The Shelter

Duong Thu Huong

IT TOOK ME nineteen days to get through the defense lines. On the twentieth, the guide left me to my own devices.

"Here we are. This is the valley. From here on out you can go it alone. You can count on the locals for whatever you need. I've got to head back to camp; there's a delegation of psychological warfare experts waiting for me. I've got to guide them to our mountain bases. From here to Zone K the trail is really dangerous. Here's a map."

He fumbled in his pocket and produced a piece of crumpled paper; it was just an empty cigarette pack covered with marks and tiny letters.

"Thanks for all your help. Maybe we'll meet again?"

"Sure. I'll pick you up on the way back. I'm too tough and stringy to die. I've already survived 317 bombing raids."

I fished a can of meat out of my knapsack. "This is the last one I've got. You have it, comrade."

From *Novel without a Name*. Quan, a northern soldier who has been fighting for years without pause, has been given a short leave to return home.

The guide scrutinized it like a connoisseur. "This is a real luxury for an ordinary soldier. Good-bye, comrade."

He stuffed the can in his sack and turned to go. He had a pug nose and puffy red eyes, the kind of face they say brings bad luck. There was something sinister about him. But then he was just a faithful guide, by all appearances a gentle, decent man. God bless him. After all, he had survived 317 bombardments.

The sun shone like a ball of fire. The guide disappeared into the forest. I walked toward a strip of grass, an open space of endless green and light. And when I lay down, I let myself go, drifting toward a feeling I had forgotten. At last I was free from the suffocating atmosphere of the forest, its stifling shadows of dense vegetation, its poisonous fragrances that sent shivers up my spine.

Above my head, the sky was an uninterrupted blue. Cloudless. The grass stretched out in front of me as far as the eye could see. The dew soaked into my clothes. Prickly grasses tickled me, scratching my feet, my legs. I could feel the sun burning into my scalp, my back, the shaved nape of my neck. A delicious warmth washed over my head, my body, in a million droplets of light. I felt my pale skin redden in the sun; the pleasure of it, just being alive. I rolled over. The sky beamed red through my eyelids. My cheeks, my neck, my chest, my arms, everything was gently warmed. The sun flooded me like a tide. I remained a long time like that, without moving, without sleeping, floating in a half-conscious state. Memories glided across my dazzled eyelids. There were faces, landscapes, murmurings, laughter. They seemed to float in smoke, pierced by a long, thin shaft of light, like a sparkling thread of

glass. I had never known happiness. So was this it, just this moment? I had never known freedom. Maybe this was it. Just this instant. Who would ever understand? Words, words are as slippery as eels. Just when you think you grasp them, they slide out of your hands and disappear into the mud. But these grasses, razor-sharp at my side, this blue sky above my head, this was real. I was happy.

I stayed stretched out like that for a long time. The ground beneath me was scorching now; the dew had evaporated and the grass had turned a deeper shade of green. The sound of an airplane rumbled overhead. I didn't care. Why bother running for cover? I thought: Bullets may miss people, but no one dodges a bullet. I got up and looked at the carpet of grass. It had been ten years since I had seen such beauty. What miracle had allowed this patch to survive so many bombings? It had an unreal beauty, like a satin ribbon discarded along a shattered, bumpy road of the war.

Planes howled across the sky. I remained buried in the high grass. The grass protected me; at the very least, its green tenderness soothed my soul. The planes veered toward the southwest, glinting in the sun. A carpet of bombs gushed forth. They tilted toward the ground, gently, calmly. Falling toward the earth, they looked like a cloud of giant termites, their wings sheared off.

The cataclysm lasted about half an hour. Then the forest and the mountain sank back into silence. The sun was dazzling at its zenith. The ground around me was hot and gave off a dense, steamy vapor. I undid my knapsack, drank a bit of water, ate some dried provisions I had, and

returned to the road. The prairie was much more vast than I had imagined. I struggled across what seemed like a sea of grass. At dusk, I reached the footpath through the forest marked N22 on the map. About three hundred yards down the path I saw a board bearing a cross and the word SHELTER. Map in hand, I walked toward it. After about four hundred paces, the footpath widened into a courtyard paved with wood and sheet metal cannibalized from old trucks. At the back of the courtyard, a small stone staircase led to another shelter hollowed out from the rock. I cupped my hand around my mouth and shouted: "Hey, anyone there?"

In the still air of the forest, my voice echoed, bouncing lugubriously off the rocks. Another voice responded immediately: "Just a minute . . ."

What luck, I thought. I took off my hat, wiped my face with my handkerchief, and waited. Ten minutes passed. I could hear the heavy tread of footsteps. A hulking, shadowy figure approached. Night had already fallen, and I couldn't make out the features of its face. "Greetings, comrade. I've come from the third line of the front. Could you offer me shelter for the night? I'll be off at dawn."

The shadow answered me in a rasping voice: "You could be a deserter. Show me your papers."

I chuckled: "No, I'm no deserter. I'm on a mission to Zone K. Here, here are my papers."

The shadow lit a battery-powered lamp. A tiny sliver of light illuminated my mission order and my army ID card. Then I saw the face: a flat square, cheeks covered with red pimples, buckteeth protruding over thick, horsy lips. The

light suddenly went out. A puffy hand stuffed the papers back into mine. The rasping voice continued: "Follow me, elder brother."

A woman. It's a woman! I almost said it aloud. She had turned away from me, guiding me toward the shelter. The lamp glowed intermittently, sweeping over the crumbling steps.

"Be careful. The other day a guy from Lao Cai fell and broke four teeth."

"Thanks, comrade," I murmured.

"Here we are," she said, pulling me through a wooden door. "Wait a minute. That's strange—I'm sure I left the lighter here somewhere. Ah, here it is."

A sudden pop. Light poured out as the woman lit another lamp: It must have burned on a mixture of gasoline and salt, judging from the thick smoke it gave off. I looked around. There was a bed made of munitions crates covered with tenting fabric. Tacked to the wall were a tin can, a tiny mirror decorated with a paper flower, and photos of famous Parisian singers and movie stars.

"It's awfully bright. Won't the planes be able to spot us?"

"Impossible. We're perfectly safe here. As for the gasoline, don't worry about that. I get a steady supply from the truck drivers."

She disappeared toward the back of the shelter and came back with some empty munitions crates.

"What are you doing, comrade?" I asked.

"Your bed. Here you go. Empty crates. We've got as many as you want."

"Thanks, but I've got my hammock."

"A hammock? You might as well go sleep in the forest.

As long as you're here, it's silly to sleep in a hammock." She arranged the crates to make a smooth surface, then pulled one of the tent shells off the wall. "Here, stretch this out. I've got to go to the cave to get some wood."

"What cave?" I asked.

"At the back of the shelter. It's a kind of storage space," she answered, shuffling off. The darkness engulfed her massive, bearlike body. I could hear the sound of wood splitting as I spread the tent shells over the crates. I propped my knapsack and my rifle in a corner of the room and sat down, stretching out my exhausted legs. A tongue of flame ran down my thighs to the tips of my toes.

The woman reappeared, a bundle of logs in her arms. She knelt by the hearth and the flames cruelly lit up her face. I shuddered, she was hideous. She looked up at me: "I'll put a pot of rice on. You stay here and watch it. I'm going to go take a quick bath in the river, then I'll be back."

I looked at the pitch-black night outside. "At this hour?"

"I'm used to it. I've got to wash."

Just then I noticed that her uniform was stained with something like black mud; she gave off a nauseating, sweaty odor.

"What's that on your clothes? Blood?"

"Yes, it's blood. I've wrestled hand-to-hand with three corpses since noon."

"What do you mean?"

She smiled weakly and then pursed her lips. Her nose twitched slightly as she spoke: "What about it? I'm in charge of N22 Cemetery. My job is to gather corpses in

these parts. All the unidentified ones are behind the hill. They're all combatants. Just like the three who were killed by this morning's bombing. I buried them all myself. The cave at the back of this shelter is a stockhouse for their belongings. I pass them along to the army when they come through."

She turned, took the lid off an aluminum pot near the fire, and poured in some water through a hollowed-out bamboo trunk. Then she dipped into an old egg-powder canister and measured out some rice. "Don't wash the rice or it'll lose its bran," she lectured me. "If you catch scurvy, it's all over. You can forget about finding medicine here."

She raised herself off her knees. "You make the rice. Here's the lighter. Use the pinewood for kindling. It lights in a flash. The water will boil in seconds."

She grabbed some clothes from under the bed and rushed outside. I heard the gravel crunch under her feet. I chopped up a plank of pine and lit the fire. I stacked a few logs on it and watched the pot. The water began to boil and slowly evaporate. The rice was cooked by the time she returned. She had changed into clean clothes and rolled her hair into a tight chignon on top of her head. As she wrung out her wet clothes, she shot a glance in my direction: "Spread the coals, otherwise it's going to burn."

I obeyed her mechanically. Meanwhile, she hung her laundry out to dry on a metal wire strung up near the fire. A strange odor filled the room. When I started to sniff, she tossed her head, unfurling her wet hair onto her neck.

"I haven't had soap for three months. Without soap, you'd need a miracle to get rid of the smell of blood. Build up the fire; the smoke will cover the smell. You'll get used to it."

She combed out her hair. Her caressing, feminine gestures jarred with her hulking, wrestler's body. I tossed a few more logs on the fire and kept my eyes fixed on the flames.

The fog had rolled in and a few wisps hovered in the cool darkness. The woman sat down beside me. Her soft, shiny black hair streamed down her back. She placed a tiny pot over the fire and dropped a lump of lard into it. "I want you to taste some vegetables sautéed in MSG. I found them this morning, just before those bastards started bombing us. There's even a can of meat. Just over a pound, enough to really eat your fill." She threw a handful of wild chilies and a bit of salt into the pot and stirred it rapidly, like you stir grilled paddy rice. Then she pulled the pot off the fire: "Put the vegetables in your mess dish."

I obeyed her like a child. She got up abruptly and went off into the cave, returning with a can of meat.

"It's imported from China. 'The Queen of Canned Meat'—you're probably familiar with it. There's no fat."

She placed the can by the side of the fire. My heart jumped. I recognized the can I had given to the guide that morning, the knife mark on the lid. Luong had given it to me before my departure. I had wanted to offer it to his soldiers as a treat, but he had stopped me, muttering that it wasn't considered normal to offer such fare to foot soldiers. The knife mark on the lid was from an American penknife I'd borrowed from Luong's aide-de-camp.

"Where did you find this?" I couldn't help asking the obvious question. The woman looked at me, surprised: "They told me I could eat whatever food I found on the

. . . I keep a list of the belongings I find in their knapsacks. You've probably never seen anything like it. I'll show you—they're odd, rather funny. Some of them collect dozens of handkerchiefs, underwear, bras for their sweethearts back home. Others carry around stones or acorns with their friends' names carved into them. Every soldier is different. As for the diaries, most of them are in shreds. Anyway, let's eat, I'm hungry."

She pried open the can of meat and pushed it in front of me. She filled a bowl with rice and set it in my hand, just as a wife would do for her husband. Awkwardly, I murmured my thanks.

She didn't answer, just lowered her head and started eating. I realized that she was waiting for something, something more tender, but my tongue froze. I ate with my head lowered. Silence fell between us. Time passed. I heard it passing with the crackle of the flames. Suddenly, she raised her head: "Why are you just eating the vegetables? Are you too good to eat canned meat?"

"I've got stomach problems. For a long time now I've only eaten rice."

"You can't find bamboo shoots back where you come from?"

"Sometimes, but it's rare."

She served me another bowl of rice. Little by little the atmosphere grew less tense.

"You men are so lazy. There are bamboo shoots in every forest. There's never any shortage of vegetables."

"It's true. We male soldiers are useless, not like you."

"You call us she-soldiers, don't you? What a bunch of bastards . . . What's your name, anyway? I didn't catch it."

"Quan. My name is Quan."

"What a lovely name. I'm Vieng. Have another bowl of rice. Or have you had enough? With your appetite, you can't be much of a heavyweight in combat. Even I eat two bowls more than you do."

"Thank you, comrade."

" 'Thank you' this, 'thank you' that—what hypocrisy! You must be from Hanoi."

"I come from the village of Dong Tien."

"You sure don't look like a villager. I'd say you've turned your back on your roots. Here, taste some of this burned-rice juice. It's very refreshing. Leave the bowls and the chopsticks. I'll wash them tomorrow. Let's sleep. I'm exhausted."

She drank her bowl in one gulp, stretched out on the bed, and began to snore almost at once. Her head rested on a little white pillow. One of the red threads had started to come loose. She slept with her mouth open, her teeth pointing toward the sky. I sneaked a sidelong glance at her. She filled me with a mixture of horror, curiosity, and pity. I closed the door and climbed onto my own bed. I sank into sleep, a deep, restful sleep.

I didn't dream. I woke up feeling a weight on my stomach, and I knew instantly that it was her, that she had come to press herself up against me. Her hair brushed over my shoulder, her huge arm circled my stomach. She seemed hesitant. I felt her warm breathing, and from time to time, she shifted and heaved a sigh, murmuring something. I lay totally still, feigning sleep. But all my senses were on alert, as tense as radar before an air attack. I knew that she was watching me, waiting for my slightest movement.

At the foot of the bed the coals still glowed, and the

heat comforted me. The light exposed me, and I kept my eyes firmly closed. She shifted violently; I could hear her panting. Suddenly, impatiently, she shook me by the belt. I grumbled, pretending to sleep, and rolled over. That was a mistake: She knew immediately that I was awake. She called my name: "Quan."

I didn't respond. She said my name again: "Quan?" I kept silent. She let go of my belt and sat up in bed. "Quan, why are you so cruel? I'm all alone here. It's terrible. Open your eyes. Listen to me."

I didn't dare open my eyes. I turned over and spoke to her softly: "Comrade Vieng, it's because you're alone here that I want to spare you trouble. If by accident you got . . . it would kill you."

She let out a little cry and threw herself onto me: "There's no risk. If I got pregnant from you, all the better. Quan, come, Quan."

She began to moan. I said, "Comrade Vieng, get hold of yourself. You have to control yourself or you're going to make a fatal mistake."

"No, no," she moaned softly. "But I want to die. Take me, kill me, make me die."

She pulled me against her, lifted me onto her.

I felt paralyzed by a strange sensation. *Just close your eyes,* I said to myself. *Let's get this over with. Close your eyes.* I felt my arms and legs grow numb. Throbbing terror, a fascinating desire. I heard her pant, cry out, "Quan, darling, darling."

I saw her by the red light of the coals, her eyes closed, her large mouth agape, stammering, panting. Nonsense words gushed from her horrible teeth. "Quan, darling, kill me, kill me."

Her cry of agony aroused a morbid feeling in me that entirely drowned my desire; all at once I felt totally lucid. My face burned with shame. I pushed her away and sat up. "Comrade Vieng, we mustn't."

She jumped to my side: "Quan, you think I'm ugly, don't you? Do you want me to put out the fire?" She rushed to the fire, grabbed a log, and proceeded to crush the coals with a hurried, but careful stroke. I stared at her stooped body and moved closer to her. "Come sit down. I can explain."

She followed me obediently, gazing up at me with docile, consenting eyes. Each feature of her crude face—her pug nose, her low forehead, her buckteeth—looked neglected, pleaded for pleasure with an expectancy that was as much a female animal's as it was a woman's. Why didn't I have the courage of a To Vu? Stranded on an island during a journey, he had slept with a monkey. Why didn't I have this ancient king's resolve, his compassion? Out of respect for a certain woman's dignity, he had made her a queen, despite the hideousness of her face. These rare men, had they been sages or wild beasts?

"Listen to me, comrade Vieng." I took her hand to maintain a distance between us, to protect myself. I forced myself to look at her directly, to spare her any shame.

"Please don't be angry with me. I don't want to hurt you, but really, I can't . . ."

She looked at me, her voice quavering, stammering my name.

"Do you understand? I just can't," I repeated.

She gave me a suspicious look. Suddenly, she plunged her hand between my thighs. The investigation was conclusive; she could feel for herself that I was useless. She

withdrew her hand and stared at me in silence, her eyes soft, pitying. It was my turn to be pitied. *Saved,* I thought to myself with relief. "Look, please understand me—I didn't mean to . . ." I stammered.

She got up and angrily tossed her head. "It's probably all those chemicals. Those American bastards!" Then she turned toward me. "Go on, try to get some sleep. You've got a long way to go tomorrow."

She returned to her bed, but I couldn't sleep anymore. I added a few logs to the fire, rekindling it. I watched, hypnotized, like an old gibbon staring at the sun.

My relief had evaporated. All I felt now was bitterness. I was innocent, but still sorry for the lie. Despite myself, shame overwhelmed me. It crawled like an invisible fungus growing in my brain, its pale, poisonous shadow seeping slowly into my body. My thoughts jumped about frantically: Was I a coward? Impotent? A man so lacking in virility that he ran from the chance for a wild coupling? Was I selfish, so lacking in humanity that I could not even respond to her as an animal would? I felt enslaved by centuries of prejudice and ignorance. Dreams of purity—outdated values, lost in an existence steeped in mud and blood—or else . . . I didn't dare follow my thoughts. I had rejected a woman who had welcomed me simply and warmly, who had begged me for a moment of happiness, a moment of life, of the life we had all lost a long time ago and that we remembered now only intermittently, in sudden flashes and premonitions. Or was she just too hideous? No, it couldn't have been only that.

She had dragged three corpses in the sunset. She had closed the eyes of three dead men. Alone, she had buried them on the other side of the hill. She lived here, guarding their belongings, keeping watch over their shadows, these mementos of life.

This woman was born of the war. She belonged to it, had been forged by it. It wasn't just because she was ugly that I had rejected her—I had been afraid to face myself, scared of the truth. I was a coward. Ten years of war had gone by. I had known both glory and humiliation, lived through all its sordid games. I had needed to meet her to finally see myself clearly. I had been defeated from the beginning. The eighteen-year-old boy who had thrown himself into army life was still just a boy, wandering, lost out there, somewhere just beyond the horizon. I had never really committed myself to war.

The fire burned brighter and brighter, its light seeping into the corners of the shelter, its gentle warmth enveloping everything. The woman had gone back to sleep, her breathing was regular, rhythmic, and one of her arms lay over her forehead. Pensive, I watched her. With all my heart I wished her luck. Surely, there were men somewhere, truly born of this war, who would bring her the happiness she deserved. I scribbled a few words of thanks in the notebook that listed the belongings of the dead. I gathered my own belongings and left. It was 4:32. The night was freezing, pitch-black. I looked the map over carefully, and when I had committed its contours to memory, I headed off, groping my way.

Translated by Phan Huy Duong and Nina McPherson

. . . Take me back." Vacillating a second longer, he said, "I'll go later."

The ferrywoman looked at the stars at the edge of the sky. "Venerable bonze, after returning to the other side of the river, I don't come back again."

The monk was cheerful. "It doesn't matter. One can go if one wants. In the past, the virtuous Bodhidharma crossed the river on a stem of grass."

The ferry returned to the wharf. The shadows of the ferrywoman and the monk were clear on the peaceful river. The moon rose, and a bell sounded sweetly.

The monk whispered the invocation, *Gate gate! Para gate! Para para samgate. Bodhi svaha!**

Translated by Dana Sachs and Nguyen Nguyet Cam
(with special thanks to Bac Hoai Tran)

*A Sanskrit line from *The Heart Sutra*: "Going. Going. Thoroughly Gone. Awakened!" Mahayana Buddhism has functioned in Vietnam for nearly two thousand years. *Paramita*, the Buddhist term for perfection, means literally "to get to the other side." Bodhidharma brought *dhyana* (Japanese: Zen) Buddhism from India in the fifth century A.D.

The Stranded Fish

Doan Quoc Sy

Long ago there was a young soldier:

Wearing a conical hat,
Yellow bag over his back,
Long gun on his shoulder,
His hands grasp rifle and lance.
When the order comes
He steps up to the boat,
The drums thunder;
He steps down into the boat,
Tears wetting his face like rain.

The trip up the river lasted several days. Then the passengers were told to disembark and take the land route. They crossed streams, climbed mountains, took to other boats, then again, leaving these, marched through the jungle. One month had passed before they reached their isolated garrison. This was at the frontier where day and night the sounds of rushing cataracts could be heard; where the mountains were high and forbidding, one peak succeeding another endlessly, barring the way home. Along both banks of the swift river were dark, ancient forests infested with poisonous snakes and wild beasts.

Poor soldier . . . he was so young and yet he had to stay here for three years. Three long years to worry and yearn for home. Any day something might happen, and he would die in these grandiose but cruel surroundings. If he went down, a small leaf would be enough to cover his body, for well before the leaf rotted away his body would disintegrate and disappear into the humid black mud, the underside of the jungle.

At night when the young soldier slept, such images rushed back with the roar of the cataracts and filled him with fear. Three years . . . three long years . . .

Three years of garrison life,
On guard at dawn, paperwork at night.
Trees are cut and sawed into lumber:
It was Fate, so why complain?
For food only bamboo shoots,
For friends, only bamboo trees.
In the clear blue water a little fish
Delightful and free . . .

One day, while looking for lumber, the young soldier lost his way and chanced upon an area round and deep, crowded with rocks—boulders, stones, and pebbles as small as gravel. The water was crystal clear, and in it he saw a little fish. Quickly the fish darted around and tried to take cover. But the homesick young soldier was only thinking of his own wish to be free. So he sang:

In the clear blue water, a little fish
Delightful and free . . .

Strangely enough the fish replied, asking the soldier, "You think I'm very happy in here, don't you?"

"Yes," answered the young soldier, "I do. You must be very happy in there. It's so peaceful, and the water's so clear. You're all by yourself . . . leisurely, free. . . ."

The fish pretended to laugh ironically, then continued, "There used to be a beautiful stream here. One day it rained and rained and rocks rolled down from the mountain, damming up the current. The old stream changed its course and left this dead portion here. At first, when the water was still quite muddied, I felt all right. I swam around and ate plenty, paying attention to no one; and no one knew I was here. But slowly the water became clearer and clearer. By the time only one moon had gone by, the water became as clear as crystal, and I felt so ashamed. It's not only unfortunate to get caught in a dead stream, but to be stranded in such clear water, that's very sad and very degrading."

"If the water's clear, there's not much to eat. Have you been going hungry?" asked the young soldier.

"I can eat the moss off these rocks."

Taking a rice ball out of his bag the soldier said, "Shall I break this into small pieces for you?"

The voice of the fish was tranquil, but sad. "Thank you very much. If only the water were muddied . . . but it's so clear you could see me swimming about snapping up your rice. What a humiliation! What a humiliation!"

The young soldier stood in silence for a moment, then seemed to recall something. "Say, my friend, why not let me take you out of this place and carry you over to the river nearby?"

The fish replied, "Thanks, really. But you see, if I let you take me in your hand that's ten thousand times more degrading than if I remain here in this dead stream. Though I remain here, day and night I can hear the river and feel its tremor through the veins of the earth. One day I'm sure . . . I'm sure a great mountain rainfall will make this hole overflow and flood that stream, and then I will follow the current to the great river. That will be beautiful . . . that will be beautiful!"

Sounds of the evening drum reverberated through the jungle, calling the soldiers to their barracks. Regretfully the young soldier bade the fish farewell.

From then on, whenever he was in the jungle, he tried to keep away from the dead portion of the old stream so as not to disturb the fish in its captivity and solitude. Once or twice, when the mountain rains came down very hard, he would run to the dead stream and throw a handful of rice into the muddied water. But the young soldier's heart was not at peace for he could not help wondering if the fish was still there to receive his gift, or if it had already wriggled over the rocks and found the great river of its dream. . . .

Translated by Vo-Dinh Mai

A River's Mystery

Bao Ninh

RIVERS, LIKE TIME, flow without stopping. Like time, they bear witness to many happenings. This is true especially at night when the river that winds through my village sparkles with thousands of mysterious luminous points. Among them lies the secret story of my life.

At the height of the heaviest flooding that particular year, a wave of American war planes destroyed a levee near my village. After the roaring of the jet engines and the horrendous exploding of bombs, the river thundered through the levee and crashed down onto the rice fields.

From the watchtower I dashed desperately toward the village. That afternoon, my wife had gone into labor, but, dutybound, I had been unable to leave my post. Now, with the sky caving in, my mind could think of nothing but my wife and my new baby. I ran at top speed, the great flood at my heels.

The village was completely submerged in water. I had just managed to get my family up to our roof when a second tide swept in. In an instant, the thatched roof was spirited away into the dark night. Luckily, it got caught up in the branches of a banyan tree where it sat precariously suspended as the tide threatened to rip it to shreds.

child of the river because they all know that she fell into the stream, and that I rescued her. But apart from the river and me, nobody, including my daughter, knows her real story.

Every now and then I go up onto the levee and watch the river. My wife, my son, and the nameless woman seem to be looking up at me from the bottom of the river. Months and years have passed. The river and history have changed. But I have never recovered from my pain. Words are inadequate to describe it.

Translated by Tran Qui Phiet

HO CHI MINH CITY
(SAIGON)

The Color of Sorrow

Nguyen Qui Duc

SHE HAD FEET to die for. I was back to thinking about them.

"I can't believe you two," Tuan said.

I knew that was coming. We had been silent, taking our time with the bowls of noodle. The heat of the day had cooled off. The occasional breeze was helpful, it made the pollution bearable, and I wasn't sweating so badly. "Believe what?" I said and started to wave my hands under the table. The place was full of mosquitoes.

"I went to the bathroom, came out, and you guys were in love," Tuan was saying.

I drank the last of my Tiger beer. "*Tao dang yeu a*? I'm in love?"

"You're asking me? Maybe she went for your rogue pretensions. Your five-day growth and all that. So, you going to marry her? Bring her to the States?"

I lit a cigarette. Tuan was lighting one of his Marlboro Lights. "She's got a husband," I said. "He's bringing her. Anyway, marriage is a leading cause of divorce."

"For sure," Tuan said. "Not even six months, I give them. What're you gonna do? Wait 'til then? Think you'll get serious?"

Tuan was struggling. We'd been friends for twenty-some-odd years. He could always see my side. But he also knew the guy she married. I slapped my hands together, caught a mosquito. "I'm not waiting for anything, man," I said.

"What're you seeing her tomorrow for then?"

"You jealous or something?"

"Minh, you're pissing me off. What am I going to tell the guy?"

"I'm just seeing her," I said. "For breakfast. She's taking me to some bookstores." I threw my cigarette down the gutter. "Man, I smoke way too much here."

"Me too," Tuan echoed. "Me too."

"I don't know what I'm doing with her," I said. "I've got four days left here. D'you have to tell her husband anything? Isn't he bad news anyway?"

"No," Tuan said. "Just a dork, I guess. She has no idea. I just know it, they're not going to last."

"Damn. Damn!" I said. "Damn mosquitoes. Should we go?"

"Yeah, let's go. Think you can get the engine to start?"

We left a bunch of money on the table. The owner of the noodle stand got up from her aluminum chair. "Thank you, brothers," she said. "Come back again."

The scooter engine started fine. You could hear it fine, roaring in the dead of the night. "Now the lights won't work," I said as we rode off. It must have been 1:00 A.M. The whole town seemed asleep. I started worrying about being out this late. It might be okay for people in town, the locals. But us two, riding without lights. I didn't have my passport on me or any other papers. What good would my driver's license do anyway? It was from California. It actually was chilly, riding like that in the wind. Maybe it was the darkness. "There's no lights anywhere in this town," I said.

"Used to be," Tuan said from behind me. "Saigon was always lit up at night."

"Wasn't there a curfew then?"

"We'd be out late anyway," Tuan said. He tapped on my shoulder. "Turn left here."

"I can't see shit," I said, but turned anyway. Tuan guided me toward his mini-hotel at the end of an alley. It smelled bad. We forgot about the curfew and the war of twenty years before. We had gone to high school up in Dalat, and we were good friends; then Tuan moved to Saigon. When the war was over, we ended up in Los Angeles. Tuan was the one friend I had who didn't become an engineer, a computer scientist, or an accountant. It was great that we'd returned to visit Vietnam at the same time.

"See you tomorrow," Tuan said and got off my bike. "Call me or something."

"Yeah, I'll call you or something."

"Let me know what happens."

"Nothing's going to happen." I turned the bike around. I took off alone. It was cold, and dark, and I was a bit fearful, and drunk. But I was thinking of her face, of breakfast, and it felt good. I was missing her already.

I wasn't intending to get involved with anyone when I left California. I had a research project and a deadline. So I flew back to Vietnam. Wasn't looking for anything. Not love. Or marriage.

By the time the airplane landed, it was close to midnight. I was exhausted and could not tell what emotions coursed through my veins. But it felt a little sad and strange to hear a Korean pilot greet me in accented English. *Welcome to Vetta-Narm*, he announced. *The tempitur in Ho Chi Minh is cullenly 87 dagleez.* He, too, was tired. Too tired to say the name of the city in full. Ho Chi Minh City was just Ho Chi Minh. Out of habit, I preferred the original version, Saigon.

The pilot was silent now. We'd arrived at the end of the line. There were no connecting flights to announce. Or precautionary reminders. When the airplane was rolling, one could stand up, withdraw one's bags from the overhead bins, or walk along the aisle to the bathroom.

I unfastened my seat belt, stuck an unlit cigarette between my lips, peered out. There was no light outside. Darkness separated me from Saigon. Its people were asleep, leaving blackness to welcome me home. I resented it. What can an absence of light at the point of arrival announce other than the poverty and misery of a place? I was prepared to learn about Vietnam's postwar problems, but complete darkness outside my airplane window was a reminder of all the sorrowful things Vietnam has had to carry in its soul through the years of warfare and beyond.

When the war in Vietnam ended in 1975, I joined the Vietnamese who went to America to take refuge. We added our names and ethnicity to the lists of people who have abandoned ancient worlds to come renew the American dream and youthful spirit. I carried on with an American life: a car, an apartment, college, work, credit cards, friends, etc. I also clutched close to my heart the

exile's belief that it would be possible to live again in the land where my umbilical cord is buried. As the years went by, the idea of going back to Vietnam became a drug I needed to confront or I could not rest. So I flew across the Pacific. Saw again my childhood home, my old school, relatives and friends. The renewals were fraught with guilt but full of tender emotions, too. The Vietcong became real people. Flawed and damaged by communism, but no longer the monsters that had once terrorized the southern half of the country.

I walked off the Korean airliner into the darkness and the heat of the Saigon night. Tried to ignore the sweat collecting under my shirt, but all I could do was stand back from the passengers fighting for a seat on the bus to the terminal. No one talked. No one smiled.

I had a smoke, but it wasn't like I could be at ease standing in line at the immigration counter. Vietnam was having trouble welcoming back its sons and daughters from overseas, the *Viet-Kieus*. They have skills and money, but also ideas and attitudes. The immigration officer didn't smile once. Absolutely stone-faced, he shuffled through the pages of my passport. Like it was some kind of dirty magazine. Studied the stamps from my other trips.

"Business?" He didn't even look up.

I shook my head. Said a slight no.

"What're you doing here? Girlfriend? Getting married?"

I smiled, but he still wasn't looking up. "No, no. Research."

"Sure," he said.

By this time, the $10 bill between the pages of my passport had disappeared. Fingers faster than a cobra's tongue, Mr. Stone-Face.

I took a taxi to a hotel downtown. Felt like I'd just escaped arrest. It was odd to feel like a dangerous intruder in a place I called home. Speeding along the empty streets toward downtown Saigon, I just did not feel at ease.

I left town two days later.

Left the atrocious noises, heat, dust, pollution, the insane traffic. The masses spilling out of shops and markets into the streets, from 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning until 10:00 or 11:00 at night. I left them all for Hanoi.

I relished the December coolness, but I was really sad because cement-steel-and-glass blocks were all you could see in many places. Historic houses were being torn down. Beautiful walls and façades full of history, just piles of debris now. They didn't come down during the years of American bombing. But capitalism had arrived, hitting the city badly, and there were foreigners everywhere: Swedish import-exporters; Japanese and Taiwanese real-estate men; Australian oilmen; American lawyers—neo-colonialists, splayed out in the white, newly upholstered backseats of vintage Citroens, driven to government ministries, to factories, to golf courses, or else posturing all over the bars and restaurants, talking money, making deals. And there were French and Dutch backpackers—latter-day hippies supporting lice-infested dorm-like hotels, dining on paté sandwiches and imitation pancakes with coconut syrup, smoking Gauloises, and visiting ancient temples, joking about northern Vietnam's dog-eating habits.

I stayed in the old quarter. The captivating streets and friendly merchants soothed my temper. I forgot about Saigon. I hung out with a bunch of spirited artists and writers. For three weeks they talked and I asked questions, and did some of the talking too. We were trying to figure out where Vietnam was going with all of its isms: Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism. And communism and capitalism. All imported over two thousand years, coexisting with each other and with Vietnam's own ism, nationalism. The artists and writers gave me gallons of tea. We smoked pack after pack of bad cigarettes, and drank a lot of plum wine. But no one could shed light on any of the isms. We left it to nationalism to fight off the other isms.

I made my way back south. Nationalism wasn't doing well in Hue, the old imperial city. Capitalism had created the sick spectacle in which, for less than fifteen bucks, tourists were served a royal meal while sitting where the Nguyen emperors once sat. Their thrones now belonged to the tourist department. Traditional court musicians squatted on the floor to serenade the feasting tourists. Aging French couples on tour buses couldn't resist this. Sunburned and reddened even more by the warm beer served over ice, they squeezed into royal costumes of gold silk, shoved their heavy asses onto the thrones and became drunken, obnoxious children. You could get away with a lot in Vietnam, provided you had dollars. I left that bizarre scene. Returned to the urban mess called Saigon.

Where capitalism had always been the supreme lord, and where I was to wait for my flight out.

"Meet me at Ciao," Tuan proposed when he called my hotel. I preferred the sidewalk coffee shops with the worn-out miniature stools and metal tables. Ciao was all neon and pastel walls, with too many inept waiters and waitresses serving bad coffee. It was popular with the young, moneyed sets of Saigon, maybe daughters and sons of revolutionaries turned capitalists. The kids were forever watching some Michael Jackson or Tom-and-Jerry videos from TV sets suspended from the ceiling. Or else talking into hand phones. Worse, Ciao was always full of *Viet-Kieu*s in American or Italian clothes and shoes, and hairstyles that looked outrageous in Saigon. Bunch of men looking for love and marriage. Or just to get laid. Always proffering business cards or dollar bills and talking about their latest commercial deals or the Vietnamese beauties they seduced. The deals usually turned out to be exaggerations. The seductions, true.

Tuan was insistent. "I'm meeting some people for dinner nearby. I'll be at Ciao at eight. It's air-conditioned," he said.

I gave in, weaving my way over to the café on a Japanese scooter so old it surprised me that it actually ran. Boys hustling outside my hotel were renting them out for $3 a day. Tuan showed up late, two gorgeous women in tow. We turned into two ugly *Viet-Kieu*s with our beautiful prey. Pale, overweight, we wore T-shirts rather than the dressy ones that were *de rigeur* for Vietnamese men our age. Tuan introduced the women.

Friends of friends. Actresses. I should have guessed. They were stunning. And tall. Neither wore the evening-wear outfits Saigon women can't stay away from. One had a teal, raw-silk ensemble, the other a pair of jeans and a lavender Indian shirt. She wore no makeup, showing off her incredible tan. Her neck, also tanned, was absolutely inviting. She looked cheerful. But behind her gold-rimmed glasses were these woeful eyes that looked as if they might be full of tears.

I lost it. Couldn't talk. Felt just a mess. I was staring at the women, especially My-Kim, the one with the sad eyes. I was looking at those black eyes every time she wasn't looking at me. If she had any sorrow, she carried it in those eyes. They made me think of the blackness of the airport. I kept my head down, pretended to be thinking. Kept staring at her beautiful toes.

Tuan helped by asking about the artists and writers in Hanoi. When he left for the bathroom, My-Kim volunteered to take me to bookstores. "Aren't they closed by now," I asked. "You want to go now?"

"Sure, maybe there's one that's open late."

Her friend laughed. "Nothing's going to be open now. But you two go ahead. We'll wait."

My-Kim and I wandered out, our impromptu walk immediately taking on the colors of a courtship. People stared at us, I stared at my feet, or at My-Kim's, and listened to her talk about her love of reading. I asked her about the books I'd known as a student.

"They didn't teach those books when I went to school," she said, tilting her head.

I wasn't free from my past and forgot how things had

changed. My-Kim had begun school the year I left. Her schoolbooks were all about anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist victories. Revolutionary triumphs. The glorious road to socialism.

We circled the downtown streets and laughed as we passed the bookstores that were closed. The infernal streets of Saigon were now full of excitement. The heat, the dust, the chaos, the crowds. Everything was lovely. Even Ciao. We came back empty-handed. But I didn't care.

It was 10:30 when we decided to leave. Damn scooter wouldn't start. I got tired of kicking the starter pedal so I pushed it. It didn't help. My-Kim came up. One stroke on the pedal and the engine roared. "You're giving it too much gas," she said. I thanked her and, while the street hustlers were laughing, I asked to have breakfast with her. We could go to the bookstores afterward," I said. "I'm married," she said.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked Tuan. We were riding around, looking for someplace to have a drink. My-Kim and her friend had left.

"Like you gave me a chance," he said. "Her husband knows my brother."

"Fuck," I said. Didn't know what else to say. We pulled into a side street with plastic tables in the dark. Boys from the beer hall brought four bottles of Tiger. I needed the beer. Same with Tuan. We let long moments go by. Then Tuan started to comment on the meaning of My-Kim's name. Kim is the formal word for American gold: the dollar. And My, the word for America, means beautiful. My-Kim: Beautiful Dollar.

How did I end up coming to Vietnam and getting tangled with a woman named Beautiful Dollar? One who's spoken for?

"I'm sorry," I had said when My-Kim told me she was married. She smiled, but her eyes still had that sadness. "It's not your fault. Breakfast sounds good. Let's talk tomorrow." We agreed on a meeting place, and she rode off into the darkness beyond the downtown streets.

Tuan and I finished the bottles of beer. "My-Kim's husband's a dork. A *Viet-Kieu* from San Jose, an accountant who lucked out. He came home, met My-Kim just three weeks before going back to California."

"You mean she married him after just three weeks?"

"Almost," Tuan said. "He went back to the States, proposed to her on the phone a few months later."

"And she said yes? What is it about the guy?"

"The guy's a fashion plate. Talked a lot about clothes and designers."

"She went for that?"

"I guess. He was here a few months ago, had a ceremony, did the paperwork to sponsor her to go to the States. Now he's not sure."

"What do you mean, not sure?"

"Told me he now has a place to park his body whenever he comes back here. Doesn't sound like he really wants her in the States."

"The sucker."

"Yeah. He was visiting us. Showed us her photos. We sort of laughed. I mean, she's a head taller than the guy. And he's sixteen years older than her. My brother thinks the guy's gonna smother her."

"Fuck," I said. Again.

"Maybe she does love him," Tuan said. "But then why is she seeing you?"

"She saw you tonight," I said.

"I brought her a letter from the guy," Tuan replied.

I started ordering more beer, but Tuan asked for a ride to his mini-hotel. Maybe he sensed that I was wounded. When we rode past the noodle shop, I pulled in knowing we weren't through. We could always talk about the *Viet-Kieus* who come home to marry Vietnamese women. Many leave the women behind, because they are already married. Or because they just wanted to have fun. Because they really aren't engineers or computer scientists who can support a wife. Such stories are common. But it isn't easy to admit that among your friends was one of those *Viet-Kieus*. We were now implicated. I was, anyhow.

I was early. My-Kim had a flat tire. "I was afraid you wouldn't show up," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

She didn't answer.

"I leave in four days." My-Kim smiled. "I didn't think you would show up either," I said.

We ordered breakfast. My-Kim cut pieces of bread for me and fixed my coffee filter. I poured hot water for her tea. She smiled but didn't thank me. We did things as though we'd always had breakfast together and knew each other's habits. We didn't talk. The sooner we talked, the sooner we'd have to acknowledge the obvious.

The waiter cleared the table. My-Kim crossed her arms and held herself in. I smoked the cigarettes that were left

in my pack and ordered another coffee. I asked her about being an actress.

"It's really hopeless here," she said.

"What do you plan to do in the States?"

"I don't know. I'm taking English lessons."

My-Kim didn't really have any skills that would be helpful in America. She had been an athlete in college, and afterward had become a physical therapist for handicapped children. Acting was a new thing.

"D'you want to go to college?"

"Yes. But I'll have a kid as soon as I get there."

I felt weak in the stomach. "Is that what he wants?" I asked. It was the first time I'd acknowledged her husband.

"I don't know. I think so." She placed her hand on mine. "Minh, I'll show you my acting pictures." She pulled an envelope out of her handbag.

"My-Kim, do you really want a kid?"

She set the pictures on the table. "If it'll make him happy."

"What about you?" I was troubled by the Buddhist attitude, or was it Vietnamese fatalism.

"What about me? Look, this is from a recent film. And that one, that's from a couple of years ago. *Con nit ghe, anh ha?* Don't I look childish?"

I went through the pictures, admiring her beauty. I kept looking from the pictures to her eyes, trying to see what she was suggesting about her future that I might accept. My-Kim fell silent. When I reached the end of her fashion photos, I found some wedding pictures. "Did you want me to see these?" I asked.

"If you want to."

My-Kim looked slim and dazzling in an embroidered tunic of triumphant red. But her eyes were strange, uncomprehending. The makeup didn't cover the innocence in her face. Or the sadness. I tried to stay calm, said a few words about the majestic dress. The only words I could manage.

"He's standing on a stool," she said. I turned my attention to her husband. The San Jose accountant looked awkward. "He wouldn't let me wear a tiara," she said. "I'm towering over him as it is."

"Do you love him?" I surprised myself with the directness of my question. I was trying to project the notion that I could take an answer, any answer, from her. Her hesitation was hard to sit through. Then I felt bad for the satisfaction her answer gave me. "I'm neither in love with him nor do I love him," My-Kim said.

The satisfaction evaporated. I thought about My-Kim's fate, and those of countless women who marry just to leave Vietnam. "Do you really want to come to the States?"

My-Kim's eyes looked full of tears again. "I don't know," she said. "I needed some stability, I guess. He asked. I said yes." She had crossed her arms in front of her chest again, and avoided looking at me.

"I don't think you should have a child, My-Kim, unless . . ."

She looked up. "It's the only way I'll stay with him."

"My-Kim. I mean, what do you want me to say? What do you expect. . . ."

My-Kim gathered her photos. "I know what you want to say," she said, her voice soft, resigned. "You don't have to say it. Should I take you to the bookstores?"

I paid the bill and we left. We spent the rest of the morning looking at books and talking about the revival of Vietnamese literature under Vietnam's new policies. We went back to pretending there was nothing awkward about being together. But My-Kim was doing a better job, at times casually hanging her hand on the crook of my arm, or placing it on my back, drawing me to one book or another. I no longer had the ability to quietly accept everything that life hands us. I was boiling with questions. My-Kim kept saying, *thoi, hoi lam chi*? Please, why ask? She always managed to stop me short, calmly and comfortingly.

At lunch, I started again. "Maybe I shouldn't have asked you to meet me for breakfast."

Very quietly, My-Kim said my name. "Minh. I am grateful for these moments. I meet a lot of *Viet-Kieu*s. I've always been allergic to them. I know the horror stories. But I've made a choice. I have no idea what it's like in San Jose. Good, bad, I don't know. I don't want to start having any regrets. Not this early."

"I'm sorry."

"I just hate myself."

"For what?"

"For not waiting," My-Kim said. "What do you want?"

I hadn't expected the question.

"I don't want to be pitied. Be honest."

I really was at a loss. I told My-Kim so. Then I said, "I have four days left here."

"Three. But that's better than none."

"Beyond that, I don't even know. I wish I knew what's really going on. You just seem sad. I wish I could take some of it away."

"Thanks." That was all she said. And somehow, it cut through me, and it was enough to want to change my ticket back to California.

"I have to go to a wedding tonight," My-Kim said. "Wish I didn't have to. I don't want to lie, so I won't bring you. But tomorrow, I've no plans for breakfast."

"Do you want to?"

"Of course I do. If you want to. Tomorrow night, I'm supposed to be at the New World Hotel for a gig at 6:00. Will you take me?"

"Yes, of course. You said honest. About what?"

"Your emotions. It's nice that you've come back to Vietnam. It's really hopeless here. But no one wants pity."

"You're fucked," Tuan said.

I'd had too much to drink to say anything. We were in one of Saigon's countless beer halls. My-Kim and I had had another silent breakfast that morning. We rode around to a string of cafés and ice-cream shops, had lunch, and an early dinner. Then I took her to the New World Hotel. The ten-story building cast an ugly shadow over the Saigon horizon. My-Kim didn't want me to bring her inside. We stood by the fountain at the entrance. A group of Vietnamese in their Sunday best were having photographs taken near the fountain. The hotel guests, mostly Westerners, gave us mocking looks.

I rode off on her motorcycle to meet Tuan. He wasn't in a mood to comfort me. "You're fucked. I just hope she'll be fine after you leave."

"I just wish I could help her."

"You're pitying her, Minh. Why don't you . . ."

"I tried changing my ticket," I said.

"Another week won't change things. Might as well go back to California."

"And then what?"

"See how you feel. You've only known her for two days."

"I think it's sad. To have a baby just to stay married. Or to please the dork."

"Nothing you can do," Tuan said. He quoted from *The Tale of Kieu*, Vietnam's classic verse epic. *Ma dan loi, quy dua duong. Lai tim nhung loi doan truong ma di.* Ghosts and devils lead the way. For she is again upon the path of sorrow. "Don't her eyes tell you she's the kind that would go from one misery to another? I wonder what happened to her before she met the dork. I doubt she's had a lot of fun. Now it's you."

"Nothing you can do about fate, man."

"That's really lame. So now you're back to being Vietnamese and blaming fate for everything. What about the *Viet-Kieu* that wanted to help?"

"Tuan," I said. "Lay off. I just don't know what to do."

There was really nothing I could do. I asked Tuan to come with me to the shops the next day. I wanted to buy a tiara. I thought that would be a gift that could tell My-Kim I wanted her to stand as tall as she possibly could.

"You're cruel," Tuan said. "You're just thinking of yourself, Minh. You want to show yourself a savior. You know you're safe. You don't have to marry her. You're worse than those *Viet-Kieu*s. You're worse than the dork."

I felt worse than the dork when I went to pick up My-Kim. I hated him, hated the Korean airline. I was sick of

not knowing what to do. I did not know about the streets of Saigon. They had seemed so sweet when I was riding around with My-Kim on the backseat. Now they were crammed with people oblivious to what I was going through. I resented them. I was upset with the odd and cruel way life was in my homeland. Or the odd way of life in my homeland and the cruelty in me.

My-Kim was waiting outside the New World. She smiled. Everything seemed better. "How was your evening?" I asked her. "Are you tired?"

"It was all right. Take me somewhere for a drink."

I brought her to Gigi's, a bar owned by a *Viet-Kieu* I'd known in California. I had a letter for her. We rode past the pedicab drivers and the hustlers who get paid to park the scooters outside Gigi's. My-Kim was resting her chin on my shoulder. It could be embarrassing, I warned myself. Gigi's was the gathering place for expats and *Viet-Kieus* who often show up late at night with their girlfriends, some of whom barely disguised the fact that they were prostitutes. I convinced myself that My-Kim and I were friends. Nothing to fear. Damn what other people thought, anyway.

"*Roi, dot duoc mot em thom qua*," a hustler said. I felt sheepish, but My-Kim laughed, unfazed. When she got off the motorcycle, she turned to me. "*Em thom khong anh?*" she asked.

That's it. The guy's picked up a nice-smelling babe, the hustler had said. Nice-smelling. Vietnamese slang for a beautiful woman. I was hoping My-Kim hadn't heard the comment. But she had turned and asked, "Am I nice-smelling?"

I wanted to offer her a compliment, to say she was beautiful. But nice-smelling wasn't the way I could do it. I smiled and guided My-Kim through the double doors of Gigi's.

Gigi stood up from her table, kissed me on both cheeks and hugged me. I leaned over to introduce My-Kim; the place was real noisy.

"Did you just come from California too?" Gigi asked in English.

My-Kim smiled.

"No, no," I said. "She's a friend."

Gigi winked at me. It didn't escape My-Kim's eyes. We sat down. Gigi shouted questions at me in English. I pretended not to hear, repeating her questions, answering in Vietnamese. My-Kim leaned over and whispered, "You don't have to translate."

A waitress brought the drink menu. "What would you like?" I asked.

"I'd like very much to have whatever you're going to have." The sweetness in her voice carried a promise, an acknowledgment of conspiracy, of intimacy. I was amazed. She'd managed all of that in a sentence meant to hide the fact that she could not make heads or tails out of the cocktail list.

I decided not to have a whiskey sour, since that would involve explaining it to My-Kim. "A beer," I said. "I'm having a beer. Would you like one?"

Gigi left us. My-Kim told me about her evening. She and some twenty other actresses had been asked to serve brandy and wine at a cocktail party for some foreign investors. In the darkness of Gigi's bar, her eyes had turned

a deeper black. They carried all the sorrow I had detected before. And all the sorrow of a postwar nation, independent, but needing to please foreigners with money. The most beautiful women in Saigon had been used to court foreigners and their dollars. I started to count myself among that crowd of foreigners. Next to me sat one of those beautiful women, nursing her grief. I drank my beer, smoked my cigarette. I felt ugly. Her name meant Beautiful Dollar.

My-Kim shocked me, suggesting that we visit her parents. I was dropping her off outside her rented room in a house stuck between a dozen two-story buildings in a twisting and muddy alley far from downtown Saigon.

"What if they find out?" I said.

"Find out what? I would like you to meet them, very much. Please," she said.

We had a quick breakfast early the next day and headed out. Her parents lived in a village by the side of a dusty highway, forty minutes from Saigon. My-Kim's sister, who owned a noodle shop that served the carpenters from the lumberyard next door, laid out a massive meal. At 10:00 in the morning, I wasn't all that hungry. My-Kim left me with the villagers and their questions about life in America, the Beautiful Country. She joked with her father, a frail man with an extraordinary smile, and seemed in no hurry. Later I found out he'd been imprisoned by four regimes in Vietnam. Under Ho Chi Minh, because he was suspected of working for the French. Under the Ngo Dinh Diem regime, he was a police officer imprisoned for opposing the suppression of the

Buddhists, even though a devout Catholic himself. The Nguyen Van Thieu government kept him for several years under charges of involvement in a coup. The communists sent him to a re-education camp for eight years for being a policeman in the two previous regimes. Three additional years for illegally raising and selling pigs. "I'm 70 years old," he said. "Been in prison for as many years as I've been out."

I mumbled my congratulations on his health and offered my sunglasses for his bad eyes. My-Kim's mother waited until I was leaving to ask a favor: "Please tell Long we said hello. We're anxious that he bring My-Kim to America. We've heard all the stories." She lowered her voice. "He's not already married, or anything like that, is he?"

"No," I said. "Nothing like that."

We rode back to Saigon under the midday sun. I couldn't blame My-Kim for telling her parents I was a friend of her husband. But I was worried.

"He never talks to my parents," she said.

For the rest of the journey, I kept asking about her father's years in prison. I realized that, for My-Kim, communism, Catholicism, or Buddhism didn't matter. Her love for her father included his image as a suffering hero. All that time I was trying to make sense of all the isms in Vietnam. I'd forgotten about Vietnamese romanticism.

All you want to do in Saigon at 2:00 in the afternoon is to sit inside a refrigerator. My-Kim promised ice cream, provided I came with her to do an errand.

"Under the sun, now?"

"Please," she said. "It won't take long."

It took an hour and a half. And all my efforts. But I wasn't unhappy. In twelve hours, I was going to get on a flight and go away. My-Kim had to drop off a certificate that she had picked up at her parents'. It was from the authorities in the village of her birth, by the side of the dusty highway. It stated that they had no record she was married. We went to the agency that was processing her papers for departure to the U.S.

There was a massive waiting room with sorry-looking benches. It looked like the inside of a church, but the benches were inches apart. At least three hundred people were pressed against one another, falling asleep on those benches, clutching plastic bags and folders containing all the papers that showed their connections to someone or something in America. Former employees of American firms and governmental agencies in South Vietnam. Former soldiers and officers of the South Vietnamese army, America's ally. Former political prisoners. Relatives of *Viet-Kieus*. And women in My-Kim's situation. The three ceiling fans made a joke of the sweating people.

My-Kim and I sat in the back. She held my hand and used her papers to fan me. She glanced at me occasionally, wordless. It didn't escape either of us that we were in the most remarkable and uncanny circumstance. We were spending our last moments together in this oven of a room, waiting for confirmation that she had submitted a piece of paper in order to join someone else on the other side of the world. My side of the world. A life sentence, she had said at one point. It was funny when she said it. When her name was called, we looked at each other and laughed. She walked off.

My-Kim reneged on her promise. No ice cream. She took me to a karaoke café. Saigon is karaoke town. I'd never been to one and was taken aback by the darkness inside. By the time my eyes adjusted, I no longer minded the gaudy drapes, dirty walls, and vinyl seats. My-Kim selected songs from before the war. Others sang more recent ones. Over two million have left the country. There were songs that spoke to the hearts of those far from home. Songs about Saigon's wind-blown streets and the midday rooster calls, or the horse-drawn merchant carts. Songs about those left behind and those about to leave. Terribly sentimental songs. But they made sense. Nationalism will always have a role in Vietnam, but sentimentalism was primordial.

I understood that the people whose lives in Vietnam were full of misery could once in a while proclaim their sorrow out loud. Most didn't sing very well, but they sang with all their sincerity, all their emotions. I believed so, for when My-Kim began to sing again, I wanted to believe she was able to let go of her sorrow.

I forgot the time. When she placed her fingers on my knees and let her voice tell me I now had "a world to leave, and a world to come back to," I believed there was a heart in my homeland.

I bribed the customs and immigration officer at the Saigon airport. Ten dollars. He stamped my passport, waved me through. No one bothered with my bags. It was past 1:00 in the morning. There was no bar or restaurant. The one souvenir shop was closed. My-Kim didn't have a phone.

I wrote a letter and asked an airport janitor to mail it.

Offered her five dollars. "For my wife," I said. The woman looked the envelope over. "Oh. It's local. But you've given me too much money. And your wife, she has a nice name. My-Kim." I thanked the woman, and left to board the plane. I had a window seat, but there was nothing but darkness outside.

It made me think again of My-Kim's eyes. Eyes the color of sorrow.

I turned away, reached for the book in my bag. The plane was taxiing. I fastened my seat belt and opened the book to where I'd placed two envelopes. The one with the San Jose address I put away. It contained proof of papers submitted to immigration authorities in Vietnam. The other one, with my name on it, I held on my lap. The stewardess was making some kind of announcement in Korean. I peered again into the darkness when the plane took off.

The stewardess was now saying, "Welcome to Asiana flight 606, Ho Chi Minh City to Los Angeles. The estimated duration of our flight today will be sixteen hours, forty minutes. Please refrain from smoking for the entire duration of the flight."

I held onto the envelope, and wished I'd had another smoke before boarding.

Dark Wood and Shadows

Andrew Q. Lam

AFTER A STORMY flight back from Saigon, where we had been visiting sick relatives, our Cessna landed with a thud on the muddy landing strip of the Cam Ly airport. Outside, a curtain of rain moved softly across the smoky gray sky, welcoming us back to this high plateau of persistent fog and whispering pine forests. The plane ran swiftly toward the control tower while brown water spurted under its white metallic wings. When it slowed it let out a fierce roar—the sound of a wounded beast—then came to a shuddering stop.

Now that we were safely on the ground, Maman exhaled and leaned back in her seat. With a swift, expert gesture from her hand she snapped open her alligator purse, took out a money envelope, and gave it to the pilot. Beyond the plane's windshield swayed the dark figures of Uncle Lau and Uncle Hien, our servants, who stood by our Plymouth and a couple of rusty army trucks. They rushed toward the plane, black umbrellas in hand, as the propeller completed its final spin.

The Cessna's door sprang open. A cold blast of moist air rushed in, bringing the fragrance of musty earth and pine trees. I could hear the raging Cam Ly falls echoing from behind the green hills. Uncle Lau was the first to

Remembrance of the Countryside

Nguyen Huy Thiep

I AM NHAM. I was born in a village and grew up in a village. If you're on Route 5 and looking toward my village, you'll only see a small green spot in the yellow fields. You can vaguely see the outline of the Dong Son Mountains, which seem close but are actually 50 kilometers away. My village is near the ocean, and in the summer an ocean breeze blows through.

The fifth month of the moon calendar is harvest time. My mother, my brother's wife, Ngu, Uncle Phung, and I are out in the fields by dawn. Those three cut, and I haul the rice.

I haul the rice home, following the edge of the path by the ditch. It's very bright outside, probably over 100°. The dry mud at the edge of the ditch is broken like rice crackers.

I'm very dreamy, always thinking. My father is a major in the navy, a middle-ranking technician who travels to many islands setting up radar instruments. Once a year he gets permission to come home. My father knows the names of all the islands by heart. My mother has never gone far from our village. She says, "Everywhere's the same. In every place, there are just people." Uncle Phung

is different. He's been to a lot of places, and when he and I are alone together, he tells me, "Within the universe there are not only people, but also saints and devils." Uncle Phung's family is all women: his mother-in-law, his wife, and four daughters. Uncle Phung jokes: "I am the most handsome man in the family."

Ngu is my sister-in-law, married to my older brother Ky, who works in the Tinh Tuc iron mines in Cao Bang. Ngu is the daughter of Quy, the village elementary school teacher. I used to study with him. He has a lot of books. Everybody calls him "the eccentric scholar." They also say, "He's an old goat," and "Quy, the goat." Teacher Quy has two wives. The first wife gave birth to Ngu, my sister-in-law, and the second, Aunt Nhung, who both sews and keeps a small shop, is the mother of my friend Van. Aunt Nhung used to be a prostitute in Hai Phong. After Quy married her, there was nothing left of his reputation.

I haul ten loads of rice, which fill the courtyard. Then I call Minh to pile the straw to make room for the rice. Minh is my little sister, skinny and dark, but bright-eyed and tough. She comes out of the kitchen, her face red, her clothes soaked with sweat.

I go out to the barrel of rainwater, fill a coconut shell, and drink it in a few gulps. The water is cool. My mother often eats rice with rainwater and salted eggplant. My mother can't eat fatty meat.

The courtyard is scorching, and it feels like the air is steaming, heavy with the smell of rice.

Rice husks lay haphazardly across the village paths. When I walk by Aunt Luu's gate I see a crowd of people. Aunt Luu's daughter Mi calls, "Nham!" The village post-

man, Ba Ven, is cramming letters and newspapers into the canvas bag on the back of his bicycle. Mi tells me, "We have a telegram from Quyen in Hanoi."

Aunt Luu, my mother's younger sister, has been paralyzed for years. Her husband, Uncle Sang, is a transportation engineer working in Laos. Uncle Sang's older brother in Hanoi has a daughter, Quyen, who's been studying at a university in America. She came to visit when she was a child.

I hold the telegram in my hand and read: "Aunt Luu send someone to come meet me at the station at two o'clock." I ask Mi, "This afternoon?" Mi nods her head.

Aunt Luu is lying with her back against the wall. She's been lying like that for the past six years. She says, "Nham, help me by going to meet Quyen at the station, okay?"

I say, "My family's harvesting the rice."

"Leave it for a while. Which plot are you harvesting?"

"Red Fetus Plot," I tell her.

Mi carries the telegram out to the fields to talk to my mother. Mi is the same age as my sister Minh, but lighter skinned and more solid. She talks a lot and demands a lot of attention. "Hey, Nham," she says. "One day will you make a bamboo picker so I can get some guavas?" You make it from fresh bamboo, with a head like a fish trap with open teeth.

I tell Minh, "You have to find the bamboo."

"I found it already. Do it tomorrow, okay?"

I calculate in my head the things I need to do, and see I'm going to be busy from early morning until late at night. Mi says, "Tomorrow."

I say, "Yeah." Her house has three guava trees. One time she climbed one of them and the branch broke and she just barely missed falling.

Uncle Phung reads the telegram and says, "What's this SNN post office? What does it mean?"

My mother says, "Nham, if Aunt Luu asked you to go, then go. I put your new shirt in the trunk. Take it out and wear it."

I tell Mi, "Go home. I have to cut rice until noon. I'll go right after lunch."

Mi goes home alone. Her shadow sinks little by little into the field, which is rough with the stubble of the just-cut rice. I hold the sickle, gather the rice in an arc around me close to the roots, and pull sharply. I go one step to the left, gather again, and pull sharply. Go one step to the left again, gather again, and pull sharply again. Like that. Like that forever. The earth in the field is wet, and you can hear the tick tack sound of tiny grasshoppers dancing.

By noon, the fields are empty. Looking out I can see only the four people in my own family still out in the fields. My mother sits at the edge, pulling thorns from her foot. Ngu, wearing a conical hat, a scarf over her face, and with her legs wrapped from the ankles to the thighs for protection, is looking dreamily toward the far row of the Dong Son Mountains. Uncle Phung is collecting rice to haul home. He says, "Are you going home now?" My mouth is so dry I can't speak, so I only nod my head. The two of us, each with one load, head home. Uncle Phung goes in front, and I go behind. The loads of rice are heavy. My feet are shaking but I try to walk anyway. One hundred steps. Two hundred steps. One thousand steps. Two

thousand steps. Like that. Like that forever. Then we get home.

Minh sets out my lunch and then hurries to carry it out to the field for my mother and Ngu.

Lunch is rice with boiled vegetables, salted eggplant, and preserved fish. I eat six bowls of rice without stopping. Now I'm tired. If not, I would eat a lot more.

I go out to the well to wash and change my clothes. I take out the new shirt and put it on, but I feel self-conscious and have to stop. I end up putting on my father's faded shirt from the army instead. Then I walk over to Aunt Luu's house to get the bicycle. Aunt Luu says, "Take a little money." She hands me five thousand but I only take two. Two thousand is worth more than a kilo of rice. Aunt Luu asks, "Do you remember Quyen's face?" I nod, though actually I don't remember well, but when I meet her I'll recognize her.

I ride the bicycle to the station. From my village to the station is four or five miles. It's been a long time since I've gone that far.

The dirt path follows the edge of the village past the village meeting house, past the lotus pond, then along the side of a ditch back toward the town hall. I'm thinking. But my ideas aren't clear.

I'm thinking
I'm thinking about the simplicity of words
Forms of expression are too powerless
While exhaustion fills the world
Shameless injustice fills the world

Desolate fates fill the world
How many months pass by
How many lives pass by
No word has the skill to describe it
Who will gather this morning for me
Gather the empty light from my little sister's eyes
Gather the gray hairs from my mother's head
Gather the vain hopes from the heart of my brother's wife
And gather the smell of poverty from the countryside
I snipe at every idea
I look for a way to chase it into a cage
And I scream in the fields of my heart
Howl like a wolf
I try to harvest some part of a life
And tie it loosely with a band of words
I howl in the fields of the body
I gather the light from the eyes of life
Which are watching the light in my own eyes
Looking into the world of consciousness
The distant and immeasurable world of consciousness
Although I understand
It means nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing at all.

The train station is empty in the afternoon. A few chickens stand in the courtyard. About ten people are waiting at the entrance. There's the sound of music coming from a cassette somewhere. The voice of the singer Nha Phuong slowly sings: "You passed through my life. Do you remember anything? My darling, you passed through my life. Do you remember anything?" Noodle soup ven-

dors, refreshment vendors. Everywhere there are shops selling clothes, shoes, sugar and milk, cigarettes. Cars running back and forth.

The sky is so clear. Blazing. The whole town has sunstroke.

The train's whistle sounds hesitant and happy from far away. Someone calls, "The train's coming." The whole town is still dreamy. Then someone yells again, "The train's coming," and now the train sounds intimidating and shrill. Everybody's suddenly excited. Old women, young women, children selling things, all running back and forth. The sound of the sellers competing with each other. "Water, here!" "Bread!" "Drinks!" "Bread!" "Drinks!"

I stand with my bicycle, watching. The passengers are standing and sitting in a group at the doors of the train. This is a local stop. My countryside is anonymous. The place where I stand is anonymous.

About ten people file, one after another, through the ticket entrance, and I recognize a few teachers from the district high school. A soldier. A few traders. Some steelworkers. A fat man wearing dark glasses with the price sticker still on them. A tall, thin youth, with hair as brittle as the roots of bamboo and intense eyes. I know him. He's the poet Van Ngoc. After Ngoc comes an old couple. Quyen.

Quyen's hair hangs down. She wears a T-shirt, jeans, glasses, and a bag over her shoulder. Next to everyone else, Quyen stands out.

She walks through the ticket gate and looks around. She recognizes me immediately. "I'm Quyen," she says. "Did Aunt Luu send you to pick me up?"

"Yes," I say.

Quyen smiles. "Thank you. How are you related to Aunt Luu? What's your name?"

"I'm Nham. I'm the son of Hung."

"Do we share any common ancestors?"

"No."

Quyen nods. "Good. Aunt Luu hired you then?"

I look at my shadow, dark in the cement, my heart sad. Me, it's my destiny; everywhere people always see me as someone for hire.

The afternoon passes slowly. Shadows chase each other across the ground. The afternoon empties the spirit of anyone who hopes to prove that anything has meaning.

Quyen asks, "How many *sao* does your family plant? One *sao* harvests how much rice? How much money do you make?"

I tell her, "Every *sao* harvests more than a hundred kilos. Every kilo of rice sells for 1400 *dong*."

Quyen calculates. "Twenty million tons of rice for sixty million people."

I say, "Who only thinks about eating?"

Passing the lotus pond we meet Thieu, the monk. Brother Thieu says hello. I say hello back. Brother Thieu says, "I remembered to set aside some *tu cau* roses for you."

I say, "I'd like to come by the pagoda to get them sometime." I love flowers. Teacher Quy always says, "That's the pleasure of a person who understands life."

Brother Thieu asks, "Want to take a few lotus flowers to put in a vase?" This season the pagoda's lotus pond has a lot of flowers.

I park the bike to push the boat out for Brother Thieu. The basket boat can hold only one person sitting down. The paddle splashes the water. Quyen says, "I want to go on the boat." So I call Brother Thieu, and he rows back to shore.

Brother Thieu carries a bunch of lotus flowers up to the bank. Quyen climbs into the boat, and I push it back out with her in it.

Brother Thieu says, "Pampering people brings trouble to us." I laugh. He and I sit on the bank. The afternoon continues to pass slowly. Bright yellow sunshine. My heart is empty and wide, so empty, an empty expanse.

Quyen comes up the bank, and Brother Thieu invites us to eat lotus root. "Is it good?" he asks.

"It's good," she says.

We linger a little and then go home. Brother Thieu says good-bye. Quyen says good-bye back. Quyen carries the bunch of lotus flowers. Brother Thieu looks hesitantly after us for a moment.

I go in front. Quyen goes behind. She asks me about Brother Thieu.

THE STORY OF BROTHER THIEU

Brother Thieu was an orphan. In his fifteenth year someone looked at his strange physiognomy and told him, "You must go into the monkhood. There's no place in this world to hold you." Brother Thieu followed this advice; then he traveled to many different places, seeking to learn

from great intellectuals, but he never got a chance. Brother Thieu said, "Now Buddha is living in a place that has no Buddha." Then he said: "Religion that's not intellectualized suits people; people who don't intellectualize are suited to religion."

Brother Thieu discovered the foundation of an old pagoda, then he mobilized the community's resources to help restore it. Inexplicably, it was called Bach Xi Tu, White Tooth Pagoda. Brother Thieu often read poetry. One poem was a couplet in the old language:

Co luan doc chieu giang son tinh
Tu tieu nhat thinh thien dia kinh

which means:

Only one orbit of light,
the mountain and river are quiet.
Only one surge of laughter,
earth and heaven are afraid.

There was another:

Lo phung kiem khach tu trinh kiem
Bat thi thi nhan mac hien thi

which means:

If you meet a swordsman, show your sword.
If you're not a poet, don't chant your poetry.

Brother Thieu said, "Buddha teaches humanity one way of entering the monkhood practically, by trying to

rediscover one's original character. Buddha is too simple, so not everyone understands."

Quyen and I get home. Aunt Luu, with her eyes full of tears, cries, "Niece! Oh, niece!"

Quyen sits on the edge of the bed and says, "My mother and father remembered the anniversary of Grandfather's death, but they're busy and can't come. They sent you and Uncle a little money."

Aunt Luu says, "We don't need money. We only need feeling."

Quyen takes five million *dong* out of her purse and gives it to Aunt Luu. Quyen says, "I'm giving Mi a shirt."

Mi smiles shyly. "Thank you," she says.

I tell Aunt Luu, "I'm going home." Then I stuff her two thousand *dong* under her pillow and leave.

At home they're husking the rice. Ngu asks, "Is little Quyen pretty?"

"Yes," I tell her.

By the time dinner is over, it's dark. Outside, it's pouring. Thunder resounds in the sky. My whole family runs around pulling the rice out from under the leaks in the rafters. By the time we've finished it's already 11:00. It's still raining. Suddenly I feel anxious and can't sit still. I say to my mother, "I want to go out to the fields to catch frogs. In a rain like this there'll be a lot of frogs."

My mother says, "You're not afraid of the thunder and lightning, child?" I laugh. My mother doesn't understand my laugh at all. I laugh like a bandit, like a debt collector, like a devil. I laugh at my fingernails and toenails. Why are they so long and black like that?

SONG FOR CATCHING FROGS

The souls of the frogs return
I lie in dry ground, now I hop to the field's edge
Where there are only holes and burrows
No blankets, no mats; misery in a hundred forms
I pray for March to come.
With one big rain I can leap outside
Outside is so spacious and relaxed
In rain or sun I can always look for food
Before, I still strove to improve myself.
Unsuccessful, I was humbled.
I see a boy with nearly black skin
He just stands and looks without speaking
I see a boy with very black skin
In one hand a fishing rod, in the other, a basket.
He wears a conical hat
With a scarf wrapped around his head looking pretty
He also carries a fan
He carries a bamboo cylinder full of bait
He carries a slender rod
With a long red line.
I just sat down at the edge of the sweet potato field
He jerks his rod and breaks my jaw
Mother! Get me medicine
Get me the leaves of chili and xuong song *herbs*
I am in the deepest hole
At the edge of the morning glory pond near the raft.
Bamboo Shoot Boy is the son of Uncle Bamboo Tree
He catches me to take home to dry and skin.
The Welsh Onion Boy goes with the Flowering Onion Boy

Add a fistful of salt, so hot, so bitter.
Oh, Buddha, come down to me
Gather the martyred soul of this frog and fly back to heaven
A lifetime mixes tears and laughter
A frog's life, a person's life, so hot, so bitter . . .

The fields are empty. Only the sound of frogs croaking, the sound of toads echoing loudly, and the murmur of insects.

It rains.

It rains continuously.

I hold the flashlight, my feet treading randomly on the wet rice stubble. There are a lot of frogs, stunned by the light, and you only need to pick them up and put them in the basket. Thunder resounds in the sky. Lightning flashes. The universe opens without limits. The wind roars, sounding like thousands of birds flapping their wings over my head. Suddenly my soul is seized by a feeling of terror. Very clearly, I see a great image gliding quickly and moving violently over my head. I lie down on the ground, stupefied, gasping. I feel certain that the invisible power hovering above me understands everything absolutely, justly, clearly, defending the inherent goodness of the human soul. It has the ability to comfort and soothe each person's fate. It brings me peace.

I was right
I am at peace because I chose this form of expression
The form is difficult, mediocre, meaningless, and vain
To add luster to the value of human knowledge
In these deserted fields
The deserted fields of stupidity and defiant cruelty

Who's there?
Who plays the plaintive flute at night?
And which bright souls, which dark souls are searching for the way
Which faint breath
Which faint laughter
Emerges screeching out of white teeth
Which whispers
Meaningless groans of insects
Sounds of the cowherd's flute, which are tiny but carry
Wandering through the fields of the heart
Wandering through the fields of the body
Which wanderer survives
Which soulmates listen closely
Which origins remind
Strumming musical sounds
On this dark night who remains awake
Who wanders through the fields of this immense and miserable world?

Little by little the rain stops. I go around this field, around that field. The big croakers have disappeared. Sometimes I can only see one peeper running along the canal. On the horizon, in the direction of Dong Son, I see the flicker of a fire. I feel lost. I don't know what time it is but suddenly I hear the crow of the chickens, the desolate crow of the chickens falling and rising in no order at all. For a long time I don't see any frogs, then suddenly I realize that somehow I've come to the place where the canal meets the Cam River. Alone in the sky is the morning star.

It's dawn when I return to the village. The air is clean.

The village is familiar and quiet. After the rain, the landscape seems elegant and pure.

Crossing by Aunt Nhung's house, I stand still. The house is situated close to the side of the road. The thatch screen opens. Someone's shadow slips hurriedly out. Whoever it is looks in front and behind then runs quickly and hides behind a tree. A thief? I'm about to yell when I realize it's Uncle Phung. A moment later, Aunt Nhung opens the door and steps tranquilly out, wearing a nightgown. Nhung is over thirty, her body well proportioned and beautiful.

I carry the bag of frogs down the road after Uncle Phung. When we get to a bend, he glances back and sees me. He says, "Were there many frogs?" I don't answer. Uncle Phung is a bit startled. He insists, "Why are you being like that?" I suddenly feel a gnawing sadness. I'm sad for Aunt Nhung, sad for Uncle Phung, sad for Teacher Quy. I'm sad for myself.

Uncle Phung walks away as if he doesn't care. I go home. It turns out that I only have about twenty frogs. Ngu says, "That wasn't worth the effort. So few and you were out all night."

My mother laughs, "He probably caught frogs and slept in the fields."

Minh is preparing to go to school for the summer activities. She wears blue pants and a white blouse, which are her nicest clothes, the ones she only wears on holidays. She whispers in my ear, "I know where you went, but I won't tell. You didn't go catch frogs." She laughs. I look into her eyes. She *knows*, but I have no way to suspect that in only a few hours I will have to cry for her. She

knows, simply because it's almost like she's experienced things and understands. Until that moment, the moment when she will die, she has only four more hours to joke and understand everything completely.

My mother says, "Child, take some frogs over to Teacher Quy's so he can drink whiskey with them."

I say, "Okay," then I go bathe.

My mother and Ngu go out to the fields to harvest peanuts, which is also my job in the mornings.

On the way to Teacher Quy's house, I go by Aunt Luu's, and Quyen yells, "Hey, What's-your-name!"

I say, "I'm Nham. Where did Mi go?"

"Mi went to school. Wherever you're going, let me go with you."

We go to Teacher Quy's.

THE STORY OF TEACHER QUY

Teacher Quy taught elementary school, had a generous nature, and had been reading books since he was small. When he grew up and his parents chose a wife for him, he said to her, "Don't marry me or you'll have a miserable life."

She said, "Even miserable, I'll still marry you."

Teacher Quy said, "If you marry me, first, you can't be afraid of poverty; second, you can't be afraid of humiliation; third, you can't be jealous; and fourth, you have to respect decency."

She said, "If you respect decency, then the other three are easy." The couple got married and lived in harmony.

Later, Teacher Quy lost his job because he couldn't bear to follow the textbooks and taught with proverbs and popular songs instead. One time he went to Hai Phong to administer a test and he met a pregnant prostitute who had no place to deliver her baby, so he brought her home to be his second wife. The first wife didn't say anything, even contributed money to build another house. Wife number two wasn't faithful, and still had relationships with a lot of men, but Teacher Quy ignored it. He only said, "Whoever you sleep with, remember to get some money out of him. If there's no money, then take rice, or a pig or a duck. Don't sleep with someone for nothing." The whole village laughed at him, but Teacher Quy ignored them. Teacher Quy often drank whiskey. Whiskey went in, and poetry came out. There were a lot of poems that were pretty good.

Teacher Quy is at home by himself, lying on a hammock reading a book. Quyen and I say hello. He gets up and hurries to make tea. We sit on a bamboo bed under the shade of the vine trellis. The teacher asks Quyen, "Miss, if you study at the university in America, who is it useful for?"

Quyen says, "It's useful for me, useful for my family, useful for the country."

Teacher Quy smiles. "Don't think about usefulness. It'll only exhaust you."

We eat taro dipped in sesame and salt. When Teacher Quy shoves a book under the mat, Quyen says, "If you do that, you'll crush the book and ruin it."

Teacher Quy laughs. "If I crush it, it's nothing. You read books to have knowledge. Having knowledge is for having a life with meaning."

The sunlight filters through the leaves, scattering traces of light on the ground. Teacher Quy and Quyen and I are quiet. I want to go out into the fields. Quyen says, "Coming back this time, I really want to have an accurate impression of the countryside. Wherever you go, let me go with you." I hesitate.

Teacher Quy laughs, "She's a woman. How can you refuse a woman?"

We say good-bye to Teacher Quy and go into the fields. Quyen says, "The fields are so wide. Do you know where they begin?"

The fields began in a place very deep in my heart
Within my own flesh and blood there were fields
From over here, the fields were immense and limitless
From over there, the fields were limitless and immense
How can I ever forget the place where my mother gave birth to me
Where she used thread to cinch the stem of my umbilical cord
Washed me in pond water
I knew that crying was useless because everything must wait
Must wait from January to December
In January plant beans; in February, eggplant
I have passed along so many wrong paths
I have passed through so many hardships, vulgarities
I must plant and harvest in this field
I must know by heart the names of so many kinds of bugs
And the field is sometimes rainy, sometimes sunny
Some places are shallowly raked and some are deeply plowed

Then one day
(an inauspicious and ominous day)
A woman came and made me miserable
She taught me the custom of unfaithfulness in love
By betraying me as she would betray anyone
I silently buried my hatred at the end of the fields
In a difficult vein of the fields, shaped like the curve of a sword
Flowers of hope withered in my hand
Work became heavier than before
I sold produce at a price too cheap
I have had several big harvests
And also failed completely several times
When the afternoon passed, twilight was quiet
I had no time to see the scars on my body
I only knew that I was wounded
Night
The stars burned like candles in the sky
I covered myself with a shroud, which smelled of my comrade
At that moment, Oh, Friend, Oh my young friend
Please understand me
I tried to make the fields so fertile

I lead Quyen past the auxiliary crops. She asks, "How much has the local price for agricultural products changed this year?"

"It's gone up 0.4 percent," I tell her.

"That'll kill you! Industrial products rose 2.2 percent," she says. "What's the price of fertilizer?"

"Nitrogen increased 1.6 percent. Phosphorus increased 1.4 percent."

"Do you use electricity here?" she asks.

"No."

"The price of electricity rose 2.2 percent."

Around ten o'clock in the morning the fields get crowded with women and children. They're the main source of labor. The men around here are adventurous. They have a lot of illusions and nurse dreams of getting rich, so they often take off for the city to look for work or to do business. There are even some people who risk going as far as the center of the country to dig for gold or rubies. They don't strike it rich, but when they return to the village, their characters have changed. They've become like wild and dangerous beasts. Uncle Phung is a person like that.

THE STORY OF UNCLE PHUNG

Nguyen Viet Phung, the child of a poor family, went through secondary school and then quit. Phung had a number of professions: plowman, builder, carpenter, ox-cart driver. When he was twenty he went into the army. Three years later he returned to the village and got married. His wife, who is four years older than he is, gave birth to four girls in three years (two are twins). Phung was determined to get rich, so he sold all the furniture in his house for two gold rings, which he carried to the center of the country to dig for gold. For a year, there was no news at all, and then out of nowhere he returned, thin as the corpse of a cicada, his face swollen like a gong. He lay down on the bed and his hardworking wife had to take

care of him for the next six months. The poor family became poorer. After his battle with illness, Phung's manner changed. Once he stabbed someone, scaring everyone in the village. Another time he suddenly started crying, putting his hands together in prayer and prostrating himself before his wife and daughters. Luckily, after that, his wife's parents moved to the city to live with their son who had just returned from abroad. They gave the family the house with three *sao* of land and that changed their lives. Phung's wife is resourceful, good at raising animals, and also at making and selling tofu. Every one of those four daughters endures a lot to help her mother. At home, Phung has one room for himself, which he forbids his wife and children to enter. Sometimes he still goes with Nhung and a few of the local matrons. Phung's wife and daughters ask, "Why do you avoid us?" Phung says, "There's nothing valuable that's close to me. My flesh is poison. Biting me would poison a dog. I love all of you. All I want is for you to be clean."

Quyen and I pass a peck of land in the middle of the fields. At the bottom, castor-oil plants and thorny amaranth grow abundantly. There is even corn with red flowers and green leaves. Quyen asks, "Why is it called a 'peck' of land?"

"In the past, King Ba Vanh dug this pit as a space in which to count the number of soldiers he had, in the same way that we would measure rice."

"About how many people?"

"Twenty people would be one fighting unit and two hundred people would be one battalion."

Quyen and I reach the field where my mother and Ngu

are gathering peanuts. Water fills the plot, prompting the peanut plants to rise from their roots.

Quyen rolls up her trousers and wanders down to collect peanuts. "It's so easy," she says.

My mother says, "You're only here for a short time. Try to calculate from the moment we first sow peanut seeds into the furrows until we harvest, then you might understand how muddy and exhausted my children and I can be."

Ngu adds, "Whoever has a full bowl of rice should remember that each grain is full of bitterness."

I step into a nest of crickets. When I turn the ground with a shovel, thousands of big, fat ones swarm into the air. My mother and Ngu stop gathering peanuts to catch crickets. My mother, grinning with pleasure, says, "Oh, a blessing! Such abundance for our family! Oh!"

Ngu says happily, "Maybe our family will be the richest in the village!"

About noon, we see on Route 5 a group of people screaming and crying and running around. My mother falls headfirst into the field, then calls to me, "Nham! Oh, Nham!" Ngu and I are afraid, thinking my mother has been blown over by the wind. My mother's face grows pale, and she puts her hands in front of her as if she's touching somebody, saying, "Nham! Oh, Nham! Why does your sister Minh have blood all over her face like that?"

Ngu shakes my mother, "Mother! Mother! Why are you talking like that?"

A few people suddenly separate from the crowd on Route 5 and run across the fields. Someone screams loudly and sorrowfully, "Mrs. Hung (Hung is my father's

name), hurry and get the body of your child." Ngoc (the poet I saw at the station yesterday afternoon), with his hair standing on end, runs in the lead. He doesn't speak clearly. I only hear it vaguely, only hear enough to know that my little sister Minh and Aunt Luu's daughter Mi were riding through the three-way intersection on their way home from school when a truck carrying electric posts hit and killed them.

My mother writhes in the peanut field, smearing herself with dirt. The crickets skip up off the ground, fly for a moment, then drop back down to bury their heads in the mud. Ngu stands silently, her eyes confused and full of fear, looking off in the direction of the Dong Son Mountains as if she can't understand why the heavens suddenly became so cruel.

Ngoc, Quyen, and I run out to the road. Tears are streaming down my face. Minh was only thirteen years old. Mi was only thirteen years old. I hadn't even had a chance to make the guava picker for Mi. And my little sister, Minh, a child so generous she wore only patched clothes her whole life and always set aside for me the most delicious things to eat.

The truck carrying three electric posts lies turned over by the edge of the road. People are using a jack to raise the wheel, looking for a way to pull out the bodies of Minh and Mi. Minh lies on her side, Mi on her stomach, pressed against each other, with the crumpled bicycle next to them.

I put my hand to my mouth to stifle any cries. I loved them so much. Swarms of flies cluster around their noses. I don't know where Ngoc got the handful of incense he's

now holding in front of the faces of the two girls. The smoke lingers in one place, unable to rise.

I won't say anything else about the deaths of Minh and Mi. In the afternoon we have to have the funeral for my sister and my cousin. It's like every other funeral in the village, with lots of tears, lots of condolences. One of the village youths and I carry Aunt Luu on a stretcher out to the end of the fields and then later carry her back. Quyen follows. Ngoc wrote a poem about the whole thing. I don't understand how he could write a poem during such a brutal time as this.

THE FUNERAL OF THE VIRGINS IN THE FIELDS BY THE POET BUI BAN NGOC

I follow the funeral of the virgins into the fields
White death, completely white death
White butterflies, white flowers
White souls, white lives
Oh, I follow the funeral of the virgins into the fields
I dig a grave, five feet long, two feet wide
I dig a grave, four feet deep
Oh, I bury these spirits that were only beginning
Oh, here is an offering for the earth
Completely pure virgins, completely white death
White butterflies, white flowers
White spirits, white lives
Oh, I stow in my heart this pure white poem
I break off a green branch to cover my eyes
The breeze flutters, the spirit flutters away

The spirit flies away, over the fields of the body
I follow the funeral of the virgins into the field
On a day like that, not a special day
On a day like that, a normal day
Oh, I am lost in the crowd, in the masses, in the hearts,
in the grief, in the desolation. . . .

The next afternoon, I take Quyen to the station. Aunt Luu cries forever, but Quyen insists on leaving. We follow the dirt road that runs along the edge of the village. At the lotus pond we sit down to rest. Quyen says, "I've only been here three days, but it seems so long!"

In the afternoon the district station is empty. There are only about ten people standing in the yard waiting for the train. In the emptiness you can hear sounds coming from a cassette player somewhere. The train arrives. One by one the passengers get on the train. Some teachers from the district high school. A soldier. A few traders. A teenager wearing clear glasses, carrying a suitcase. An old couple. Quyen.

Quyen says, "Hey! What's-your-name! I'm leaving! Thanks for coming to the station with me!"

I stand in the station yard for a long time. The train disappears. I have a feeling I'll never see Quyen again.

I pass through the ticket gate and go back to the village. From the side, you can only see a small green spot in the yellow fields and vaguely, in the distance, the outline of the Dong Son Mountains. I have so many remembrances there.

Will tomorrow be sunny or rainy? Actually, rain and sunshine are both meaningless to me now. I am Nham. Tomorrow I will be seventeen years old. Is that the most beautiful time in a person's life or not?

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ISBN 978-1-883513-02-3
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Berkeley, California
www.whereaboutspress.com

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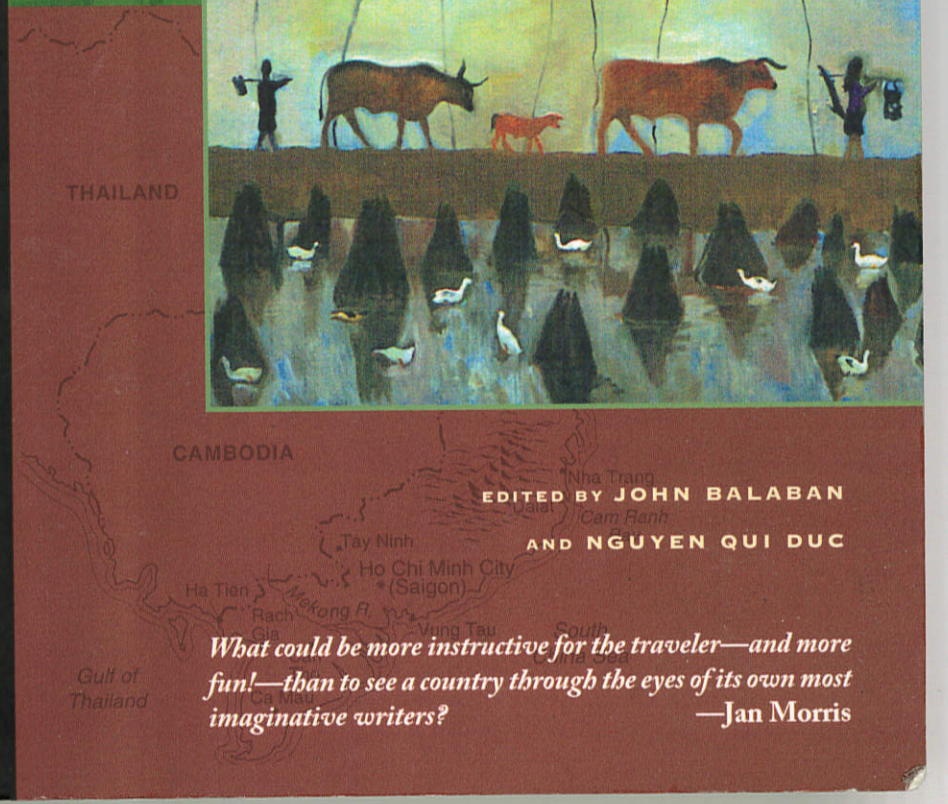

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