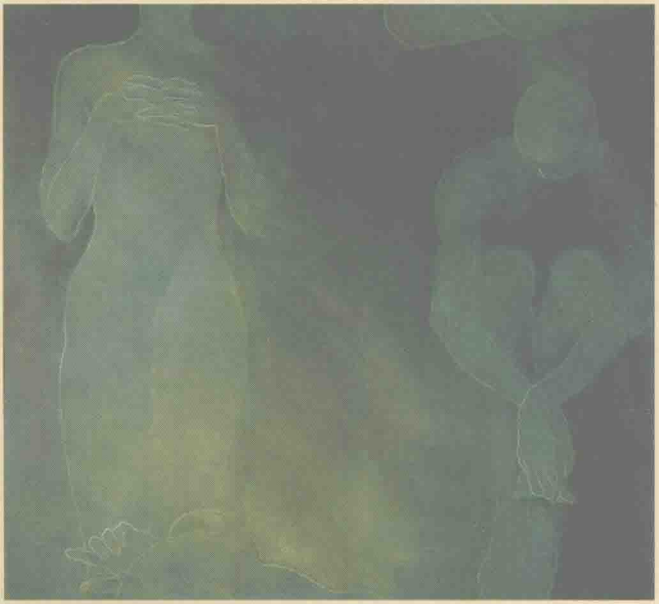
THE STARS, THE EARTH, THE RIVER



short fiction by
LE MINH KHUE

TRANSLATED BY BAC HOAI TRAN & DANA SACHS
EDITED BY WAYNE KARLIN

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Introduction

Although they often concern such universal matters as love affairs, the tangles of family life, greed, ambition and the tyranny of the mundane, "to understand my stories," Le Minh Khue once wrote to me, "you need to understand the history of revolution, war and struggle that my country has gone through and out of which those stories grew." Both Khue's fiction and her life were formed by and in turn reflect the tug between tragedy and hope that have marked her generation's movement through the last half century of Vietnamese history.

Born in 1949 in Thanh Hoa province, south of Hanoi, Le Minh Khue lost her parents when she was very young to the upheavals of the Land Reforms of the early fifties, a period of forced collectivization and class warfare which, as we see in her story "A Small Tragedy," left scars across many lives. Khue was raised by an aunt and uncle who were passionate about both Vietnam's struggle for independence from foreign rule and about literature, both legacies which they passed on for her. She grew up as part of a generation of young people to whom the justice of their cause was as clear as the fact of the American bombs falling on their cities; they were fervent not only with a belief in liberation from foreign domination and national unification, but also in the faith that a socially just and humane society would grow from the roots of victory.

It was that faith which led Le Minh Khue, then sixteen, to lie about her age and enlist in the People's Army in 1965, after the American bombing campaign began. She was assigned to the Youth Volunteer brigades and sent south to the highland jungles, where she received on-the-job training as a sapper. Her duty, along with the rest of the kids in her unit and the thousands like them, was to see that the Ho Chi Minh Trail—really a network of roads built under the jungle canopy in order to keep fighters and supplies flowing south to the war—was kept open. For the next four years, Khue lived in the jungle, often thirsty, starving, filthy, plagued by jungle sores, fevers and scabies, under frequent bombardment, napalm and chemical attack and strafing by the American and South

Vietnamese aircraft whose job was to shut down the Trail. The bombs were dropped while the girls huddled in caves or bunkers, where their bodies were sometimes ripped by shrapnel—Khue remembers one girl who died next to her in the middle of a sentence, a scene she describes in "A Day on the Road." When the bombing stopped, the girls would fill in the craters with dirt, defuse the unexploded bombs, or explode them after packing dynamite around them.

Khue's aunt and uncle had taught her to love reading, and during all her time in the war, she carried books by Chekov, London and Hemingway in her knapsack. She was a reader and then she was a writer: all around her, she saw the drama of her times being played out by her generation and she felt the need to add her stories to the stories that had sustained her not only because they were about tough people surviving tough times, but also because they reassured her that the complications of the human heart still existed beyond the terrible simplicity of the war. She began to be published in the army newspapers—her first story, "The Distant Stars" was written when she was nineteen and immediately received wide attention.

In 1969, Khue's enlistment was over, but when she returned to Hanoi, like many soldiers, she found that she no longer felt comfortable amid the maneuverings and self-concern of civilian, rear area society. She'd lost any romantic notions she'd had about war, but she'd left her heart at the front, with the thousands of soldiers she'd seen day by day going down the Trail, with the remnants she saw returning. She applied for and received a position as a correspondent for *Tien Phong (Vanguard)* magazine and went back to the war, traveling with combat units, witnessing, writing about and broadcasting stories until North Vietnam's final victory in 1975. She was with a unit in the jungles near Danang during the last days of the war: they entered the city and later swept further south (where they occupied the old American helicopter base camp at Marble Mountain where I'd once been stationed). Demobilized, she continued her career as journalist and fiction writer. She married, had a daughter, became an editor at the Writers' Association Publishing House, and continued to write novels and stories—seven books since 1978—that followed her generation's path back from the jungles to the more complex struggles—physical, moral, emotional and spiritual—of postwar life.

* * *

"The war years were both the worst time and the best time for me," Khue wrote to me. "The Distant Stars," written when she was just nineteen and still on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, depicts that dichotomy in the life and work of three Young Volunteers, Nho, Thao, and Dinh, who live in a cave from which they emerge after air raids to measure and fill in bomb craters or explode time-delayed bombs. Dinh, the story's first person narrator, a somewhat pampered teenager from Hanoi, is at first shocked to learn that she would have to "haul dirt." She had imagined that she would be a soldier-hero, carrying a gun, "[her] speech would be strong and terse, just like the slogans." Yet even though "The Distant Stars" was published in 1971, during the war, Dinh, Nho and Thao are far from propaganda poster stereotypes. At times irritable, vain, tender, brave, idiosyncratic, they are above all teenage girls, engaging in flirtations, crushes, quarrels, the sharing of dreams. It is the juxtaposition of that normalcy against the deadly task in which the girls are engaged, and their matter-of-fact courage at doing it, which startle and engage the reader. The story not only vividly depicts the grim details of the war but also the deep sense of purpose, idealism and optimism, the willing self- sacrifice and comradeship among the girls and the other soldiers: "I loved everyone," Dinh says, "with a passionate love...that only someone who had stood on that hill in those moments, could understand fully...that was the love of the people in smoke and fire, the people of war."

The search to achieve that sense of love and that purity of purpose, to once again subordinate one's life to an unselfish ideal —and the way men and women and their societies fail at it—drive many of Le Minh Khue's postwar stories. "The Distant Stars" becomes, in that way, a touchstone for the other stories. In "A Day on the Road," for example, when the narrator, a female combat veteran traveling from Saigon to Hanoi in postwar Vietnam, remembers vividly the death of a girl standing next to her during an American air raid, one understands, one feels like a blow to the guts, that this could have been any of the bright, courageous kids in "Stars." But even more than such direct intertextual echoes are the descriptions of the loss of love and idealism we see in many of

Khue's other stories and feel more poignantly when we remember "The Distant Stars." Often Khue's postwar stories are set at construction projects, places where a literal rebuilding is occurring, where, it is implied, attempts at a deeper rebuilding, a reconstruction of the characters' humanity, are being made—or, conversely, they're set in decaying, shoddily maintained housing projects. We see that future, those attempts, failures and corruptions through the eyes of Ninh, Nho and Thao. During the war, the country around the girls' cave is torn and scarred: "It had been punctured by bombs...neither side of the trail had any signs of vegetation. There were only stripped and burned tree trunks, uprooted trees...twisted parts of vehicles, rusting in the earth." Khue's generation in the North, and in the Southern revolutionary movement, had sustained itself through the fighting and dying with visions of the world that would be built out of the seared jungle, that would rise like a phoenix out of the ashes. "After the war," says Ninh, "When the trail we were protecting here was evenly paved with asphalt. When electricity would flow on wires deep into the forest and timber mills would run all day and night. All...of us understood this. We understood and believed it with a fierce faith." "We defeated two great powers," I once heard the novelist Le Luu say, at a meeting between Vietnamese and American veteran-writers, "we thought we could pull the heavens down to the earth if we were of a mind." But where Ninh's statement is firm and confident, Le Luu's, spoken two decades after the war, was wistful. The skills and disciplines that led to military victory didn't transfer easily to shaping a society at peace; the ashes left by the devastation of the war were too deep to allow the phoenix to emerge. Millions of the best and most dedicated had been killed, millions more had been crippled, widowed, orphaned, and the land had been scarred by bombs and chemicals. Vietnam was still divided psychologically between North and South, victor and vanquished, and was still to go through two more wars. Postwar Vietnam endured and endures the problems of poverty and the social tensions and attitudes that attend deprivation and division: with the fighting over, the Vietnamese genius for survival moved, perhaps inevitably, from the collective to the individual. That movement forms a subtext in Khue's other stories and, as we read, the three girls huddled in a cave under the bombs, their love for each other and their fellow

soldiers, their willingness to sacrifice, their faith in the future, stay in our minds, and we somehow feel their silent commentary and sometimes their heartbreak. I use "we" here deliberately, because while Khue's situations are particular to Vietnam, they are also universal: what society has lived up to its own youthful ideals? The images and emotions in "The Distant Stars" form shining points of light far over the heads of Khue's characters in her other stories as well, lights that sometimes make them, and us, ache for lost dreams, that sometimes, still, act as beacons that suggest infinite possibilities.

In "The Blue Sky," also set during the war, Ninh, a naive female war correspondent who is "infatuated with soldiers and their victories, just like a thirteen year old boy," eventually develops a shell of self-survival and cynicism. Ninh's infatuation is really with anything or anyone who demonstrates the sense of heroic purpose we saw in "The Distant Stars"—but her passion can't survive her editor's cynicism, her colleagues' cowardice, their petty quarrels and jealousies at work, their domestic squabbles. All of it erodes her faith, until she finds herself even doubting the story of a hero she once idolized—the truth, her very ability to discern it, has become cloudy to her.

The normal life that many Vietnamese felt was their due after the long war years often became symbolized for them, as elsewhere on the planet, by consumer goods. The narrator in "A Day on the Road," a woman who was in the Youth Brigades during the war, who saw hundreds of people die around her in the bombing, reacts bitterly when she hears two men speaking incessantly about motor scooters and business deals—they stand in her mind for the way in which people seem to be forgetting the losses of the war and are becoming shallow, self-centered—the way her own lover had left Hanoi to go live in Saigon so he could have such luxuries as a sponge, an imported nylon broom and an electric rice cooker. In a reversal of many American stories about returning male veterans alienated from their wives and lovers who had not had the experience of combat, it is the narrator, a woman, who is the returning veteran—her lover avoided the war and when she came back to him, she could no longer tolerate his constant harping on mundane physical comforts and "luxuries," an obsession which seems to trivialize the sacrifices of the war. And yet she knows she is beset by the same

concerns: "Almost every morning some inconvenience would upset me...I hoped that my pen would improve, that my tires and inner tubes would become more durable, that the rice would have fewer stones and fewer husks, that the ceiling of our house wouldn't collapse from too many leaks, and that I wouldn't have to live with mice." Later, she discovers that the two men she'd overheard were also veterans: "In our generation, it's hard to find anyone who didn't go through the war," one says to her, recalling how he'd been in a battalion that had lost 500 men—and her feelings change; she is able to see their very banality as a sign of human resilience, another kind of victory: "The driver and the interpreter were once again discussing gadgets. Now they were talking about tape recorders and record players. They said nothing about the war and I looked at them with admiration. I knew that no one could forget what had happened during those years. But they were still young and whatever they had experienced only made them stronger."

While Khue's stories all exhibit an understanding of the complexities of human nature, not all of them exhibit the same final sense of hope as "A Day on the Road." "Scenes from an Alley" is one of the four bitter social satires in this collection (the others are "The Almighty Dollar," "Tony D," and "The Coolie's Tale"); each depicts ways in which deprivation and greed corrupt human nature and tear apart family and social relationships. Quyt and his wife, a couple who have entered the ranks of the *nouveau riche* due to his time as a guest worker in Germany, rent out a room to a Westerner, who becomes the economic base of the alley in which they and other families live—a source of rent money, of cash for liquor and prostitutes and even of reparation money when, driving home drunk one night, he runs over a mentally disabled girl. "Oh, a blue-eyed, long-nosed man was a gold mine," the alley dwellers exult.

One of the other main goals of the war was the reunification of Vietnamese society, a goal achieved politically in 1975 when the People's Army rolled into Saigon. Yet, as between North and South in the United States after our Civil War, punitive policies, inefficient administration, corruption, differences of character and temperament, and the extreme difficulties caused by the economic and physical scars left from the war, have made the goal of

reunification far from perfectly realized. In "Fragile As a Sunray" a woman doctor in her forties, who served with a medical unit during the war, is haunted by her memory of an enemy soldier, a Southerner wounded and taken prisoner, who she briefly encountered and treated in a jungle clearing. The two had looked at each other and had known that under different circumstances, they would have loved each other, would have spent their lives together. But he was taken away and even though she never forgets his face: "Now twenty years had passed and many different barriers had been torn down...but her hope has never been fulfilled." What can be seen on one level as a very romantic story, as only Vietnamese stories can be romantic, becomes an expression of all the dreams of reunification still unfulfilled.

Love—the search for it, the failure to achieve it, the need to find an ideal relationship—becomes another paradigm for the utopian search that sustained Khue's generation through the war and for the ways in which reality frustrated that ideal. "Rain," is again one of the stories set at a construction site, a place where new buildings are being erected, but where the humanity of the engineer, the builder, who is the story's antagonist, is eroded and hollow behind his handsome face. He seduces Ngan, a pretty young guest house hostess who has developed a crush on him, but her romanticism is shattered by his love-making, which is selfish and brutal, and which ultimately leaves her feeling soiled and exploited. She loses not only her virginity, but a certain openness to the world, a certain readiness to believe in hopeful possibilities...

Love saves Trang in "The Almighty Dollar;" she is a gentle woman who doesn't seem to fit in with her coarse and contentious family, and who is considered unattractive because she is too tall. However, she is just the right height for a visiting foreigner, who marries her and takes her abroad. Yet the dollars she sends home so that her brothers and sisters-in-law will continue to care for her retarded younger brother Ngheo become the source of the destruction of her family as the two couples fight over the right to care for the boy. One of Khue's bleakest social satires, and less a broad farce than the other three, the characters and some of the scenes in "The Almighty Dollar" could have come from the pen and the South of Flannery O'Connor; its depictions of Ngheo will

put images in the reader's mind that will continue to disturb, and possibly even nauseate, long after the story has been put down.

"The Last Rain of the Monsoon" centers around an extramarital love affair between two engineers sent to work together at a construction project. The narrator, Duc, a male friend of both Mi and Binh, the two lovers, sees both become increasingly involved—and increasingly desperate as the project ends and their affair has to either be finished, or they have to decide to leave their families and commit to each other. Mi, the woman, sees her love for Binh as something that has given meaning back to a life trivialized by routine pettiness and sordidness. After Binh and Mi have met, the narrator suddenly notices how beautiful she is—"her features were bright, as if unexpectedly suffused with happiness," and then notices, as if in contrast a woman selling lemonade who had "...crude hands and unclean fingers. I fixed my eyes on her long, dirty nails, then glanced at the fat flies perched at the mouth of the sugar jar." Yet Duc doesn't have faith in love as a form of rescue or renovation: if Binh and Mi run away with each other, he warns Mi, they will eventually find their lives no different than they are with their present spouses. "The pettiness of daily life will break up even stones." At first Mi can't accept it: "Then I would die. If things are like this forever and ever, then there's nothing left for me at all. I'll erode a little more every day. I'll become stupid, lethargic, house bound. I'll be mean, wicked. I'll shout at my son, fight with the neighbors, become a penny pincher..." But Duc tells her: "To be alive in this world is the best you can hope for. On top of that, you are whole, you sleep soundly at night, you're not hungry, and you have no worries."

"You say that because you lived through the war," Mi replies, that's what Duc, the country, the story implies, has learned from the war: to settle for peace and survival—who has the time or the energy to search for anything more meaningful, and where do such searches lead except back to their starting points? In the end, Mi accepts Duc's reasoning, and, in a seemingly light moment, begins to tell him stories about the squalidness of life in the housing project where she lives, including one about a visitor who fell into an open latrine and nearly drowned in human waste, a scene so funny "it made [her] laugh until [she] cried." There's no way, finally, she feels she can escape the tyranny of the ordinary, the shit she's fallen into...

The terrible living conditions of that housing project and some of its more colorful inhabitants seem to surface again in "Tony D". The story of two petty criminals in Hanoi, Old Man Thien and his son Than, who find and attempt to sell the bones of an American G.I., "Tony D" again depicts how deprivation and greed corrupt traditionally strong Vietnamese family ties—father and son are two predators who prey on each other as readily as on any outsider, who will do anything for money. Yet "Tony D" is also a Hogarth's tour: it depicts the use of the icons of the revolution to gain privilege, corrupt building practices, the migration of peasants to the city, even, perhaps, a sly comment on the state of contemporary poetry, as Old Man Thien and two cronies sit around and make up poems "like kids farting. One after the other." Along with, and underlining all of these revelations, is the image of the war as a haunting, mocking presence, a skull-faced American ghost squatting in the rafters and laughing: the thing that will not go away until it is dug up, and confronted, and prayed to and finally brought to peace.

"A Very Late Afternoon" is a look at a time in Vietnam when association with a Westerner was illegal and would bring a Vietnamese to the attention of the security services. What's also interesting about the story, though, is the way the character, a woman named Hang who as a teenager was arrested and traumatized for having a few innocent conversations with a French boy studying in Hanoi, essentially arranges her own therapy by seeking out an act of love, shedding the virginity, the self-isolation, she's been locked into since her arrest, before she leaves the city forever.

"That wench Canh is coming home," a group of university professors tell each other: "The Coolie's Tale" again tells of someone who has gone abroad and came back wealthy, though this time the work Canh engaged in—or at least what she referred to as her second job—involved experiencing "the Western smell, which was both fatty and redolent with milk." Canh, a guest worker, had discovered a lucrative second career as a prostitute. The story satirizes an academia where (working) class background becomes both prerequisite for admission and the basis of a kind of reverse elitism, and the vestiges of class snobbery: The ever-hungry Professor Tri, who came from three generations of mandarins and who is now married to a cadre who lectures him about the class struggle as if

she is shouting into a loudspeaker, can't help resenting the way "the toads and frogs always rise to the top," even as he accepts gifts of food from Canh.

In "An Evening Away from the City" Tan and Vien could have been any of the girls in "The Distant Stars—their friendship forged deeply in the war when they had both operated a communication station in the jungle. "Whenever one went off on a mission, the other couldn't sleep...Life and death were very close together. Who could know? When they finally parted, they always hugged, which made the soldiers roll their eyes." After the war, the two went to the university. But it is now years later and each has moved into her life: Vien married a poor doctor, who took her to a rural area where he kept her pregnant and abused her: the dreams of her youth have disappeared into the endless tasks of child rearing and housework. Tan, on the other hand, fell in with a group of "notables" at the university and married an older, well-to-do man, became a fashionable woman of Hanoi, living at an elegant address, wearing the latest fashions: "Who could have known that she had ever worn a uniform, that her whole body...had once been covered with scabies and tortured by bouts of malaria?" On a trip to the country, Tan decides to finally look up her old friend, but finds she is repelled by the squalor of Vien's life, horrified when Vien tells her she had thought of coming to the city. "This messy and dirty mother and children were so different from her bedroom with its white curtain and the light blue plaster on the walls. Heaven forbid if they were ever to come visit." In a burst of guilt, she tells Vien she will arrange a trip to the city for her and use her husband's influence to get her friend enrolled again in the university. She means it, but somehow, when she returns, it never happens: "The problem was that she had so little time," she thinks, as she spends her time deciding what clothing to buy, what makeup to wear—and we think of Nho, Thao, and Dinh, sitting in their cave, staring in horrified disbelief at this distant future.

Bac Hoai Tran, one of the translators of these stories, called "A Small Tragedy," the title piece of Le Minh Khue's 1993 collection, one of the most important stories in contemporary Vietnamese literature. Khue's richest, most layered and resonant story, "A Small Tragedy" encompasses the large tragedies of modern

Vietnamese history, the land reform period, the war, and its aftermath, by focusing on the life of one family, the family of the influential and powerful retired cadre Tuyen, and on a marriage between an overseas Vietnamese and Tuyen's daughter. The story opens with the narrator, Thao, a young woman journalist and a niece of Tuyen, who is on her way home after she has failed to interview, to confront a murderer—a son who killed his father. The journalist, discontent with her own lonely and rather shabby life, somewhat envious of her privileged cousin Cay, receives a letter from her uncle, inviting her to come meet his daughter's fiancee. She puts aside her assignment to come to the wedding, to witness and help in the start of this new life, but learns in the course of the story that the sins of the father cannot be put aside: the murders of the past still haunt and direct the present. This translation has appeared in *Vietnam: A Traveller's Literary Companion* (Whereabouts Press). It is presented here for the first time in its unabridged version.

Although "The River" is not Khue's most recently published story, I've placed it last because, true to its title, it seems to flow through and connect the other stories and yet also suggest a direction to go from here. If "The Distant Stars" is the ideal held in memory, then "The River", represents the continued existence of hope—it brings us back to the hope for the future we saw embodied in those three girls in a cave. But it is not the same kind of hope. Dinh, Nho and Thao looked towards a future they couldn't see. But the protagonist in "The River" is a veteran of the war and of the realities of peace. Working in the city, busy with his life, he often thinks that he should go home to the small village where he grew up, but never seems to have the time. It is only after the aunt who raised him dies that he decides to go home to attend the Hundredth Day Ceremony after her death. Thus, like so many of Khue's other stories, "The River" involves a journey. But where the others all end in the city, in the complications of modern life, this story takes the narrator back into the strong roots of his past, away from a city "scarred by too much construction." As he travels, he remembers his childhood in the village, the taste of hot sweet soybean milk and the sugarcane the children chewed and which they saw made into sweet sugar candy. He remembers his aunt, a cherished teacher, and his uncle, who always sang a French song. He remembers the end of that

childhood, when the American bombers began coming, and the village dug in with trenches and shelters, and he hears the story of how his aunt gave birth while the B-52's were dropping their bombs and their house was falling around them. And he remembers leaving for the war and not coming back until now, when he meets the child born that night, when he hears again—under the sound of an English song, the noise of motor scooters, under "the urban noises that had invaded the countryside"—the creaking of a shaft being turned by oxen, grinding the sugar cane, still in the old way. The river connects, as rivers do, past, present and future. This lovely story gifts us with the strength and tenderness of common human beings, their connections to their land, and to their history, and to each other; it shows us how life and hope and love can endure.

* * *

There exists among Americans two stereotypes of the Vietnamese who were on the other side of the war, each coaxed by the holder's own politics. The first sees the Vietnamese as sadistic, heartless communist robots able to win through sheer cruelty and lack of respect for human life. The second paints the Vietnamese as saintly, simple-yet-wise peasant-or poet warriors, Third World boddisatvas who speak in fortune-cookie platitudes, super competent soldiers, who in spite of their martial skills are still gentle, just, and politically correct. Le Minh Khue's stories do not allow either stereotype to remain in the American reader's mind: one can't read them and ever look at the Vietnamese again as anything more or less than human beings, their lives configured by the same passions, angers, love, hope and despair that mark all human lives.

Le Minh Khue the writer continues to perform the task of Le Minh Khue the sapper: searching out and identifying the bombs that lay buried along the Trail along which we must move, bringing them out of the earth, and sometimes identifying them, and sometimes defusing them, and sometimes exploding them, and sometimes smoothing over the scars they leave in the earth. She never lets us forget what is buried and where; in doing so, she gently suggests the directions we must continue to travel.

—Wayne Karlin

Translators' Note

In Le Minh Khue's story "The Blue Sky," the young journalist Ninh interviews a soldier who tells her an astonishing combat story. Ninh, intoxicated by the glories of battle and infatuated by the handsome young soldier, believes every word of it. She writes a passionate article about the incident, but her editor, feeling the story "stretched the truth" refuses to publish it. He tells her to "write something more believable" and she walks out of his office, overwhelmed by tears and anger.

The process of translating Le Minh Khue's fiction into English taught us to sympathize both with Ninh's love of the story and with her editor's demand for exactness. Like Ninh's editor, English is a language that calls for precision. But, like the story Ninh heard, Vietnamese offers as many possibilities as certainties, and refuses to be pinned down.

The most obvious example of the disparity between the two languages comes in the use of verb tenses. What would we do in English without the distinctions between *go*, *going*, and *gone*? In English, we could hardly make it to the grocery store and back, much less through a short story, poem, or novel, without a whole suitcase full of tenses. Vietnamese travel lighter. They speak and write in the basic structure that we might call "present tense," occasionally using past or future markers, but more often leaving it to readers and listeners to fill in the time frame for themselves. One aspect of our task as translators lay in filling in such blanks. For example, when Ninh returns to her office, she asks a question, the original Vietnamese of which goes something like this: "Article day I send back publish number what you know not?" Unlike English, Vietnamese demands the active participation of listeners or readers in pulling together the meaning implied by the words. Although the sentence might sound confusing in English, it follows the rules of Vietnamese grammar and to Vietnamese readers makes perfect sense. In our final version, this sentence becomes: "Do you know what issue my article was published in?" Rendering Vietnamese into English grammar and inserting tenses formed the simplest, most straightforward part of our task.