has translated more than fifty books into Vietnamese, and Wayne Miller, editor of the series.

Translation, at its best, is an inspired approximation, and this trio of translators has obviously strived to create a cohesive and neutral American voice for Doan Le. The only real blemish on their effort is in the voice contrived for old Guot in Guots Love. Aiming for colloquialism, he is made to speak in a southern-American accent. Take for example this line: Lookit the little girl. Spittin image of little Man, aint she? It is only because the rest of the translation is smooth and none of the other rural characters adopt this tone that it is grating. As a whole, this is a complex and enjoyable collection, a pleasure in itself and clearly an important contribution to modern Vietnamese literature. (March)

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