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# VISIONS OF VIETNAM IN WOMEN'S SHORT FICTION

## SUSANNE CARTER

During World War II, British Writer Elizabeth Bowen recognized the short story as the "ideal prose medium for war-time creative writing." To her it seemed the only genre "capable of conveying the immediacy of her experiences." Both a novelist and a short story writer, Bowen discovered the "disjointed nature of wartime experience was exhilarating for the short story writer" while it "created serious impediments for the novelist who wished to portray these years in fiction." The short story seemed better suited than the novel to capture the "fragmentary and abrupt quality of life" characteristic of wartime.<sup>1</sup>

The Vietnam war fictional writings of contemporary women authors would seem to corroborate Bowen's assertions, for the majority of these women have elected the short story genre to express their individual interpretations of the Vietnam experience rather than the novel form, although there are noteworthy exceptions in Jayne Anne Phillips' *Machine Dreams*, Elizabeth Ann Scarborough's *The Healer's War*, Patricia Walsh's *Forever Sad the Hearts*, and Susan Schaeffer's *Buffalo Aftersnoon*. Bobbie Ann Mason has bridged both genres with her novel *In Country* and short story "Big Bertha Stories."<sup>2</sup>

During the 1970s, following the American defeat in Vietnam, "the war seemed to disappear below the surface of a country that wanted only to forget it."<sup>3</sup> Veterans returning to "the World" from the unreal, almost surrealistic nightmare that was the war in Vietnam were sentenced to silence by an American public largely unsympathetic with their losers' plight. During the 1980s, however, the Vietnam war resurfaced, this time gaining recognition as an "experience, one unique in the annals of American war narratives."<sup>4</sup> Many members of the Vietnam generation, separated by class distinctions, differing self-definitions, and conflicting ideologies during the 1960s, have united in a common search for comprehension.<sup>5</sup> As novelist Robert Stone explains, the pain of the Vietnam war may be arrested, but it will never be fully erased:

It's like a wound covered with scar tissue or like a foreign body, a piece of shrapnel, that the organism has built up a protective wall around, but it is embedded in our history; it is embedded in our definition of who we are. We will never get it out of there. I don't think it is a mortal wound for this society, but I think it is a very, very painful one.<sup>6</sup>

A "cathartic flood" of literature aimed at some kind of understanding and resolution of our longest war and a definition of who

we are in relation to that war experience saturated a receptive public during the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> Especially responsive was the Vietnam generation of Americans, now in their 30s and 40s, still trying to place Vietnam in some meaningful context in their lives, still mourning the 58,132 names etched in black granite on the Vietnam memorial wall in Washington, DC, still trying to resolve so many lingering uncertainties. The Vietnam war was such an illusive experience writers have found it difficult to translate into literary form. "The place became its own bizarre, hermetic mythology," writes Philip Beidler in *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*, the war a "mixup of American mythic consciousness and realized experiential fact so dense and entangled from the very beginning there would never be any real hope of sorting it out."<sup>8</sup> The most common element of Vietnam fiction, writes Stephen McCabe in his essay "The Literature Born of Vietnam," is the "abundance of senselessness—meaninglessness—that provides a strong unifying theme...."<sup>9</sup> Beidler views the role of the Vietnam writer as a creator of meaning where meaning never previously existed through artistic interpretation:

It would become the task of the Vietnam writer to create a landscape that never was, one might say—a landscape of consciousness where it might be possible to accommodate experience remembered within a new kind of imaginative cartography endowing it with large configurings of value and signification. In this way, what facts that could be found might still be made to mean, as they had never done by themselves, through the shaping and ultimately the transforming power of art.<sup>10</sup>

In the fiction written about the Vietnam war during the past two decades the war has emerged as a "story of universal victimization" affecting both men and women of a variety of ages and cultural backgrounds.<sup>11</sup> This broader scope of the war experience has attracted more contemporary women to enter the traditionally male arena of war writing. By adding their impressions of the Vietnam experience to the rapidly mushrooming new genre—still continuing to grow and mature—these women have expanded the scope of the traditionally romanticized, and often didactic war story of the past in favor of short fiction that depicts war's special brand of horror and shows how it affects both veterans and civilians, often the overlooked indirect victims of war.

Most women writers who have contributed short stories to the new canon of Vietnam war literature have used the techniques of realism, viewing the war as outsiders from a female perspective, in contrast to male writers (many of them combat veterans) who tend to relate their war experiences from an internal viewpoint. Perhaps because most American women's experience with war has been largely external, and only partial, the short story seems a more logical representation for expression than the longer novel form. Women's fiction emphasizes the war's sociological effect on male-female

## 76 VIETNAM GENERATION

relationships and family unity. Some women have deviated from this pattern, however, experimenting with form and perspective, to add to the diversity of short stories about the Vietnam experience, both realistic and innovative, offered by women writers. Kate Wilhelm reenacts the My Lai massacre in "The Village," but this time the tragedy takes place on Florida soil. A woman discovers an inner strength never before realized when both her husband and son are believed to be MIA in Maxine Kumin's "The Missing Person." The war becomes a disturbing interference in the lives of a new generation of children oblivious to the Vietnam war except through their veteran fathers in Bobbie Ann Mason's "Big Bertha Stories" and Linsey Abrams' "Secrets Men Keep." Joyce Carol Oates enters the confused mind of a paralyzed veteran, mentally aware enough to realize how thoroughly he has become "out of place" in American society. And, in Emily Prager's bizarre satire, "The Lincoln-Pruitt Anti-Rape Device," the Vietnam war is fought once again, this time with female prostitutes in combat, armed with most unusual feminist weaponry.

In this study of Vietnam war short fiction written by contemporary American women, the stories are classified and analyzed according to theme and mode. In the traditional mode of realism—by far the most prevalent vision of the Vietnam war writers—are short stories with these recurring themes: the American experience in Vietnam and male-female relationships; the American experience in Vietnam and the family; and, the American experience in Vietnam and the veteran. Naturally, some of these short stories overlap in categorization and thus, have been included in more than one thematic section. "Big Bertha Stories" belongs in all three, for it is equally a story of a disintegrating marital relationship, a story of the stress placed on a family by the problems of a troubled veteran, and the story of a veteran haunted by guilt and regret, struggling to readjust to civilian life. Favoring a more innovative mode, other women writers look either into the future or the past, and reconsider the significance of the Vietnam war and the consequences of the repetition of that tragic event with a different sort of vision.

### IN THE TRADITION OF REALISM

#### **"Walking Time Bombs:" THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN VIETNAM AND MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS.**

The stress the American experience in Vietnam has placed on male-female relationships is the central focus of several short stories by American women. During the early 1970s, many American women unsuspectingly "snuggled next to walking time bombs" when their lovers returned as strangers from Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> One wife of a Vietnam veteran reflected: "We knew the veterans were not heroes even before they did, but we were not sure just what they were....We refused to allow them to defuse. We didn't know how to hear men cry...."<sup>13</sup> Many women, like the character of Jeannette in "Big Bertha Stories," were dismayed to find their lovers obsessed by "another woman" they could scarcely comprehend

much less hope to compete with: "Her name is Vietnam. She is ugly and battle scarred, but her power is great. Somehow this 'other woman'—Vietnam—still controls the men who knew her."<sup>14</sup>

In Susan Lowell's short story, "David," the male-female relationship never develops because the female narrator senses her potential lover is destined never to return from his assignment in Vietnam. A series of letters from Vietnam to Canada and back chronicle the relationship of a veteran and his lover in Margaret Gibson's "All Over Now," their last remaining tie severed when Calvin's letters continue to arrive, but his body does not. Relationships are strained, some to the breaking point, when veterans return as strangers to their wives and lovers and cannot readjust to civilian life, vividly represented in Maxine Kumin's "These Gifts," Bobbie Ann Mason's "Big Bertha Stories," and Julia Thacker's "A Civil Campaign."

Laurie Albert, "Veterans," in Joe Bellamy and Roger Weingarten, eds., *Love Stories/Love Poems* (San Diego: Fiction International) 1982: 56-64. The unnamed narrator of "Veterans" feels intensely jealous of the "other woman" who lingers in her lover's mind, representing a history he has experienced but she, as a woman, has been denied. She and Stefan are hopelessly out of accord, she overzealously trying to penetrate his barrier of silence in a futile attempt to vicariously experience the war, while Stefan internalizes his war wounds and refuses to express whatever anger or guilt or sense of loss he feels. "I don't have answers for you," he says, continually refusing her questions in an effort to protect his past.<sup>15</sup> The attraction between the two eventually dissolves, the narrator admitting to herself, "I have no time for Stefan. For him there is no time."<sup>16</sup> The story offers perceptive insight into the frustration of a woman, longing to penetrate the forbidden territory of the male domain of war and touch the most enigmatic and well-guarded part of her lover's psyche, and a veteran who needs the intimacy of a relationship but refuses to let anyone break down the wall he has carefully erected around his Vietnam experience.

Margaret Gibson, "All Over Now," *Considering Her Condition* (New York: Vanguard) 1978: 53-67. This epistolary story is composed of letters to and from a soldier in Vietnam and his civilian lover in Canada. The story is written from the vantage points of both a male insider, who wages war with his own identity and values (as well as with an elusive enemy), and a female outsider, who longs to join him, "trudging, wading through the muck, a gun slung over my shoulder, wondering like you if the thunder, the bomb thunder would ever stop."<sup>17</sup> The two attempt to maintain their intimacy through shared confidences and a strong bond of memories, but Clare comes to accept that her relationship with Calvin is "all over now" when his letters keep arriving but his body lies missing somewhere in Vietnam.

Shirley Ann Grau, "Homecoming," *The Wind Shifting West* (New York: Alfred Knopf) 1973: 41-54. In this piece of short fiction a mother attempts to fabricate a relationship that never existed between a daughter and a

## 78 VIETNAM GENERATION

Vietnam casualty so that she can relive her own tragic, historical drama when her own husband was killed in the Korean War. The story examines the conflict between the daughter's honest feelings—that Harold was only a casual date, a “poor bastard” whom she pitied more than admired, not worth the effort of mourning—and the hypocritical displays of emotion expected of her by her mother and neighbors who expect her to play the role of the bereaved widow. The telegram announcing Harold's death becomes an excuse for a social gathering during which the attending members of the World War II generation relive their individual moments of glory during a war remembered as far more honorable than Vietnam. The story illustrates how attitudes toward war can dramatically change during the span of one generation, and how war can create familial conflicts even among non-participants.

Maxine Kumin, “These Gifts,” *Why Can't We Live Together Like Civilized Human Beings?* (New York: Viking) 1975: 75-84. The youthful marriage of high school lovers does not survive the changes rendered by Neddy's Vietnam experience. While he is fighting half a world away, Sheila is formulating her identity as an adult individual. Neddy returns, “a daring boy the war reduced to a dreamlike state,” so passive at times he reminds his wife of a turtle in winter hibernation.<sup>18</sup> Sheila emerges as the stronger of the two, a woman who would rather face life alone than cope with her husband's post-Vietnam war estrangement and withdrawal. This story depicts the consequences of a relationship severed by the experience of war, one partner continuing to grow and self-actualize, the other frozen in time.

Susan Lowell, “David,” *Southern Review* 7 (1971): 254-264. “David” is the story of a wistful relationship that never has the chance to develop because the narrator convinces herself that David, a drifter who enlists in the Marines, will never return from his tour in Vietnam. “He is Hamlet and Huckleberry Finn and Lucifer flaming on his way to hell,” concludes the narrator, as she envisions him on a self-created, tragic mission of demonic futility.<sup>19</sup> “I am in love with David in a temporal way, and he is going to die. The end is inescapable.”<sup>20</sup> Lowell constructs the emotional defense of a woman who finds it safer to resist the start of a relationship than to allow herself to become involved and live with the uncertainty of the return of the naive young David. Lowell's characterization of the narrator, Susan, is an effective contrast to many of the youths of Kennedy's Camelot years who were reared on romanticized images of warfare, who envisioned their country (and themselves) as invincible, only to become severely disillusioned at the lack of romantic adventure and proliferation of death and defeat awaiting them in Vietnam. Susan portrays the opposite end of that idealistic spectrum in her cynical view of the Vietnam war.

Bobbie Ann Mason, “Big Bertha Stories,” in Reese William, ed., *Unwinding the Vietnam War* (Seattle: Real Comet Press) 1987: 121-134. Donald is so obsessed with reliving his Vietnam experience, his vision narrowed by a combination of regretful hindsight and overbearing guilt, that his wife is convinced “there must be another woman, someone that large in his

mind.”<sup>21</sup> Despite her attempts to understand the complexity of Donald's psychological dilemma, hampered by her impatience and frequent indifference (“Wasn't Vietnam a long time ago?” she continually asks), Jeannette slips comfortably into the single parent role when Donald admits himself to a Veterans Administration Hospital for an undetermined length of stay. Her epiphany—the realization that she has thought of Donald as husband, father, and provider (and found him equally deficient in all three roles), but never really thought of him as an individual, never attempted to look deep inside of him—comes too late, for not only has her marriage disintegrated, her dreams have become disquieting nightmares of the same haunting variety that disturbed Donald's sleep. Involuntarily, Jeannette has become another noncombatant victim of the Vietnam experience, and her marriage a casualty.

Judith Rascoe, “Soldier, Soldier,” *Yours, and Mine* (Boston: Little, Brown) 1969: 164-179. Contrary to the theme of many short stories which point to the Vietnam experience as the cause of the breakdown of a relationship, in this story Nicholas' experience in Vietnam is what attracts war-resister Nola to him. One of the few young men in their community who returns from Vietnam, Nicholas becomes an object of curiosity. Has he changed? Is he corrupted? Is he homosexual? Nola finds his mysterious mannerisms and unpredictable intentions intriguing. Like Clair in “All Over Now,” and the narrator of “Veterans,” she is eager to vicariously experience the realities of war denied to most women because of their gender. “What's it like to hold a rifle?” she wonders. Nicholas' undisclosed experiences in Vietnam form the basis of Nola's attraction to him and her willingness to begin a relationship with uncertain direction.

Julia Thacker, “A Civil Campaign,” in J. Laughlin, ed., *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 44 (New York: New Directions) 1982: 83-88. Leah must cope with one of the most difficult psychological problems faced by the female protagonists in these stories—the potential impotence of her veteran partner—yet she emerges as one of the strongest female characters with the most realistic possibility of an enduring relationship, despite the stress caused by wheelchair-bound Gus' handicaps. As Gus becomes more withdrawn and reclusive with his war wounds, Leah becomes more disgruntled and impatient with his “hollow” existence. Their relationship assumes an awkward, polite distance, bland and stagnant. In a passionate confrontation that shatters the distance separating them and nearly climaxes in violence, Gus takes his first decisive action since his homecoming. Leah humbles herself in deference to his unexpected assertiveness, and their relationship begins to assume balance and vitality once more. This story depicts in detail the veteran who returns from Vietnam but withdraws from society where he can hide his incontinence and accept his impotence in solitary security. It is also a character study of a woman assertive enough to risk challenging her lover's dormancy rather than allow him to vegetate in self pity or abandon him to confront his condition alone. “A Civil Campaign” is also a study of the delicate equilibrium of the sexual battlefield, upset by the experiences of one partner on a strange and distant military battlefield.

# 80 VIETNAM GENERATION

## WAR'S OTHER VICTIMS: THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE AND THE FAMILY

The repercussions of the Vietnam experience for the veteran's family are explored in several short fictions written by women. It is not only the veteran who has suffered from his service "in-country," but the significant others in his life as well—"an army of millions" who have involuntarily become direct victims of war although they have never experienced combat.<sup>22</sup> Two stories, Maxine Kumin's "The Missing Person" and Leslie Silko's "Lullaby," contrast different mothers' acceptance of the reality that their sons will not return from Vietnam. Three other stories—Stephanie Vaughn's "Kid MacArthur," Laura Kalpakian's "Veteran's Day," and Maura Staunton's "Oz"—focus on brother-sister relationships altered by the war. The psychological problems of the Vietnam veteran are sometimes internalized by his children, who become unwilling, innocent victims of war by virtue of association. These children often show signs of low self-esteem, aggressiveness, developmental delays, and difficulties with social interaction.<sup>23</sup> Some children, similar to Rodney in "Big Bertha Stories," even exhibit behavior aberrations (such as recurring nightmares) quite like those of their veteran fathers. Many report feeling responsible for their fathers' emotional well-being.<sup>24</sup> The short fiction pieces "Big Bertha Stories" and "Secrets Men Keep" show how the readjustment difficulties of veterans can adversely affect their children's lives. In all of these stories it is clearly apparent that the Vietnam experience make unalterable changes in the family that often necessitate rebuilding and restructuring, or the unity of the family is placed at risk.

Linsey Abrams, "Secrets Men Keep," *Mademoiselle*, August 1985: 144-146+. At six years old, Jeffrey has undergone counselling for two years in an attempt to cope with his father's Vietnam war injury. Jeffrey has built an irrational fear of all men who can walk, originating from his father's paralysis, and tries to counteract his own fear that he will "get caught like Daddy was" by creating his own introverted fantasy world where he has convinced himself if he remains as "silent as an Indian" and avoids contact with adult males, no one will ever be able to "deaden his legs."<sup>25</sup> This story illustrates how fears related to war can become disproportionate and very inhibiting in the mind of a sensitive child.

Laura Kalpakian, "Veteran's Day," in Michael Blackburn, Jon Silkin & Lorna Tracy, eds., *Stand One* (London: Victor Gollancz) 1984: 9-30. When Walter Sutton returns from Vietnam as the stereotypical "disturbed" veteran—unpredictable and volatile—he begins to distribute long nozzled gas masks to protect innocent citizens against the government's conspiracy to pollute the environment with "killer enzymes and radio carbons" destined to reduce "everyone's brain to tapioca pudding."<sup>26</sup> Although his crusade is interrupted several times with temporary incarcerations in the State Loony Bin, his sister maintains her confidence that he is sane and will "outsmart them all. He's not crazy," she

maintains. "He never was."<sup>27</sup> In her rationalization of her brother's bizarre fantasies and defense of his irrational fears, Walter's sister becomes an indirect victim of the Vietnam war as she develops the same paranoia and post-Vietnam dementia that plague her brother. Although she did not fight in the war, she has allowed herself to become an accomplice in Walter's private war against governmental authority, a war in which both of them will ultimately be losers. Watching the late-night television news, she slips on one of Walter's masks and relishes a moment of calm serenity and temporary relief from her growing paranoia: "It's real quiet inside that gas mask. I can hear myself breathe and I know if I wear it enough they'll never get me."<sup>28</sup>

Maxine Kumin, "The Missing Person," Joyce Carole Oates, ed., *The Best American Short Stories 1979* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin) 1979: 234-242. The disappearance of both her son in Vietnam and her husband on a busy city street one night evokes a surprising source of strength in Ellie, the protagonist of this short story. "The Missing Person," is a story of a woman's moment of crisis when she is presented with the choice of either acting decisively or succumbing to stress, not altogether unlike the psychological demands placed upon a soldier in combat. Although portrayed as dependent and fragile, Ellie discovers an inner fortitude that surfaces spontaneously and allows her to respond rationally when her husband suddenly vanishes. It is as if her son's disappearance in Vietnam subconsciously provides her with a reservoir of emotional strength which can be tapped to endure crucial situations.

Bobbie Ann Mason, "Big Bertha Stories." Donald's young son already shows signs of emotional disturbance in "Big Bertha Stories." When his part-time father unexpectedly appears, Rodney is caught between the urge to run and hug his father's knees or hide in the closet (he does both). He draws disturbingly violent pictures illustrating the "Big Bertha" stories his father tells and experiences nightmares with frightening images similar to those that torment his father. It is only when his father commits himself to a Veterans Administration hospital that Rodney's pictures assume a more peaceful imagery and his nightmares gradually subside. This story illustrates how even the occasional presence of a troubled father can have detrimental effects upon an impressionable young child.

Leslie Silko, "Lullaby," Martha Foley, ed., *The Best American Short Stories 1975* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin) 1975: 254-262. In this story an aging Navajo mother wraps herself in her youngest son's army blanket—all that she has left of him—and huddles against the cold with memories of her three children, all taken by white men in khaki uniforms whose language she could not comprehend. Two of them had infectious diseases during childhood, and Jimmy was taken by the Vietnam draft. This is a tragic example of American Indian stoicism, a defense built gradually in response to learned powerlessness. The Vietnam war claims yet another son of a mother who has sacrificed her third and last child to an unknown cause.

## 82 VIETNAM GENERATION

Maura Stanton, "Oz." *The Country I Come From* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions) 1988: 25-35. This story, set in the Midwest, draws a symbolic comparison between a family seeking safety against the imminent danger of an approaching tornado, and the inevitable departure of one of their sons for the equally turbulent war in Vietnam. The physical and emotional closeness of the family members huddled together in their basement shelter (not unlike the World War II bomb shelters remembered by the mother) makes the unspoken absence of the recently drafted son awkwardly conspicuous. The recorded sensations of the sister-narrator, who leaves the safety of the basement to hunt for the family's missing cat and witnesses the full fury of the storm, resemble the impressions that might be expected of a sensitive soldier experiencing his first vivid and terrifying impressions of war: "I felt dizzy, as if I had been spinning and spinning. This must be like the future, I thought. Your past did not blow away. It was you who blew away. You looked out the window and everything was different."<sup>29</sup>

Stephanie Vaughn, "Kid MacArthur," in William Abrahams, ed., *Prize Stories 1986: The O'Henry Awards* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday) 1986: 226-244. The brother-sister relationship in this award winning story is strengthened by the Vietnam war which he fights and she protests. Once the war ends, MacArthur's sister becomes the only family member who can relate with her brother's isolationism, vegetarianism, and *laissez faire* attitude toward the future. She becomes the sole intermediary between her brother, who has chosen to live a solitary existence in a rural farmhouse, and his estranged parents, bitterly disappointed that MacArthur has rejected the military career they always envisioned for him, even as he was named at birth. Although MacArthur's life seems defined by negatives—"no job, no college, no telephone, no meat"—his sister accepts his solitary lifestyle and peculiarities without judgment, continuing to remain his one assured link with the outside world. Although their methods of expression may differ, this brother and sister both rebel against their representative military upbringing and its corresponding set of rigid values. The Vietnam experience draws them closer as siblings who share a common rejection of their family's regimented, hawkish traditions.

### "OUT OF PLACE": THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE AND THE VETERAN

Although the stories written by women about the Vietnam experience usually emphasize a female perspective, many of these stories also address the unique psychological difficulties experienced by veterans who went to Vietnam so young, and returned old before their time—many of them victims of post traumatic stress disorder. In *Vietnam Wives*, Aphrodite Matsakis characterizes the Vietnam veteran with PTSD as a "case of unwept tears, unsuffered suffering, a numb heart full of pain, subject to unwanted rage reactions which express not only a deep sense of betrayal and alienation, but a profound sense of grief, hopelessness, self-pity and self-hate as well."<sup>30</sup> The description seems

appropriate for a number of Vietnam veteran characters in women's short fiction: Neddy ("These Gifts"), Walter ("Veteran's Day"), Donald ("Big Bertha Stories"), Gus ("A Civil Campaign"), Stefan ("Veterans"), and MacArthur ("Kid MacArthur"). Still other veteran characters suffer related maladies. In "All Over Now" Calvin doubts both his masculinity and his sanity while serving in Vietnam. The protagonist of Joyce Carol Oates' "Out of Place" returns from Vietnam horribly disfigured, haunted by frequent flashbacks, and unsure of his identity. In Ethel Yates' "Seeds of Time" Harry attains the "height of manhood" at 17 when he joins the male ritual of battle, but returns from Vietnam less than the intact hero he envisioned himself to be.

Laurie Alberts, "Veterans," in Joe Bellamy and Robert Weingarten, eds., *Love Stories/Love Poems* (San Diego: Fiction International) 1982: 56-64. Stefan represents the veteran who is protective of his Vietnam experience, unwilling to share his memories of war or his accompanying feelings about war with anyone, not even those with whom he is most intimate. Clues in the story, such as his violent/pacifist tendencies (he cries at the thousands of toads squashed by cars each spring, but hurls dishes across the kitchen in an angry rage), his inability to express his feelings, his abrupt emotional swings, and his preparation for the inevitable nuclear war (a sailboat and a rifle), suggest that Vietnam is still an existing, if not an interfering wedge of influence in his life. Yet his Vietnam experience remains a mystery he will reveal to no one, even if the price of secrecy is the loss of intimacy. Stefan lacks structure, direction, and, often, a reality base in his life. For Stefan, as for so many Vietnam veterans, "there is no time," so out of place is he.

Margaret Gibson, "All Over Now." A former mental patient, Calvin volunteers for service in Vietnam to prove to himself he is capable of "pulling the trigger." Once engulfed in the miasma of death and destruction, Calvin not only doubts his masculinity but his sanity as well. He helps a Vietnamese woman sort through a heap of bodies in search of her lost children. He witnesses soldiers "drawn to death" who throw down their guns and run, screaming into enemy fire, "their screams almost a shout of joy."<sup>32</sup> "I'm afraid and I'm afraid to be afraid," he confesses in a letter to his lover, Clare. "I am a Columbus who has rediscovered madness."<sup>32</sup> Calvin's life is cut short before it is apparent how his tour in Vietnam might have changed his character, but the contents of the letters indicate his mental stability was already growing more uncertain as the war progressed, and with it, the outcome of his own private battle with his insecurities and fear of death.

Laura Kalpakian, "Veteran's Day." Walter Sutton stands as the most disturbed and violent veteran characterized in these short stories written by women. A juvenile delinquent, he is "sentenced" to Vietnam by a judge who is hopeful military training "would still make a man of him," but "the Army spits him back like he was a slug we'd tried to slip in the juke box," his sister recalls.<sup>33</sup> Walter suffers from paranoid delusions that the government is "putting chemicals everywhere so they can putrefy our

## 84 VIETNAM GENERATION

brains and we'll obey them and not have a single thought of our own. They're controlling us just like they controlled all those boys who went to Vietnam."<sup>34</sup> He wages his own war against the government (wearing a gas mask for protection) when he is not serving time for terrorism or theft in the State Loony Bin. This story points to the fallacy of using the military for rehabilitation, for in Walter's case, his military experience in Vietnam only exacerbates his psychological problems.

Maxine Kumin, "These Gifts." Neddy is the numbed victim of Vietnam warfare who remains in an almost catatonic state (even after electroshock therapy), so passive he reminds his wife of a turtle whose heartbeat has slowed, decelerating for winter hibernation. He would rather hide from the world around him than attempt to interact with it. Only when Sheila's life is suddenly placed in danger is Neddy "roused from his torpor." But it is too late. Sheila has realized she can actualize her life without Neddy, who is more of a parasite than a companion. Like many estranged veteran husbands, Neddy is left alone to confront his inability to adjust to life after Vietnam.

Bobbie Ann Mason, "Big Bertha Stories." Donald's stress disorder derives from his combined infatuation with the gentle Vietnamese people and their country's awesome beauty, his guilt over the role he played as an accomplice ruining the Vietnamese landscape, and his obsessed conviction that the war in Vietnam could have been won if only the Americans had employed the power of more "Big Bertha" machines. He fails as husband, father, and financial provider for his family. He finds he can only play the cultural roles expected of him part of the time, retreating into seclusion periodically. This story presents the dilemma of the veteran who attempts to readjust to civilian life but discovers too many insurmountable hurdles blocking his way.

Joyce Carol Oates, "Out of Place," *The Seduction and Other Stories* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow) 1975: 154-164. Narrated from the viewpoint of a veteran paralyzed and grossly disfigured by the Vietnam war, so tormented by flashbacks he is unsure of his own name (although he is certain he is *not* the same individual who served in Vietnam), this story portrays the pathos of a veteran who realizes his painful appearance and vacillating mental clarity render him "out of place." He accepts without protest his ostracism from a family that appears too superficially positive in his presence and a society that is so blatantly obvious in its rejection of the Vietnam war veteran.

Julia Thacker, "A Civil Campaign." This story examines a veteran's emotional response to the reality that his sexual life is permanently altered by a wound acquired in Vietnam. Gus copes with his wheelchair-bound, incontinent, possibly impotent post-Vietnam condition, like many veterans, by withdrawing from the world, hibernating in his apartment refuge. He and his partner's lives have become a "set score, a familiar record one puts on because he knows the lilt and crescendos and can listen without particularly hearing anything."<sup>35</sup> It is only when Leah confronts him with the challenge to face the world, to "do anything to show you're still a man," that Gus' lethargic trance is broken with an

outburst of passionate rage at her that can be interpreted as a positive sign that the withdrawal phase of Gus' post-Vietnam recuperation may be coming to an end, and his relationship sustained.

Stephanie Vaughn, "Kid MacArthur." MacArthur represents the Vietnam veteran who withdraws into a self-imposed solitary confinement in his search for a meaning to his life after Vietnam. To his military family, MacArthur's life as a vegetarian pacifist is a disappointing enigma "defined by negatives." MacArthur is one of the rare Vietnam veterans characterized in these stories who seems content in his role as exile, fulfilled in his chosen lifestyle of organic simplicity with minimal contact with the outside world. His family members who anticipated a military hero, cannot adjust to the reticent antihero who returned from Vietnam instead.

## INNOVATIVE VISIONS

Innovative writers search beyond the limitations of traditional fiction for a more expansive mode of representation (although some admittedly abandon representation altogether) to reflect their impressions of the Vietnam experience. For innovative writers, non-traditional literary forms may offer the closest interpretation of a war that continues to remain as elusive and ambiguous as the American war in Vietnam. Jerome Klinkowitz discusses the effect of the Vietnam war on contemporary fiction in his essay "Writing Under Fire: Postmodern Fiction and the Vietnam War": "Vietnam affected our literary imagination in ways that no other war has, and the result has been a body of fiction that relies on various innovative formal devices, similar to the experimental features that characterize other postmodern fiction, to capture a sense of that war's assault on language and our sense of reality."<sup>36</sup>

From the content of the innovative short stories discussed here, it is obvious these authors have broken with the tradition of realism in content as well as form. These writers often abandon the woman's traditional external vision of war in favor of an internal perspective usually associated with male writers.

Margaret Gibson, "All Over Now." The letters which comprise this story follow an emotional chronology that is cyclical rather than the traditional linear progression usually associated with the epistolary form, an innovation which shows the influence of contemporary psychology in the short story form. Readers follow the psychological changes Clare undergoes as her lover departs for Vietnam, experiences the atrocities of war, begins to doubt his own sanity, and then becomes one of the war's casualties himself. The story begins—and ends—at the same point (Clare standing on a subway platform screaming at her dead lover, at last able to release her repressed emotions) with flashbacks in letter form providing the narrative structure of the story.

## 86 VIETNAM GENERATION

Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Word for World is Forest," in Harlan Ellison, ed., *Again, Dangerous Visions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday) 1972: 28-118. This novella is set in a future century and depicts the destruction of another planet very similar to Vietnam, and the disruption of its peaceful inhabitants by invading American troops. Although Vietnam is never mentioned specifically, the parallels between planet Atshe and Vietnam are obvious. The invading Americans are led by a captain who regards the Atsheans as subhuman and believes "the only time a man is really and entirely a man is when he's just had a woman or just killed another man."<sup>37</sup> American soldiers are supplied with drugs and prostitutes. Numerous land mines and underground tunnels mar the landscape, helicopters continuously comb the sky, and monstrous, oversized weaponry shipped to the planet from Earth prove as worthless for fighting on the Atshe terrain as they were a century before in the jungles of Vietnam. Writing in the science fiction genre, Le Guin launches a fictional protest against the war that serves as an ecological and humanistic admonition to Americans.

Emily Prager, "The Lincoln-Pruitt Anti-Rape Device," *A Visit from the Footbinder* (New York: Simon & Schuster) 1982: 130-180. This macabre postmodern feminist satire proposes an alternate history. As the failure of American troops in Vietnam is acknowledged, female troops (former prostitutes programmed into a troop of emasculators eager to wield their vaginal wrenches with a degree of viciousness no male ever imagined) are dispatched to Vietnam to test their experimental weaponry against the Vietcong. These women go armed with ingenious, sadistic vaginal inserts guaranteed to inflict instant death on penetrators. This story is a sustained lampoon, countering the absurdity of war with an equally absurd solution. Writing from a radical feminist point of view, Prager employs both the comic and ironic modes of fiction in a combination that examines war in a cerebral and humorous light. Her story has a lingering, satirical bite.

Kate Wilhelm, "The Village," *The Infinity Box* (New York: Harper & Row) 1975: 277-287. This short piece of speculative fiction simulates a reenactment of the 1969 My Lai massacre, which killed 347 Vietnamese civilians, most of them women and children. This time American troops are ordered to murder *en masse* unsuspecting small-town Southerners trapped "when the wrong village and the wrong war meet."<sup>38</sup> The speculative mode allows Wilhelm to juxtapose the casual routines of the townspeople with the aggressive march of the infantrymen, callously programmed only to carry out orders as served. While Mildred Carey argues with the local grocer over the price of tomatoes, one of the soldiers *en route* to the village expresses his indifference to the task ahead: "One fucken village is just like the others."<sup>39</sup> Fantasy distorts the situation just enough that the imagined atrocity becomes more shocking than a graphic narration of the gruesome event might have been, similar to the technique used by Shirley Jackson two decades earlier in her short story "The Lottery." Like "The Word for World is Forest," this story stands as a potent reminder of the tragic consequences of unchecked aggression and the dehumanization of the military system.

## CONTINUING VISIONS: WOMEN WRITERS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This collection of short stories reinforces Elizabeth Bowen's assessment of the potential of the wartime short story. Although their perspectives and writing styles may vary greatly, these women have found the short story genre to be brief enough to coincide with the disruptions and uncertainties of life during (and after, in the case of the long, slow recovery period of Vietnam) wartime but long enough to offer a representative depiction of how the Vietnam war has affected the lives of women—whether they grow more independent as a result of the experience, as in "The Missing Person"; more assertive, as in "A Civil Campaign"; more paranoid, as in "Veteran's Day"; or more militant, as in "The Lincoln-Pruitt Anti-Rape Device." As a collective unit, these stories stand as proof that the "gender gap" of war writing is indeed narrowing. Novelist Marge Piercy points out in her essay "Of Arms and the Woman" that women have always "experienced" war, even if they have never seen combat:

Bombs do not fall only upon men from the ages of eighteen to forty-five. They kill and maim women, old people, children, babies, cats, dogs, tigers, and water buffalo; birds, reptiles, and the landscape and future of a place. Women experience wars even when they do not fight in them; and not infrequently, women end up fighting, if not in the official armies, in the unofficial armies that have been part of every war in the second two thirds of this century.<sup>40</sup>

Now, in greater numbers, women are translating those experiences into literature that reflects a broader perspective of war experience. The content of these short stories indicates that the concept of the traditional war story has indeed expanded far beyond the romantic and didactic modes popular in past wars. The images in some of these stories—American raping Americans before the massacre in "The Village," a soldier helping a Vietnamese woman sort through a pile of bodies in "All Over Now," feminists eager to wage war in "The Lincoln-Pruitt Anti-Rape Device"—are haunting reminders of war's brutal nature. Other images—Clare's emotional outburst at her dead lover while she stands on a subway platform in "All Over Now," an Indian woman wrapped in an Army blanket in "Lullaby," Jeannette's dream of bouncing on a pile of stringy bodies in "Big Bertha Stories"—lament war's far-reaching, detrimental effect upon women, even if the war is half a world away. Still other images—Rodney's violent nightmares in "Big Bertha Stories," and Jeremy's irrational fears of ambulatory men in "Secrets Men Keep"—point to a war that has affected not only the Vietnam generation, but generations to come as well. These visions of Vietnam and its still unresolved aftermath are at once disturbing, sobering, enlightening and, above all, symbolic of an era of social and political unrest that

## 88 VIETNAM GENERATION

united many of the Vietnam generation in mutual mistrust of authority and a desire for peace. Underlying all of these stories is the common, if not always overt, quest to come closer to comprehending this still mystifying war experience in the hope that understanding the past may represent the first step toward the prevention of future conflict. The collective vision of Vietnam represented in these stories is also one of reconciliation as women attempt to survive the postwar stress of Vietnam in individual ways and regain a semblance of normality. They endeavor not to bury the Vietnam experience, but to reach a point where it might continue to influence their vision while no longer dominating their lives.

The long-lasting, far-reaching effects of the Vietnam experience as one of "universal victimization" have expanded the boundaries (if indeed there are any left) of war fiction to the point where male and female, traditional and innovative writers alike find room for literary expression. This body of short fiction represents a significant contribution to the still-expanding Vietnam genre and the short story achievement of contemporary women, many of them members of the Vietnam generation.

<sup>1</sup> Heather Bryant Jordan, "The Territory of Elizabeth Bowen's Wartime Short Stories," *Library Chronicles* 44 (16 September 1988): 1.

<sup>2</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason, *In Country* (New York: Harper & Row) 1985; Jayne Anne Phillips, *Machine Dreams* (New York: Pocket) 1984; Elizabeth Ann Scarborough, *The Healer's War* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday) 1988; Susan Schaeffer, *Buffalo Afternoon* (New York: Knopf) 1989; Patricia Walsh, *Forever Sad the Hearts* (New York: Avon) 1982.

<sup>3</sup> Carol Lynn Mithers, "Missing in Action: Women Warriors in Vietnam," *Cultural Critique* 3 (1986): 79.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic) 1987: 219.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*: 220.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Shroeder, "Two Interviews: Talks with Tim O'Brien and Robert Stone," *Modern Fiction Studies* 30 (Spring 1984): 135-164.

<sup>7</sup> Mithers: 79.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Beidler, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (Athens: University of Georgia Press) 1983: 13, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen McCabe, "The Literature Born of Vietnam," *The Humanist* (March-April 1986): 30.

<sup>10</sup> Beidler: 16.

<sup>11</sup> Elshtain: 218.

<sup>12</sup> Aphrodite Matsakis, *Vietnam Wives* (Kensington: Woodbine House) 1988.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*: 29.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*: xii.

<sup>15</sup> Alberts: 57.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*: 64.

<sup>17</sup> Gibson: 28, 65.

<sup>18</sup> Kumin: 83.

<sup>19</sup> Lowell: 255.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*: 254.

- 21 Mason: 207.
- 22 Myra MacPherson, *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday) 1984: 264.
- 23 Matsakis: 343.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Abrams: 283.
- 26 Kalpakian: 24.
- 27 *Ibid.*: 30.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 Stanton: 35.
- 30 Matsakis: 3.
- 31 Gibson: 64.
- 32 *Ibid.*: 65.
- 33 Kalpakian: 20.
- 34 *Ibid.*: 24.
- 35 Thacker: 86.
- 36 Jerome Klinkowitz, "Writing Under Fire: Postmodern Fiction and the Vietnam War," in Larry McCaffery, ed., *Postmodern Fiction: A BioBibliographical Guide* (New York: Greenwood Press) 1986: 79.
- 37 LeGuin: 81.
- 38 Wilhelm, "Introduction": 12.
- 39 *Ibid.*: 277.
- 40 Marge Piercy, "Of Arms and the Woman," *Harper's*, June 1987: 30.