

Dissection Nation

*I can just make out the boat, a small open “v”,
drawing its wake pattern, on the sea, in the letters.*

—Hai-Dang Phan, ‘At the Vietnam Center and Archive’

On Reading a Bestselling Novel about The War

I do not read
it. I dislike
the style¹,
letters not
lushly
revealing
selves.

She writes² she
picked rice
from the rubble.
You read³ she
cooked rice in
our family's blood.

¹ Actually, it's how my skin pricks as my people flee bombs loosed by my people joysticking B-52s over trees.

² I lied. It's how the narrator creeps out after the vibrations. Sees, flung on branches, our organs. Do they know how to bleed? She doesn't itemise how many fragrant days a brain rests on a leaf, how many birds peck through our lungs. I require photographs and receipts, recordings of organs directing organs into trees.

³ All right. The problem—yes, I'm ready to confess!—were the noisy gyrations of your eyes reading over my shoulder. Together we scanned letters printed on dead trees. But you've always been a better multitasker. You read me.

Dream Diary



Mr. Kissinger/The President (tape)
December 9, 1970 8:45 p.m.

JH

R. Mr. President

F. The thing that concerns me about this thing you sent over on Cambodia was Messer's, it seems to me, I am sure that they did not have any intelligence because the weather has been bad. I don't think they are trying to do a good enough job in trying to get the intelligence over there. You understand what I mean?

R. Yes, indeed.

F. There are other methods of getting intelligence than simply flying. They've got the methods of the Cambodians to talk to and a hell of a lot of other people and I don't think they have done enough there. The second thing is as I have put on here now I want you to get a hold of Messer tonight and I want a plan where every goddamn thing that can fly goes into Cambodia and hits every target that is open.

R. Right.

F. That's to be done tomorrow. Tomorrow. Is that clear?

R. That is right.

F. I want this done. Now that is one thing that can turn this around some. They are running these goddamn milk runs in order to get the air model. You know what they are doing. Henry, it's horrible what the Air Force is doing. They aren't doing anything at all except to damn.

R. They are not imaginative.

F. Well, they're not only not imaginative but they are just running these things on a boring jungle. You know that. They have got to get in there and I mean really go in. I don't want the gunships, I want the helicopter ships. I want everything that can fly to go in there and knock the hell out of them. There are no limitations on mileage and there is no limitation on budget. Is that clear?

R. Right, Mr. President.

F. Now that he's got to understand. Now the second thing on this drill and I want you to tell both DHI and Mei that this is what I have decided to do. We will go forward on the basis and we will do it. We are not going to do it on the basis of an open end commitment but on the basis that you are going to fly in supplies, airt supplies to a place and so you air in a hold of a lot of troops with it too. Now there must be absolute security on it. It should be supplies. In other words the troops go in with their supplies. What the South Vietnamese have to do, the troops have to unload them, don't they?

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Authority EO 12958
By NARA Date 6/11/04

The Frog Doctor

*The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring
1,000 non-combatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward
nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed,
is not a pretty one.*

—Robert McNamara to Lyndon B. Johnson, 1967

No matter how many times you kiss the frog
baby, it won't transform. It speaks French. It speaks Japanese. It
eats ketchup and mayo, sliced Michigan blocks

sweating on the bed of a truck. You kiss it
with forceps winced through a speculum
yawned wide as the country's coast, then kiss it

with an operative report: the membraned brain, the clam
eyelids, the skull above sliced clean.
A kiss is newness, then routine. The uterus owner slumps,

clutches one breast with its nipple squeezing
a teardrop as the other tips back
to her village like a navigator's needle.

You leave your shift starved, buy a quail shellacked
dead by a man on the street. Through your incisors
thread thin ribs. On your tongue tracks

the orange of iodine on a gash, the colour
of mother after mother bargaining the birth
of the nearly dead, the tint of silt in the river

below *dầu ngã* ropes you crossed to hide the worth
of your family's foreheads. The mothers
tempt the creatures permitted to remain on Earth:

the singing carp, the daughter peach, other
beings not yet sealed in the human
skeleton a spectacled man hinges together

with nails. A man lurches acid at an ice-skinned woman.
A man levitates his treatise with a fist of balloons, slips
it across your gate. You know the bogeyman

takes bribes in foreign currency. Tally up the gifts:
how many captive families were split so you
could feast on one calf's leg. Plump as fetuses

or basil seeds swollen in sweet water, the balloons
begin their inquisition. A doctor is trained to spot analogue.
Tell them of the orange jade you found in a monsoon,

how the light inside knocked like a chain on a dog.
Tell them of the gobbledygook the men scrawled
in the brains of all the blessed sprogs.

ACT II

SCENE 2

The silent deck of a fishing boat populated only by women and children, including LINH, a teenage girl in a red shirt. Some squat, others sit cross-legged; all gaze at the door of a fish freezer, from which emanates the cries of invisible men. A rope and gangplank connect to an unseen vessel offstage. RED BANDANA, the captain of a boat of fishermen-turned-pirates, and a SECOND PIRATE cross the gangplank and board the fishing boat.

RED BANDANA *****. ****. ***.*

SECOND PIRATE *(Stops in front of LINH, then unsheaths a knife and points it at RED BANDANA) *****. ***. ***. ***!*

(LINH rises and walks to RED BANDANA. SECOND PIRATE selects six more teenagers to join her.)

RED BANDANA *****. (Bandana flaps in the wind, a national flag.)*

SECOND PIRATE *(Points at the gangplank and pokes the knife at LINH's hip.) ***! ***!*

(LINH and the others cross the plank, looking below; they cannot swim. RED BANDANA and SECOND PIRATE follow. The gangplank is pulled offstage.)

SCENE 3

The silent deck of a fishing boat populated only by men—RED BANDANA, SECOND PIRATE, THIRD PIRATE, OLDEST PIRATE, and others—and the seven teenagers, lined up to face them.

RED BANDANA ***. ****. *(Bandana waves, a national flag.)*

SECOND PIRATE **** **** *** ... **** ... **** **! *(Drags a teenager to a cabin.)*

THIRD PIRATE **!* *(Does the same.)*

LINH *(Drops to her knees in front of the OLDEST PIRATE, squeezing her palms together as if in prayer.)* Papa!

(The OLDEST PIRATE takes her to a cabin.)

SCENE 4

Night. The deck of a fishing boat. Shapes of humans. Sounds like dying grey birds. A spotlight illuminates LINH, pulling herself along the rope. Undulating around her are immense strips of red cloth, waved up and down by hands offstage.

Ciru!

Ciru!

Ciru!

Ciru!

Ciru!

Ciru!

Ciru!

Ciru!

Ciru⁴!

Cull

⁴ Vietnamese for 'help'.

Autobiographies

Hypophthalmichthys nobilis

You have read the story: I was born a carp at the bottom of a well. Periodically, sunlight was eclipsed by the curve of a worker's hat. Carp-father sang to me and circled the well, always counter-clockwise, always counter-clockwise. Through the dark water I saw the eggs of my mother. Carp-father and I swam our circles. We never had to see each other in the eye.

Tell me how long I
must circle till my wish
is song. Five apricots are ripening
in the arms of an ice-skinned girl.

Cyprinus carpio

In a small town near the border I meet five cats; one follows. A cat and a carp should never mate;
can never mate. A teal geode glints in my eyelid. I lied: I had a sister.

A man lays New Year's
bodies on ice:
clams, a dozen mackerel, two carp
with magnified eyes.
Asian invasive species
survive weeks in dead
water by eating oxygen
from their own flesh.
But stories need alcohol
to stay alive. These fish
teeth shape to their feed:
stale rice, women's bones,
a sister's shredded clothes.
The rhythm of salt vibrating,
sluicing into the common,
percolating the invasion.

Ctenopharyngodon idella

Where are the men? At the *bia hoi*. Under ground. On the horse. By the paddy. On a horse, by a paddy, chewing a betel leaf wrapped by women's fingers. The men supply a carp, a dress, a kingdom, water to boil. Quiet, they ventriloquize in carps' voices, deep and melodic like wells. The women murder carp and steam them for good luck. Don't trust a carp without a head or tail. Once I was promised a carp with both its ends and was delivered three fillets from a buffet; I didn't know whose flesh I chewed or whose fingers carved their shapes. The men: drunk-quiet torsos after liquor of tails and heads.

Light slants the angle
you picture my eyes,
yellow.

I arrange museum flowers:
birds-of-paradise,
lilies clipped of pollen
to remind us museums
are for the dead.

Who selects a family
of ice and suicides?

Carassius carassius

I attended Bible study in a small country to improve my formal Arabic. We met once a week at those one-person university tables whose chairs come attached. In our hunter green Bibles were diacritics special to holy language, including a fish, the kind on bumper stickers. I can't recall if the sign was decorative, signalled sound, or denoted meaning. At the time, I was decorative, made sounds, and pretended to have meaning. We read many stories, none of which I could see.

As many times as memory is played,
I cannot:
how her legs
stuck together like knives
grinding on the chopping block,
how her torso bent
like the bones of a fish.
When the man fell from the tower, we watched
him
glide into our shutter.
Like walking off a step
knowing below.
We don't know
if he gulped condensation
from a hundred stories
or glimpsed his mother, said,
Ma,
like my sister,
gasping for
carp-mother
boiling water
for the head
of her son.

Hypophthalmichthys molitrix

Up north, they season carp with beans stewed in wooden barrels. Us, we pile the dead—tails and heads—and ferment till they emit their flavour. In the best light, your hair is the thread of a brocade jacket. In the worst, it is the glint of a scrubbing brush. I am sorry for the lives you spent scrubbing: all those lives your back fins grew.

The monger grey-blades
my belly, slips between
my listening bones.
My yellow down
the well. He lifts
my spine
—my perfect arc
 this lone second—