We have all grown up in difficult times.

Tran Hung Dao (13th century)

As the plane sets down, the land comes right up at you. Lush greens, blues, browns, and yellows of the paddies, jungle, and mountains with their thousand different shades are so bright they are almost blinding. On the ground, animal and vegetable life threatens to take back the tarmac. In some places it already has. The cities wait, their mazes of streets, each with its own history, each with a name and a whole set of historical associations about which any passerby will argue. This is Viet Nam, a country where place is all-important, and every square inch has a history.

For most Americans, that sense of place and history is still tied to the war and Viet Nam remains a set of discrete images we weave together to make up our own history: young girls in white ao dai and conical hats walking down a road; a monk immolating himself in a street; Vietnamese prisoners gagged and bound being led in a line through a clearing; American prisoners being led through the streets of Ha Noi; a Vietnamese colonel executing a Viet Cong suspect in a Sai Gon street; a young girl burned by napalm running down a road in Trang Bang; a helicopter lifting off the roof of the u.s. embassy in Sai Gon; a tank bursting through the gate of the presidential palace.

Powerful images, true; and perhaps the poetry, as World War I poet Wilfred Owen said, resides in the pathos. Still, little comes from the source: Viet Nam. If we are lucky, we may have heard the voice of Trinh Cong Son over a radio, or a few lines of the poetry of the Vietnamese child prodigy Tran Dang Khoa, or the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. But most likely we have not heard much, not the several-thousand-year-old tradition of folk songs, of myth, of heroic epic, not the tradition of Nguyen Trai, Nguyen Du, Che Lan Vien. The place names we know are also few and tend to be confined to the sites of battle—Da Nang, Quang Tri, Hue, Dak To, Dien Bien Phu—not the names of villages or provinces that conjure entire other histories, real and imagined, of their own.

It probably should not be all that surprising that the poetry of a people deeply uprooted by war should be a poetry of rootedness; a poetry focusing on the endurance and continuity of life in the villages, in the highlands, and along the deltas; a poetry, almost Buddhist in tone, that seeks to affirm the interconnectedness of all things. The reality of the war may intrude in Vietnamese poetry written during the American war, but the great enduring themes remain the traditional Vietnamese ones...
of home and love. The bridge in Pham Tien Duat’s 1964 poem will become Ham Rong (Dragon Gate) Bridge, one of the most heavily bombed and contested sites of the war, and Duat will become one of the war’s great poets, but the themes of place and love will remain at the center of his work, just as they remain at the core of the great poems that survive the war.

The images of these poems are those of people and places struggling and enduring. Even today, amid some deflation of the great heroic myths of the war, the images survive. In Duat’s “In the Labor Market at Giang Vo,” in Nguyen Duy’s “Do Len,” “New Year’s Fireworks,” and “Red Earth, Blue Water,” in Vu Cao’s “The Bells,” and in Le Thi May’s “Poem of a Garden” and “Wind and Widow,” the sense of place and person may appear under siege, but endurance and overcoming are always implied. In the work of the post-war poets Nguyen Quyen and Nguyen Quang Thieu—especially in poems like “The Wheelbarrow,” “October,” and “A Song of My Native Village” by Nguyen Quang Thieu, the most prominent of the post-war poets—the sense of the countryside of Viet Nam as a world of minute and numinous particulars endures.

Unfortunately, much of the richness and beauty of this poetry must be lost in translation. In the Vietnamese language, a line of poetry can have several literal meanings, all quite plausible, all intended by the author. That is just the start of the translator’s dilemma. Monosyllabic and tonal, Vietnamese is a language of words abundant in associations and varying in meaning according to tone. Traditional poetic forms such as the luc bat—a form of alternating six- and eight-syllable lines—have strict requirements regarding rhyme and the alternation of rising, falling, and flat tones, resulting in a complex poetics that also draws upon a rich lexicon of symbols from the natural world. So also with the old folk poems of the countryside, ca dao. Today, as some poets move away from these traditional forms, the rich imagery and deep sense of musicality so embedded in the language enable them to create a poetry filled with possibilities.

All of this is so difficult to render into English, and forty years of war and ten years of embargoes have taken their own toll. For the past twenty years, there has been little Vietnamese taught in the United States and little English taught in Viet Nam. Hence, a paucity of translators, complicating this long period of silence between the two cultures. These problems are not, however, insurmountable. It is now not that unusual in Viet Nam to meet young American students and scholars who can speak the language and read the literature; and in the United States, a small but steady stream of Vietnamese writers and students has been arriving. Most important, poetry flourishes more than ever in Viet Nam: writers are public figures; the merits of this poet or that are the subject of argument in homes and on the street; and almost every province and association have their own literary journal, publishing celebrated local poets as well as those from other regions and, in translation, poets from outside Viet Nam. Writers visiting Viet Nam may find themselves invited to read at local gatherings where rough on-the-spot translations are offered and where they will hear the histories of rivers, lovers, and harvests sung with a cohesion and continuity that can seem to belie fifty years of war and embargo—where, despite the limits of translation, they may often find themselves face-to-face with a poetry that is almost blinding at times, blinding in that way all great poetry is.