Those Who Cross the Ocean: Records and Essays By Vietnamese and American Writers (2017)

Introduction by Thomas T. Kane

This is a book of love, a historical record of the reasons for the formation of the Writers' Workshop and its continuing development at the William Joiner Center (now Joiner Institute since 2013) since its establishment in 1982 at the University of Massachusetts Boston. It started with former William Joiner Center Director Kevin Bowen's first trip to Vietnam in 1987. Witnessing a postwar Vietnam under the U.S. embargo, with “houses still pockmarked with bullets, fields still swamped with bomb craters, and a city filled with nothing but bicycles, he understood instinctively the impact of over seven million tons of bombs, over a million tons of Agent Orange, and over a half-a million soldiers armed to the teeth with modern weapons.”1 He decided he had to do something to remedy that. In February 1988, together with David Hunt, Bruce Weigl, Bill Ehrhart, and John Balaban, he founded the first Writers Workshop at the William Joiner Center “where veteran teachers and their students could exchange views, resolved on-going traumas and found a resolution through literature.”1 And invited to join these conversations with the American veterans, for the first time in the summer of 1988, were two veterans from Vietnam - Le Luu and Nguy Ngu1.

To begin that international process of reconciliation, Kevin Bowen had to deal with an untold number of difficulties. Vietnam was still under the U.S. embargo (not until 1994 was it removed). There was no telephone nor fax with Vietnam, no internet nor cell phones; and no travel agency could organize a trip without violating U.S. law. With the embargo still on, there was no Vietnamese language program in the U.S., while after the war, very few Vietnamese had learned to
speak English\textsuperscript{2}. Except for a very few, Vietnamese refugees in the U.S. did not want to help Kevin with the task of translation.

For many years thereafter, the William Joiner Institute and its members met with so many obstacles that few could imagine. On the U.S. side, many accused the writers of the then William Joiner Center of being pro-communists, or communist minions; on the Vietnam side, people were cautious. They wondered whether these people were CIA agents, masquerading as helpers to commit some nebulous plots\textsuperscript{3}.

In the U.S., a group of Vietnamese refugees violently protested the event organized for Nguyen Quang Sang, Nguyen Khai and Le Luu at the Boston Public library. "Who could imagine that literature and translation could be such a dangerous business?"\textsuperscript{4}, quipped Kevin Bowen. Thirteen Vietnamese refugees living in the United States, including former ambassador Bui Diem of the Republic of Vietnam, sued the Joiner Center for "hiring" communist cadres instead of "South Vietnamese refugees" for the Rockefeller Fellowships. After failing in the two lower courts, they appealed to the Supreme Court of Massachusetts. There they failed again.

The exchange program, however, has continued. Though the primary focus in the early years was Vietnam, Kevin Bowen and the subsequent Director (since 2013) Thomas Kane have invited writers from Ireland, Serbia, Iraq, Somalia, the U.K., and Latin America, studying conflict and its consequences around the world. Since the first Joiner Writers Workshop in 1987, The Joiner Institute has brought approximately one hundred writers from Vietnam to the U.S., and many trips of American writers, including the Joiner Directors Kevin Bowen and Thomas Kane, have been made to Vietnam.

"Before the two governments were rigid in their ideas while the people believed everything that belonged to capitalism was vile," wrote Duong Thuan. “Now, reading what those writers wrote, listening to what they said, the people think differently. The William Joiner Center has a great deal to do with that. The center has invited Vietnamese writers to the U.S. in order to concretize the Vietnam-United States normalization."\textsuperscript{5} Yes, it's incredible, but that was true. A hundred
Vietnamese writers had a chance to visit the U.S., caught sight of another side of America, and brought that back to Vietnam. "WJC is the bridge between the two cultures, the ice breaker ship," said Nguyen Khoa Diem, former Head of the Commission on Ideology and Culture of the Polibureau in a meeting with the American delegation in 2006, "when the relations between Vietnam and the U.S. had still been put on ice." 6

Besides the cultural exchange, Kevin Bowen embarked on a translation program. Since 1994, the William Joiner Institute staff and faculty have completed at least fourteen books of translated Vietnamese poetry, more than any other foreign organization in the world. To the Joiner Institute, "translation isn't a business; it's a journey of discovery and self-enrichment." 7 As Kevin Bowen puts it eloquently: “The practice of translation has been likened to an exercise in travel, a journey the translator takes into the language and culture of another people, another place, sometimes another time. The translator is charged with the task of crossing over into this new territory and returning with a treasure, a jewel, a beautiful object which offers a view of transparency into the lived history, the shared truths, the seeking of a world not fully seen before.” 8

Long-time Joiner Writers Workshop faculty member Martha Collins, in translating the Vietnamese poem "October" of Nguyen Quang Thieu, said she had suddenly realized that she had come into contact with a new world, a world that was very different than that of her own:

Smoke from rice stubble burnt by boys

Tending buffalo after harvest

Carries the taste of October into my heart.

Martha stated: "Beneath the English of the translation, I glimpsed not only my first Vietnamese poem, but also a countryside that was both familiar and unfamiliar. I had grown up in an agricultural state, so I could replace the rice stubble with corn stubble and experience, on an emotional and visceral level, something that all the historical and political reading I’d done had not allowed me
to do. I’ve had very few moments in which the power of poetry has been so clear to me.”

For Fred Marchant, his collection of poems "The Full Moon Boat" published in 2000 could not have been written without his contact with the people, the literature and the culture of Vietnam. That contact played an important role in his personal development. "I had been introduced to a poetry that was radically different from mine,” he writes, "a poetry that sang in the midst of the worst suffering, a poetry of resilience as much as resistance, a poetry that declared the imagination and its education by poetry to be a key to survival, and its witness a matter of central importance to life. In contemporary American culture, with its hubbub and commerce, there is little room or time or quiet in which the power of poetry can be fully affirmed.” He was deeply impressed by how critical the role of poetry played in the making of that country, how poets became the spokespersons of that culture, and how the poetry carried its cultural values from generation to generation.

Van Gia captures the contributions of these American soldiers of culture - "They have accomplished many prodigious tasks not just for the Americans, for the American veterans who once fought in Vietnam, but also for Vietnam with all their impartiality and gallantry." Many Vietnamese American writers have joined in programs organized by the Joiner Institute, have met and worked with writers from Vietnam, starting the process of social and cultural reconciliation.

In the conclusion to his first essay, Kevin Bowen explains the motivation for this work: "I think that spirit very much sums up the spirit of Bill Joiner, and of the Joiner Center. It is a spirit which has overcome the divisions of wars, languages, and oceans, drawing us together, binding us in this work, a work perhaps more important now than ever. We live today in a time when diverse forces and powers seek to divide the world again. The work of dialogue, of exchange, of translation, of opening our hearts, our houses, to others is perhaps more imperiled now than it was twenty years ago when we began this work. With that thought in mind, perhaps, we should look at our accomplishments, not as having reached an end, but as having just found their beginnings."
As the William Joiner Institute celebrates its 30th anniversary of the Joiner Writers’ Workshop and our partnership and collaboration with Vietnamese Writers, I would like to introduce this powerful book of essays for broad dissemination and a wide reading among the American population.

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References

1Nguyen Ba Chung, "War Literature: The Road to the Discovery of Self and the Recovery of Humanity"

2Kevin Bowen, "The Road of Translation: Introduce Vietnamese Literature from Hanoi to Washington”

3Nguyen Duy, "The Duty of Conscience"

4Kevin Bowen, ibid.

5Duong Thuan, "With Poet Nguyen Ba Chung Running in America"

6To Nhuan Vy, "The Road of Vietnamese Literature into the United States: The Path From the Heart”

8Kevin Bowen, Ibid.

9Martha Collins, "Experiencing Vietnam through Poetry”

10Fred Marchant, "The Ferry on Kinh Thay River”

11Van Gia, "The Fruits of Peace and the Heart of Humanity"

12Kevin Bowen, “The Journey of Translation: Introducing Vietnamese Literature from Hanoi to Boston”