

BOOK II

Khanh Phu Village
Red River Delta
Northern Viet Nam

A Boat on the River

*The stream slips by, as calm as smooth paper.
A single star guides the sampan; the moon trails behind.
While the oars creak, the sculler ponders a maze of dreams
That might free the rivers and mountains of an ancient land.
As the sampan moves homeward, dawn lights the sky,
Tingeing the horizon with the flush of a new day.*

*Ho Chi Minh
1890-1969*

Khanh Phu Village

Vietnamese sometimes describe their country as shaped like two large rice baskets (the two deltas) suspended from a bamboo carrying-pole (the Truong Son Mountains). The Red River Delta in northern Viet Nam has an entirely different feeling from that of the Mekong Delta in the southern part of the country. The northern soil is less fertile and lacks the Mekong's web of sluices with houses hidden here and there beneath lush foliage. In the Red River Delta there are typhoons, and the population pressure is so intense that every square foot of land is used.

As a first impression, Khanh Phu looked much like other northern villages. Its rice paddies stretched toward the horizon, giving a sense of openness, but this feeling was countered by the clusters of walled compounds with squat houses and compact gardens.

To welcome me and my entourage, the head of the village People's Committee beat a gong made from an American bomb canister. Uncle Peaceful was also head of the village Communist Party. In his mid-sixties, he had a square face and close-cropped, bristly hair. His right shoulder sloped down and his grin tilted up in the opposite direction.

Uncle Peaceful led us into the People's Committee building, a stucco structure furnished with a long table and stools. The entourage settled around the table. We sipped tea, we exchanged speeches. Since I made this first trip to Khanh Phu before I visited Ban Long, I had no clue that my arrival was a sensational event. No foreigner had been allowed to stay with a family or even in a village. Furthermore, I was an American, and this was the time [1987] when no diplomatic relationship existed between the United States and Viet Nam and when the U.S. embargo was stringent.

I suspect that every one of the well-meaning listeners sitting around that table worried that he or she would be held personally

responsible if a problem occurred during my visit. The easiest way for these officials to ensure that nothing went wrong was to see that nothing happened. Perhaps that's the reason everyone insisted I return to the Province Guest House, where I would be safe and utterly comfortable.

The meeting with the People's Committee lasted an hour and madly frustrated me. Afterwards, I paused at the gong hanging from a jackfruit tree and ran my fingers over the rusty bomb casing. At home in Ohio, it was calving season. With the twelve-hour time difference, it would be after midnight in our hollow. I pictured my neighbor, having finished his afternoon shift at the tire mold plant, walking through the moonlit snow to the barn to check my cows. What am I doing here? I asked myself. I should be back home tending to my own chores.

I rapped my knuckles against the bomb casing; it resonated, *thoong*. Just then someone grabbed my elbow. During the previous week in Ha Noi, people had often grabbed my elbow, leading me here, tugging me there. But this particular grip felt different: It was fierce, with a strength that comes only from hard labor.

I turned to find a woman in her sixties whom I'd noticed during the meeting. She had sat alone against the side wall. Sunken cheeks accentuated her unusually high cheekbones. The woman's eyes had narrowed when I told the People's Committee of my wish to live with a family in order to help Americans understand ordinary Vietnamese. Now, her eyes narrowed again, matching with their intensity the grip she maintained on my elbow. With her free hand, she pointed to herself and then to me.

"One, two *Ba My*," she said in Vietnamese.

My means "beautiful" and, ironically, also "America." *Ba* means "Mrs." and also "woman." *Ba My* could mean "Mrs. Beautiful," naming the woman who grasped my elbow, or it could refer to me as an American woman.

"One, two *Ba My*," she said, repeating her pun.

"Yes," I answered, too discouraged for jokes. "We must be alike."

Mrs. Beautiful's grip on my elbow became even more proprietary. "You are coming to my house for lunch," she said. She looked me straight in the eye. "And you are going to stay at my house with me. You are not going to the hotel."



Autumn (center) joined me in Khanh Phu in early 1987 before the changes that would come with Renovation. The woman on the left led the Khanh Phu Women's Union during the American War. The woman on the right was a guerrilla against the French.

I had no idea then what gave Mrs. Beautiful the power single-handedly to overturn the collective decision of the whole People's Committee. But she had done it. I could feel the passion surging through her fingertips as she propelled me across the road, down a narrow path between high stucco walls and through the gate in the wall surrounding her house.

That first day, as I ate lunch with the officials at Mrs. Beautiful's house, I caught snippets of intense whisperings about my fate. Whatever her reasons, Mrs. Beautiful seemed determined to have me remain as her guest. She insisted on taking responsibility for my health and safety with the help of Autumn and the head of the village Women's Union. After lunch, Mrs. Beautiful dispatched the national Women's Union cadre and driver back to Ha Noi. Soon, she began to usher the provincial and district officials to her gate.

Once all the officials had left, I retrieved clean clothes from my bag. I was dipping a pail of bathwater from the courtyard cistern when the head of the village Women's Union came running. In accordance with the custom of northern Viet Nam, she went by her name, New Moon, without the prefix indicating birth order as is customary in southern Viet Nam.

New Moon was about forty years old, with blunt hands and widespread eyes. Strands of hair slipping from her nape knot gave her an appearance of openness. "Oh no!" she protested, taking the bucket from me. "You must have hot water."

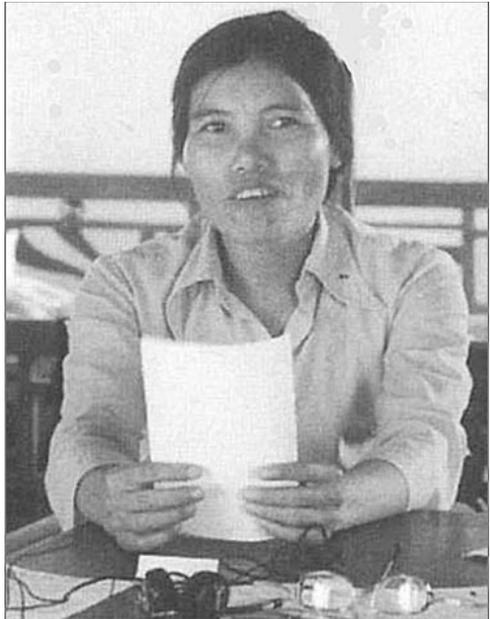
"No, no," I countered, "this is fine."

I continued into the brick enclosure, which had been built for people far shorter than I; before I could remove my sweaters, New Moon appeared with a blackened kettle. She insisted on mixing the bathwater lest I burn myself, and then she stood next to me, watching as, bent over in the low enclosure, I bathed. When I'd finished, she took the soap and washcloth and scoured my back.

"Oh!" she said. "You are full of muscles."

Once I was dressed, New Moon appraised me from head to foot. "You wear a white shirt and black satin *quans* like us, and sweaters like us, too. You wear your hair tied back in a nape knot." She took my hand and ran her fingertips

New Moon facilitated my first visit to Khanh Phu in early 1987. During the American War, she had led Khanh Phu's women's militia. She and her husband courted when changing watch.



over my knuckles. Then she tested the calluses on my palms. “You have the same hands, rough from work.” Her wide gaze settled on my face. “But your eyes are different.”

... Throughout that visit, Mrs. Beautiful hovered over me as if I were the last remnant of an endangered species. At meals she sat next to me, chewing her betel nut as she plied me with tofu and eggs, peanuts and rice. She ate only a bite or two.

“Eat four bowls,” she’d order, tapping her chopsticks against the rice pot.

“But I’m full,” I’d counter.

“Eat four!” she would insist.

I resented the martial way Mrs. Beautiful watched me eat. I tried to engage her in conversation, and gregarious Autumn tried as well. But Mrs. Beautiful would deflect our talk and serve more rice. Then she’d slip out to tend to her pigs.

Each night, I’d awaken to frail, gold light glancing across my face. I would pretend to sleep as Mrs. Beautiful stood by my bed, baby lamp in hand.

For the first week, I never left Mrs. Beautiful’s walled compound. The bicycles Autumn and I had brought leaned unused against the pigsty. My hands turned soft; the calluses on my palms peeled. I struggled against the swirling depression that, for me, comes with physical inactivity.

New Moon arrived every morning. She and Autumn and I did a lot of sitting, and we drank a lot of tea. Sometimes New Moon brought her friends to visit me. Gradually the visitors began to open up, but the stories they told me often had the rehearsed sameness of pre-approved rhetoric. Villagers would *noi chung*— speak in general, using the first person plural, their language peppered with “report to you . . .” When I pressed them to tell their own stories, they complied but often in a predictable litany.

“I report to you, I was born in 1946, the year after the famine,” New Moon said one afternoon as she, Autumn, and I sipped tea at the table by the altar. Mrs. Beautiful sat on my bed, listening.

With her sturdy build New Moon seemed as solidly rooted to the earth as a banyan tree. “I finished fourth grade when I was

fourteen," she said, "then joined the construction brigade digging the irrigation canals. I was eighteen when the American War came to us. I became a platoon leader in the women's militia." New Moon interlaced her sturdy fingers; her knuckles were ingrained with dirt." Our village was close to the main road to the South, and we were close to the sea. Your planes came in from the ships to bomb us. They came so fast, with so little warning."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"We listened to Uncle Ho. He urged us women to make Viet Nam secure by working the paddies so our children and the soldiers could eat. When the Americans bombed by day, we plowed at night. But usually we worked the paddies by day. By night we repaired the bombed roads. We carried a rifle slung over our backs for the low-flying bombers and a rope nearby in case a pilot parachuted."

New Moon stood up and bent over, settling her hands onto the floor as if she were transplanting. "If we stood up to shoot," she added, pretending to dip rice seedlings into the mud, "the planes would bomb us. That's why we'd skitter to a trench."

"*Rununuu, ruunuu,*" Autumn said, imitating a bomber.

New Moon squatted and, like a crab, scuttled across the room to my bed. All the while she held her arms raised, imaginary rifle ready. She ducked behind Mrs. Beautiful's legs as if hiding behind a tree. "The planes would dip close to the earth to release their bombs," she said, squinting as if taking aim. "Then they would level and race upward again. When the planes leveled, we could shoot them in the belly!"

"Did you have artillery?" I asked when New Moon returned to the table.

"Oh yes." She swung the tiny teapot slowly as if it were made of heavy steel, its spout a gun barrel. "It took two women to manage the artillery. Our task was to be ready whenever an American plane flew over. We took turns." New Moon giggled, covering her mouth as she looked over at Mrs. Beautiful. "That's how my husband and I courted."

"Ah ha," I said.

Mrs. Beautiful laughed and edged closer.

"My husband was a platoon leader in the men's militia," New Moon continued. "He was also president of our section of the Youth League." She laughed, a light sound. "I became vice president. He had the watch after mine. Every evening I would chat with him as we changed shifts!"

"But what happened when the men went to the South?" I asked.

"We had to learn their work," she answered. "We had to study the theory of farming, how to gather and store the next crop's seed, how to repair machinery. We women had dug the irrigation canals, but we'd never run the pumps. We studied about the best time to open the sluice gates for irrigation and how to use the system to protect our harvest from floods." She paused, her voice dropping in pitch. "When the dike was bombed, we called everyone. 'Bring your shovels!' we yelled. 'Hurry to the dike!' We worked all night. We women had dug that irrigation system. We had to protect it!"



Mrs. Beautiful, a guerrilla during the French War and a trainer for the Khanh Phu women's militia during the American War, was the first Vietnamese peasant to welcome an American into her home to stay. Mrs. Beautiful's daughter-in-law and grandson tend her altar following her death in 1993.

"In the old days," Mrs. Beautiful added, "women would transplant, weed, and harvest. But when the men left for the South, we women had to plow and harrow. Whatever it was, we had to do it."

New Moon nodded toward Mrs. Beautiful. "We had great teachers. Mrs. Beautiful! She'd been a guerrilla against the French. She taught us how to fight. I will report this to you," New Moon added. "Times have changed for women in this village. We're not beasts of burden the way we used to be before we built roads into the paddy land. Now, we carry manure in oxcarts and haul it only a short distance by shoulder yoke. After we dug the irrigation sluices, we no longer had to haul water long distances to the paddies. And now we have pedal machines for threshing and fans for winnowing! Oh my! Life is much easier than it used to be."

"Yes," Mrs. Beautiful said, touching her right shoulder as if steadying a bamboo yoke. "But the paddy road. That was the greatest development in the history of this village. An oxcart instead of women's shoulders!"

When New Moon's younger sister, Plum, came to see us, she brought with her a written speech. Plum resembled her sister, though her build and features were more delicate. As a youngster, she had corralled other children to play student while she stood before them as teacher. When she was seventeen, Plum finished middle school and began to teach first grade.

After much urging, Plum tucked her written report away in her cloth bag. She looked me in the eye and started talking. "I report to you, the year I started teaching was the year the Americans came. There was no safe place. Bombs everywhere. If the Americans bombed in the morning, we held school in the afternoon. I report to you, we never stopped school. Once, a bomb hit a bunker in a neighboring province and killed a whole class. After that, we divided our classes into groups of three and moved between the groups. Then if a bomb hit, we'd lose only three children. I was lucky. All my children survived."

"Did you have evacuees?" Autumn asked. Her daughter was six when Ha Noi's children were evacuated to the countryside.

“Yes, ours came from Nghe An and Quang Binh,” Plum said. “Every family took in one or two children and raised them as their own. We gave those children extra attention. They were so young and far from their parents. They’d cry when they heard bombing in the distance because they worried their parents had been killed. Sometimes we would just hold the children.” She spread her arms. “But our arms weren’t long enough.

“I report to you,” she continued, “when the Americans began dropping baby bombs,

we made a helmet and shield out of straw for each child. A baby-bomb pellet couldn’t pierce a straw helmet.”

Autumn touched my shoulder. “The kids loved wearing the helmets,” she said to me, “because then they looked like soldiers.”

“The children stopped saying ‘airplane’,” Plum added. “Instead, whenever they heard bombers, they would call out, ‘Xon Son! Xon Son den!’” Plum laughed as she imitated the children saying, “Johnson! Johnson’s coming!” She continued, “Then later, they’d call, ‘Nix Xon! Nix Xon den!’ In the bunkers, the kids drew pictures of Nixon.”

Autumn laughed and pushed her glasses up onto her nose. “Forgive us if we tell you this, but Nixon was the most fun to



Photo: Ngo Vinh Long Collection

Women were responsible for much of the North Vietnamese defense against American bombers.

draw." She sketched a likeness of the former president that could have earned her space on a newspaper editorial page. "We drew Nixon with a nose like an elephant!"

"We also built swings in the bunkers," Plum said, "and we sang."

"Can you sing one of the songs?" I asked.

Plum cleared her throat. She had an ethereal, childlike voice that wavered around each note:

*The sun flashes through the clouds.
The breeze tussles my hair.
Mother, I'll bring you rice as you transplant.
Eat for your health while I tend our buffalo.*

Plum paused, as if searching for words, then picked up the wavering melody. New Moon joined; her voice had a deeper resonance.

*Mother, you try to teach me,
But I'm slow to learn.
Maybe tomorrow I'll wake to victory
And Father's return.*

The sisters faltered. They looked at each other, laughing.

"We can't remember the rest of the song," New Moon explained.

"It was so long ago!" Plum said.

"And you?" New Moon asked of me. "Did you have special songs?"

"Of course," I said, remembering how we would sing in the bunker in Quang Ngai during mortar attacks. I began with "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" but couldn't remember the words. I tried "If I Had a Hammer" and faded on that one, too.

"I can't remember," I said. "It's so long ago."

One afternoon Mrs. Dream and Mrs. Pearl came to visit. They'd heard an American was staying at Mrs. Beautiful's, and they were curious. Mrs. Dream was seventy-seven. She had the reputation

for the best singing voice in Khanh Phu when she was young and still had her teeth. However, despite Autumn's numerous requests, Mrs. Dream refused to sing. She sat in silence throughout the afternoon except for one crucial sentence that freed me from what had felt like house arrest.

At sixty, Mrs. Pearl was irrepressible. She wore a green-plaid headscarf tied with the knot on top, the ends in the air. She laughed often, flashing her beautiful black teeth. Mrs. Pearl's parents had been coolies in the French coal mines. She had lived on boiled hibiscus leaves during the 1945 famine; three of her six brothers and sisters starved to death.

"I was eighteen years old during the famine," Mrs. Pearl said, retrieving the spittoon from under the altar. Dabbing an areca leaf with lime, she wrapped the leaf around a betel nut and popped the tiny green package into her mouth. She chewed, the betel saliva slurring her words. "During the famine," she said, "we had both the French and the Japanese as masters. I saw the dead. They were everywhere! In 1946, when the French invaded again, I asked my father if I could join the Viet Minh."

"Father said, 'As long as our country survives, our family will survive, but if we lose our new country, our family will die.' " Mrs. Pearl spat, a perfect shot. " 'You may work with the women', Father said, 'but you may not run with the men. You may not return with a bursting belly! " "

"Oooh!" Mrs. Dream giggled, covering her toothless grin.

"So," Mrs. Pearl continued, "I joined the Resistance. I led a unit of thirty-two women until I was arrested.

"I worked as a secret agent for Unit 66," Mrs. Pearl said. "I was eating a rice cake in the market on March 3, 1950. I had two maps in my pocket to pass along to a contact. Someone must have pointed me out to the Vietnamese puppet troops. The puppets arrested me, they beat me. 'What were you doing in the market?' the puppets asked.

" 'Chewing a rice cake!' I said.

"Oh! The puppets beat me harder, they slashed canes across my face, up one side, down the other. When I fainted, they waited until I revived, and then they beat me again. They poured a

solution made from red peppers into my eyes. They poured fish sauce down my throat, and then they beat me again. They tried electricity.

"While I was in prison," Mrs. Pearl went on, "there were skirmishes between our guerrillas and the French. A Frenchman was killed. The French prison guards blindfolded me, dragged me out on parade in front of all the people, then to a hole waiting in the earth. They were about to shoot me in a public execution. But Good Fortune smiled on me. Just then a jeep arrived with orders from the French garrison to throw me in prison. I was in Kim Son for a year. That wasn't too bad, though they beat me from time to time. But the French confiscated everything in my family's house. They took the house itself. I was horrified to return from prison and see my parents living in a hovel with no roof.

"I asked my father, 'What should I do?'

"He said, 'If we lose our new country, we lose our family. Continue your work, Child.'

"That's when I became a regular soldier fighting hand-to-hand combat. When peace came in 1954, I joined the movement to divide the rice land among the people." Mrs. Pearl wrapped another betel nut. Her fingers were creased with dirt. "For years now, since we've had the cooperative, we've had a better life than under the French." She nodded at Mrs. Dream. "Now that we're retired, we no longer work on a labor brigade. We can be part of the Garden of the Elders."

"Garden of the Elders?" I said. "Is this a real place?"

"Real!" she and Mrs. Dream chorused.

"I'd like to see that garden," I said under my breath.

"Then come!" Mrs. Pearl said.

I glanced at Autumn and New Moon, who looked at each other. Mrs. Beautiful appeared out of nowhere, hovering. The clock struck five. The dog with the bedraggled ear rose, circled, and settled into the same spot.

"We invite you!" Mrs. Dream said in the "we" of *noi chung*—to speak in general. That one sentence, an invitation from a revered elder reputed to have once had the best singing voice in the village, was all I needed to step outside the walled confines

of Mrs. Beautiful's compound.

"Will you sing for me in the Garden of the Elders?" I asked Mrs. Dream.

"I will sing," she said, speaking for herself.

The next afternoon, Uncle Beautiful appeared, riding through the gate on his bicycle, along with Uncle Peaceful. I was washing out my *quans* near the cistern. I stood up, shaking soap from my fingers to greet the two village leaders.

"Why haven't you come to visit me at the buffalo barn?" Uncle Beautiful teased, leaning his bike against the cistern.

"When will you invite me?" I said, unwilling to let this small opening slip by.

"You know how to ride a bicycle?"

"Of course."

"Then come tomorrow afternoon."

After hanging out my clothes, I sat with Autumn and the two uncles over tea. Both men were in their late sixties. They both had bristly, close-cropped hair and flat, square faces that looked straight out at the world as if to take it on their own terms. But Uncle Peaceful had a chunkier build and a sloping right shoulder as if his dual role as head of the cooperative and the Party were two loads hanging from a bamboo yoke. He rapped the table with his fingertip the way he might if calling a meeting of the People's Committee to order.

"The taxes, the debts!" Uncle Peaceful said, recalling the years when the two men fought the French. "If you couldn't pay your paddy rent, you had to pay interest. If by the third harvest, you still couldn't pay, the landlord took your land and your house, and you had to sell a child. That was the worst. We had a phrase for it, *tat den*— 'snuff out the light'.

"I remember one old man," Uncle Peaceful continued. "He had worked all year but didn't have enough to pay back his loan. He cried, 'Hu, Hu', because he couldn't keep on living. By 1945, after the Japanese made us grow jute instead of rice, we had nothing to eat. There were dozens of people dead over every kilometer of the road. No one had the strength to dig them separate graves."

Uncle Peaceful stared at the Siamese cat sitting on a rafter, its tiny body overshadowed by huge eyes. Autumn refilled his teacup.

"In 1945," Uncle Beautiful added, "this village had three thousand people. Some five hundred left, searching for food. No one heard of them again. I could read a newspaper. That's how I knew Uncle Ho had declared independence. I read about the Youth League and joined so that I could become a guerrilla. I was overjoyed to see the red flag with the gold star. That gold star made of cloth was worth more than one made from real gold!"

Uncle Peaceful leaned forward. "We'd had guerrillas as long as there was memory," he said. "There were resistance movements, guerrilla bases, guerrillas attacking here, guerrillas attacking there, but there was no organization, no concerted effort. When Uncle Ho declared independence, he opened a single road for us to follow. Then the French invaded a year later, and we were drawn once again like oxen under the French yoke. But we'd seen the starvation the colonists brought us! We knew it was better to die fighting than to starve slowly."

Mrs. Beautiful brought in her tray of betel nut. Autumn and I scooted over, making room for her to sit next to us and across from her husband.

"So," I said, taking a chance, "tell us how you two met."

"Yes!" Autumn said. "Was your marriage arranged?"

"In 1952," Uncle Beautiful began, "we guerrillas won independence from the French in this region. The French retaliated. Their artillery killed my first wife, her mother, and my own mother. My three-year-old daughter was wounded."

Mrs. Beautiful looked up, her hands busy with the betel nut. "My mother and I lived in another village three kilometers away," she said. "We fed guerrillas, and I guided them around our traps. Mr. Beautiful had his daughter with him. Whenever the child would cry, the guerrillas would sing. It was touching, Mr. Beautiful so lonely, with a child to raise, his wife dead."

Mrs. Beautiful popped a betel nut into her mouth. Her words thickened with the chew. "My mother had already arranged my marriage to someone from another hamlet. I said, 'I will walk three meters in front of that man or three meters behind, but



Photo: Ha Noi Women's Museum

Many of the women I played badminton with in Ha Noi's Lenin Park carried supplies to Dien Bien Phu. The trip took three months by foot.

I will not walk with him because I do not love him.' I couldn't stand to marry that man, but my mother had already received his family's betel nut. I said, 'Well, give it back!' " Mrs. Beautiful leaned over, spitting into the spittoon. Then she sat up again, grinning, her gums a triumphant red. "So, my mother gave back the betel nut!"

Uncle Peaceful sipped his tea. "Report to you," he said, "Uncle Ho taught us how to make our new society better than the old for women as well as for men. He said we should all fight three enemies— famine, illiteracy, and foreign occupation. After we won independence in 1954, we engaged in 'paddy land to the plow'. We formed a small cooperative and then made it into a larger cooperative, where we kept part of our produce and turned part over to the government. Uncle Ho showed us how to feed ourselves and our nation's soldiers, too."

"Did you ever see Uncle Ho?" I asked.

"Twice!" Uncle Peaceful's infectious grin tilted in the opposite direction from his shoulders. "Once in Ha Noi and once in a neighboring village. Uncle Ho told us we must study tirelessly, from books, from each other. He said that as soon as we conquered one accomplishment, we must press on to the next if we were to maintain our independence.

*The lark raises its song.
The rice ripens, season after season.
Rake in hand, I work the fields.
The heavy grains pour joy into my heart.*

*From "Visiting the Rice Field"
Tran Huu Thung*

"Uncle Ho didn't just meet the leaders," Uncle Peaceful said. "He wandered among the people, asked them questions. There was a drought on then. He stood on a paddy dike and dipped water. He taught us how to cooperate on large projects like the irrigation system, the cooperative barns for buffalos and pigs, the brick kiln, the road through the paddy land."

"Tomorrow," Uncle Beautiful said, "we invite you to pedal down the paddy road to the buffalo barn. You'll see all this for yourself."

The next afternoon, Autumn, New Moon, and I left by bicycle for the buffalo barn two kilometers away. I had never thought riding a bike would take such concentration. Autumn and New Moon escorted me, one on each side, riding so close that our handlebars almost touched. To make matters worse, they pedaled so slowly that I could barely keep my balance.

On both sides of the road, paddies stretched out in collectivized expanses of twinkling green shoots. Since the women of the collective had finished transplanting the week before, the paddies were empty. In the whole expanse of green there were only our reflections wobbling in the paddy water.

The buffalo barn, a huge stucco structure, stood at the far end of the paddy. Dairy buffalo were rare in Viet Nam; the Khanh Phu buffalo, a special experimental breed that had been flown in from India, were so precious that Uncle Beautiful lived in a small room next to the barn so that he could tend them day and night. We sat in his room at a table made of rough lumber. He invited me

to drink a glass of warm, raw milk dipped from the drum taken each day to the cooperative's ice-cream factory.

"You've heard about the straw helmets we wore against the baby bombs," he said. "Have you ever seen one?"

"No," I answered. "I'd like to." I sipped the warm buffalo milk, which tasted thick and sweet.

"I think we have the only one left," Uncle Beautiful said. He went into the storeroom and returned with a helmet and shield. "When the mother bomb exploded, the sky rained baby bombs. Each baby bomb hit the earth, bursting into hundreds of pellets, each one the size of a bike ball bearing. A direct hit would kill you, but if a baby bomb exploded nearby, this shield would stop the pellets. Here, try it on."

I took the shield, intrigued. Clumps of straw had been twisted to form a rope the size of my wrist. The rope had then been coiled around itself so tightly that a ray of sunlight couldn't penetrate. So this, I thought, was what Plum had made for her first graders. She and other Vietnamese peasants had deployed straw—their agricultural by-product—against our terrifying technology. I stuck my arms through the straps of the shield and patted the thick padding over my chest.

"No, no!" Autumn said, laughing as she took hold of the shield. "It goes over your back! Like a knapsack." She helped me into the shield as if dressing a child. Reaching up, she set the helmet on my head and tied the string under my chin. "See? When you hunker, the helmet and shield form a shelter."

"Ruuuuu, ruuuuuuu!" Uncle Beautiful made a rumbling sound.

I dropped to my heels inside a bunker of coiled straw.

"Rifle ready!" New Moon ordered. "Scuttle!"

There were whoops of laughter as I waddled to the corner, helmet bobbing, hands flailing, the shield bouncing against the dirt floor.

Giddy, I stood up, reasserting my equilibrium. "But are there still baby bombs?" I asked.

"Yes," Autumn said. "You read about them in the paper."

"I'm on the team to defuse bombs," Uncle Beautiful added. His voice turned somber. "A baby bomb killed my eldest son in 1984."

The swirl from gaiety to death threw me off balance. Nineteen eighty-four. That was nine years after the war. Twelve years after the bombing.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't know."

A buffalo moored. Uncle Beautiful turned the empty milk glass in his hands. "But the war," he said, "was fought by the American government, not the American people." He looked at me intently. "The American people are good. The American people are progressive."

I had heard this rhetoric in North Viet Nam during the war. Ho Chi Minh had subscribed to the Marxist distinction between the government and the people in wars of national liberation, with the United States government representing the interests of capitalists who enriched themselves through the arms industry. In order to benefit these higher classes, the U.S. government subjected the American people to war taxes and made the young men risk their lives in combat. The American people, Ho explained, were victims of the war much as were the Vietnamese. Therefore, he concluded, American and Vietnamese people belonged to the same side.

Ho's teaching explains in large part the reason Americans visiting Viet Nam today find so little resentment about the war. However, wearing a straw helmet and shield as I stood in front of Uncle Beautiful, I didn't have the courage to explain that we American people were not completely separate from our government and that we had not been totally ignorant when we paid for the baby bomb that killed his son. I chose instead to let Uncle Beautiful hold on to whatever comfort he could draw from Ho Chi Minh's teaching. In that moment, I chose silence over honesty.

The light shifted toward dusk, and the air took on the fragrance of falling dew. A woman pushed a cart of straw into the barn. The buffalo in the rear stall moored. Another buffalo in a nearer stall picked up the beat.

"Milking time," Uncle Beautiful said, setting aside the helmet and shield.

That was the last time I saw Uncle Beautiful. He stood before me, arms folded, shoulders square, his face open to the world.

He recited the same speech I would hear hundreds of times, but I believe he spoke it with honesty, on his own terms.

"When you return home," he said, "give my regards to your father. And give my best wishes to the American people."

It was two in the morning of my last night. I was dreaming about riding a bicycle alongside the rice paddies when Mrs. Beautiful appeared at my bedside as she had every night. Her lamp cast a pool of yellow light, illuminating a tiny cup. She held it out to me. I sat up, assuming she had brought tea. I took a sip.

Suddenly I was wide awake. Mrs. Beautiful had given me a dose of her health tonic, an elixir made from deer antlers and tiger bones. Its raw taste of whiskey seared my throat. Autumn slept on as I rose and followed Mrs. Beautiful to the table, where we sat side by side.

"I can't sleep," she said.

"Yes." I rested my hand on her shoulder.

"I miss my son," she said.

I nodded. "Uncle Beautiful told me about him."

She turned the demitasse of tonic in her fingers, then pinched her bottom lip between her thumb and forefinger. "I was ill." She sipped the elixir and offered me the cup. We passed the demitasse back and forth until we'd drunk it all.

"My son was with the army." She paused, watching the Siamese cat slip behind the family altar. "My son took leave to come home to see me. He was supposed to return to his unit the next day."

She rose and, lighting three joss sticks, set them in the incense urn. The sharp fragrance mixed with the biting odor of whiskey. She adjusted the wick on the tiny lamp made of dimpled, hand-blown glass, then returned to the bench we'd shared and poured another cup of tonic.

"The night before my son was to return to the army," she continued, "he went to visit friends. They'd found a baby bomb in a pond, but my son's friends didn't know what it was." She looked at me. "Maybe you've never seen a baby bomb. It's bright orange like your Malaysian sarong, pretty like a child's toy. When my son arrived, the baby bomb sat on the table, like this." She moved the demitasse cup to the edge.

"My son knew it was a baby bomb because my husband defuses them. Before my son could say anything, the baby bomb rolled off the table." She drew her knees up to her shoulders and hugged herself. "It killed my son, killed his friend's grandmother. Four people killed. Five wounded."

She looked at me. The frail light from the baby lamp accentuated her high cheekbones, making her seem even more gaunt. Her intensity turned to sadness.

"Do you think Americans understand?" she asked.

"Not yet," I said.

She set her hand on my knee. "You'll leave soon. I'll never see you again."

I offered her the cup of tonic. "If you agree," I said, "I'll come back."

"I agree." She sipped the elixir and returned it to me. "Finish it, Sister. It's late. We should rest."

"Tomorrow," I asked, "will you eat?"

"I will eat."

"Tonight, will you sleep?"

"Now," she said, "I will sleep."

... By now, a fifth of the people in Khanh Phu had television. Three years before, no one owned a TV. The change in consciousness had been stunning. Now, adults had images in their minds of Western wealth. For the first time, they spoke to me about their own poverty.

"I've seen Moscow and Tokyo," Uncle Firmness said. "I've seen your Beverly Hills. Automobiles as long as my house. You should have seen TV last night! The palaces of the deposed Czech Communist Party leaders. A marble staircase as big as our river dike just to go upstairs. We don't even have upstairs." With his chopsticks, he clipped a tiny snail Mrs. Dutiful had caught in the pond. "Whole rooms of pork for the leaders!" he continued. "No wonder they were fat!"

"Once I assisted a Czech delegation visiting Ha Noi," Rose said. "The Czechs brought all their food. They even brought their own water. And servants, too. The servants had to bow before the visiting diplomat, like slaves to an emperor."

Uncle Dutiful poured more rice whiskey. "Like my father to the French," he said. "My father couldn't feed his own children."

Uncle Firmness pulled a yellowed photograph from his shirt pocket and handed it to me. "The peasant guerrillas after a meeting with their district managers," he said.

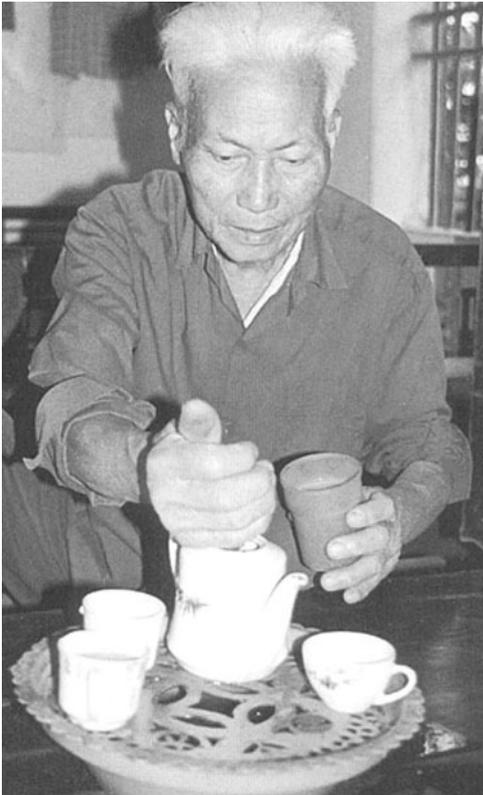
His oldest grandson leaned over my shoulder, pointing at two of the earnest, youthful faces. "There's Grandfather Firmness," First Son said, "and there's Grandfather Dutiful."

"But you had no weapons?" I said.

Uncle Dutiful sat up straight. His white hair wavered. "How could we have weapons? We were poor!" He pointed to his temple. "Our weapon was our wits."

With that, Uncle Dutiful climbed off the bed and took down from the rafters a fish trap, which was made of lashed bamboo slivers. It looked like a small dress hoop. That morning, Uncle

Dutiful and Number Two Grandson had plunged the basket into the pond mud. Reaching through



Uncle Dutiful had recently retired as chairman of Khanh Phu's Communist Party when I first stayed at his house in 1988. During the French War, he, Uncle Spring Rain, and several other guerrillas captured the French garrison after spreading a rumor through the Market Mouth that a large number of Viet Minh soldiers had encircled the village.

the top of the hoop, they caught the fish trapped inside. Aunt Dutiful then fried the fish for the death-day feast.

Uncle Dutiful turned the hoop upside down and tested his thumb against one of the bamboo spikes. "The French would stomp across our seedling beds and crush the season's potential harvest in a few minutes! We built special traps." He reached inside the hoop, pointing to a circle of cane used as a brace. "We added bamboo spikes here, pointing up from inside toward the rim. So easy! We dug up our seedbeds, set the traps deep underneath. Then we set the seedlings on a flat basket atop the trap."

Uncle Dutiful rested the fish trap on the floor; stepping back, he marched toward it, his steps exaggerated in imitation of the French. I chuckled.

"The Westerner stomps across our seedbed," Uncle Dutiful explained. "He steps on the flat basket, falls into the trap! He tries to climb out, but the bamboo spikes pierce his flesh. He thrashes, sinking, sinking until he gags on paddy muck."

I gulped, no longer amused.

Uncle Dutiful hung up the fish trap. "Or sometimes," he said, "we hid a banana stake in the paddy."

"What was that?" I asked, wary of what would come.

"We carved a bamboo spike with barbs like a porcupine quill, embedded it in a banana trunk, and buried the trap." He spread his arms to illustrate the banana trunk's length. Then he ran his forefinger from his ankle to his knee. "When a French soldier stepped on the spike, it went through the sole of his boot and up into his calf.

"It was impossible to break off the spike there in the rice paddy. The soldier couldn't stand the pain of the vibration from cutting the spike. So, the French needed six soldiers to rescue the wounded man—two to carry the man, two to haul the banana trunk, one to carry their weapons, and one to guard the procession."

Uncle Dutiful removed the wad of tobacco from behind his ear. "We would surreptitiously mobilize the Vietnamese soldiers inside the French garrison," he said. "Once we mounted a rumor campaign that there was a large Viet Minh unit surrounding the French fort." He tore off a piece of tobacco and popped it between his teeth. "We fought with our mouths!"

"But you can't just fight with your mouth," Uncle Firmness explained. "You have to act."

"Indeed!" Uncle Dutiful said. "We asked one family to kill a pig. We asked other families to cook huge pots of rice so the French would think a large Viet Minh unit was nearby. Then we let it be known that if the Vietnamese garrison leader didn't want to talk to us, the French would be defeated and he would be killed. We sent a message for the garrison leader to come out and meet us on the far side of the river across from the Catholic church.

"We were only three guerrillas— my brother Spring Rain, another man, and myself. We brought along four peasants to act as escort. That's all we had— three guerrillas, four masked peasants, and a rumor. The Vietnamese garrison commander was a very tough man, but he was afraid because of the rumor we'd spread. We had only one pistol. How could we three guerrillas fight? We had to fight with our mouths."

Uncle Firmness leaned forward. As district leader of the Party, he had been responsible for strategy covering a number of villages. "The guerrillas told the garrison commander, 'We'll fight to our last gunner!' " he explained.

Uncle Dutiful reasserted his reign over the story. "'Think carefully', Brother Spring Rain said to the garrison commander. 'If you don't surrender, we'll attack and a lot of Vietnamese will be killed.'

" 'But if I surrender to your demands,' the commander said, 'I'll be killed. I'll die either way.'

" 'You haven't even heard our demands,' we said.

" 'What are they?' he asked."

Uncle Firmness sipped his whiskey. "We always had the same three demands," he explained. "First, you must release all your prisoners. Second, you may not conscript Vietnamese laborers. Third, you may not assist any French operations."

Uncle Dutiful tapped the edge of the feasting tray with his forefinger. "The garrison commander didn't know what to do.' But the French will be suspicious if we don't have Vietnamese workers,' he complained.

" 'All right,' we answered. 'You may have two laborers if you'll slip us two machine guns.' And so we agreed. We asked guerrillas

from other villages to help us," Uncle Dutiful continued. "Seven days later, we pretended to fight. It was all pretend! What did we have? Maybe twenty of us in all! But we captured the French garrison guarding the river.

"We sent our French prisoners to Nam Dinh, but we educated the Vietnamese puppet prisoners about the French oppressors. Once they were converted, we added them to our force. Everything else in the garrison—the food and other supplies—we gave to the people. That night, we got drunk.

"But the weapons!" he went on. "All made in America! U.S. carbines. Remingtons!" He nodded at Uncle Firmness. "We passed the weapons on to the district. According to our thinking, a guerrilla makes traps, lays mines, maybe at most uses a grenade or a pistol to escape or kill himself to avoid capture. The United States had supplied the French with weapons. Ha! The United States supplied us!"

"You Americans paid for seventy-five percent of the French War," Uncle Firmness said. "Then after we won our independence in the North from the French in 1954, the war continued in the South." He tapped his temple the same way Uncle Dutiful had. "When the Americans invaded the South in 1965, our guerrillas had to turn the same Weapon of Wits against your GIs. That's one way our Resistance fighters in the South supplied themselves during the American War. They stole American weapons from your puppets."

I nodded, feeling bleak. The folly of it all seemed staggering.

"Excuse us," Uncle Dutiful said. "We don't want to make you sad."

"Here is one of our customs," Uncle Firmness explained. "During a thousand years, whenever we beat the Chinese, we sent a delegation to China to apologize. You see, the Chinese had lost face in the defeat. We should have apologized to the French and the Americans after their defeats. After we break our heads against each other, we must recognize we are family."

"Please," Uncle Dutiful said, gesturing to the food. Threads from his cuff brushed the feasting tray. "More chicken. Snails. Fish."

"Time for Americans and Vietnamese to drink tea together," Uncle Firmness said as he motioned us to a table in the center of the room. His small grandsons, having eaten their fill of snails, tumbled onto the bed in a pile of interlaced legs and arms. Fierce turned the tape over. He moved the baby lamp from the altar to the table, then sat on a stool, his *thnoc lao* bong on his knees. A zither played a melody as delicate as the dew settling on the day's transplanted seedlings.

"My father was a slave," Uncle Dutiful said. With tea, he rinsed the tiny cups in which we'd drunk his wife's rice whiskey. Then he filled the cups with green tea harvested from his garden. He offered us each a demitasse. "This is the proper way to honor my father on his death day," Uncle Dutiful said. "Now I can serve a feast of greater splendor than any meal my father ever ate."

..."Mother!" one of Uncle Dutiful's small grandsons called. He waded knee deep in a nearby paddy sluice, a crab in his tiny fist. "Look!"



Photo: 'Autumn'

Mrs. Spring Rain serves rice along with soup made from greens and small crabs caught in the rice paddies.

Kindness stood up, sickle in hand. "Good!" she called back. "Bring it here. We'll save it for supper." She bent again to her work. "Of all those years we were hungry," she said, "the worst was 1980."

"Nineteen eighty," I said, remembering the Boat People pouring that year onto Pulau Bidong, the Malaysian refugee camp where I'd worked as health administrator. "But wasn't the hunger worse during the war?"

"No," Senior Auntie said, "the Chinese and Soviets gave us food then. But after we ousted the Khmer Rouge, few countries would help us."

Kindness's six-year-old son ran up, his expression triumphant as he held out the crab. Kindness removed a handkerchief from her pocket and wrapped the crab inside. She nodded toward her only daughter, River, who bent over the rice, her looped braids swinging against her cheeks. Then she looked at me, her light brown eyes steady. "We adults could stand the pain that comes with an empty stomach," she said, "but no sound tugs harder at your heart than hearing your child cry from hunger."

Senior Auntie stepped up onto a paddy dike and, pouring green tea, offered me a glass. I joined her on the dike. Just then Uncle Precious, who was Mrs. Spring Rain's next-door neighbor, came by. He sat perched on the front board of a cart laden with sheaves of rice.

"Ah," he said, pointing to my ankles, "I see the leeches are having lunch."

Stopping his cart, Uncle Precious leaned over to watch as I cut the leech loose with the tip of my sickle, then tore a snippet of leaf from my conical hat. "I'll tell you a story about leeches," he said. "During the bombing, we harvested at night. One night we stopped to eat rice and soup. I couldn't see what I was eating. I thought my wife had put a tiny red pepper in the soup to invigorate me for the harvest." He held up his hand as if clasping a morsel between his chopsticks. "I held the red pepper in my chopsticks and bit it in half. I chewed."

Uncle Precious tilted back his pith helmet and laughed, displaying his tobacco-stained teeth. "It was a leech! Half chewed in my mouth. I wanted to puke. I couldn't eat for a week. So don't you worry, Ly, if the leeches like American meat. You'd rather have them eat you than you eat them." Chuckling, Uncle Precious slapped the lead rope against his buffalo's flank and waved as the buffalo plodded on.

"So Uncle Dutiful," I said, nodding toward Uncle Precious as I returned to the paddy, "what's better, an ox or a buffalo?"

Uncle Dutiful set a sheaf of rice into his half-filled cart. "The male buffalo. It's the strongest and so the best, but the ox is more versatile because it can take the heat. All a buffalo wants to do is loll around in a fishpond."

I bent again to the rice, wrapping, cutting, setting aside; wrapping, cutting, setting aside. My back ached. The sun seared my skin. My shirt was soaked. Sweat dripped from my chin into the paddy mud.

I could sense how Vietnamese endurance is tied to their labor season after season, year after year, birth to death. Through my hands and feet I could feel how Vietnamese are as rooted to their land as their village banyan tree. Bending over, the mud oozing between my fingers and toes, I began to feel that no American military technology—no matter how massive or how sophisticated—could have subjugated the villagers laboring in the fields around me.

*The azure sky spreads its embroidery and brocade.
The days and months take on the color of hope.
The sun pours quantities of love into our hearts.
Villages fall asleep on the arms of rivers.*

Xuan Viet

BOOK III

Ha Noi
Viet Nam's
Largest Village

Rice Pounding

*How terribly the rice suffers under the pestle!
But it emerges polished, white as cotton.
The same process tempers the human spirit.
Hard trials shape us into polished deamonds.*

*From A Prison Diary
Ho Chi Minh, 1890-1969*

Ha Noi

The traffic thickened as our airport van entered Chuong Duong Bridge. Below, the Red River, rich in iron oxide, swept by in a graceful curve, giving Ha Noi its name, “Inside the River”. But whereas the river moved at a stately pace, we had stopped. Two trucks—battered veterans of the American War—blocked the bridge, their hoods raised.

“Welcome to the Ho Chi Minh Trail!” Flower joked in English. Her face was full for a Vietnamese, soft and exuberant, like a peony in full bloom.

I relaxed, relishing the sound of Flower’s laughter. We hadn’t seen each other for fifteen years, not since my first trip to Ha Noi during the war. By now, it was the summer of 1990. I’d returned for a four-month assignment to set up an office for the American Friends Service Committee. As interim director for Quaker Service, I would be among Ha Noi’s first American residents; Flower was to be my Vietnamese partner.

“Remember the first time we crossed Dragon Bridge?” Flower said, pointing upriver. “It’s used only for bicycles and cyclos now.”

I glanced at the lacy French artifact, which looked as frail as a child’s Erector-set model. Dragon Bridge—once the sole road link between Ha Noi and Beijing—had been a prime U.S. bombing target during the war. Back then in 1975, stuck in traffic on Dragon Bridge, I had watched lines of women carrying yoked baskets of earth that weighed some eighty pounds per load. They emptied these into the craters.

But now in 1990, the riverbanks below Dragon Bridge were verdant with cabbages and greens; the bridge itself was a blur of bicycles. Everything looked different from the way it had looked during the war, except that motorized traffic entering Ha Noi was

still in gridlock. Up ahead of us, a man inserted a steel shank into the crankcase of his truck and gave the rod a twirl. Soon the truck lurched forward, its engine spewing acrid smoke.

“Whew!” Flower said, waving at the air.

I had made a dozen trips to Ha Noi since the end of the war and had often asked after Flower; I knew that she’d married and had a daughter. Still, despite my inquiries, we never met after my first trip to Ha Noi during the war. But intimacy can grow across a void. Now, by chance, the agency that provided AFSC’s contact with the Vietnamese government had assigned Flower to Quaker Service.

Flower and I were like old roommates reunited in giddy friendship. My one worry—what Vietnamese colleague I would work with—dissolved. And so I relaxed as our van made its way through downtown Ha Noi to Rice Soup Street, where I settled into the room that would double as office and living quarters.

When Flower left that first day, I asked her to swing by Cotton Street and tell Rose I was in town. On previous trips, I had grown so brazen that I would stop by Rose’s house unannounced. But the relations between the United States and Viet Nam were like a road checkpoint with a levered bamboo pole and a guard to raise and lower the gate. Sometimes the gate would be up, sometimes, down. Whenever you found a gate down, it was wise to chat with the guard in Vietnamese. When it was up, you could wave and ride through— but with caution, because you never knew when the bamboo pole might bop you on the head.

Every time there was an opening in the relationship between the United States and Viet Nam, the gate lifted a little higher and it became easier to pedal back and forth underneath. However, a slight closing usually followed any opening. The bamboo gate had recently dropped; an American teacher and an American journalist caught by its swing had been deported. For that reason, I was not about to chance dropping in unannounced on Rose.

Minutes after Flower left, Rose arrived. She parked her bicycle in the narrow alley by the house. In her white sweater, snug jeans, and high-heeled sandals, she looked as stylish as ever. Her hair curled gently around her face, but her eyebrows had gathered into a fretful line.

“Why did you send Flower?” she asked. “Why didn’t you come yourself? I thought we were sisters!”

I smiled at her, shrugging. “I didn’t want to get you in trouble.”

I led Rose up the narrow staircase that circled the outside of the stucco house. Soon we were sharing news. I told her that I’d been asked to select poems by Vietnamese women for an anthology by American women veterans of the American War. Since the Ha Noi Post Office had a fax machine, I could make the final deadline, which was two weeks away.

“Want to work on this together?” I asked Rose.

“You remember Xuan Quynh?” she answered.

“Of course.”

Xuan Quynh, a close friend of Rose’s, had been Viet Nam’s foremost living woman poet until her death almost two years before. She and her husband, the dissident playwright Luu Quang Vu, and their twelve-year-old son had been killed in a car accident. I was there in Ha Noi at the time. Rose and I rode with Luu Quang Vu’s theatrical troupe in the funeral procession, the largest spontaneous



The dramatic increase in the number of motorcycles and cars, and the change in the variety of consumer goods carried by cyclos signal the economic growth in Ha Noi since Renovation.

outpouring since Ho Chi Minh's death. Afterwards we went to the Central Theater, a French colonial structure in the center of Ha Noi, to see the actors' last performance of Luu Quang Vu's satire *The Disease of Pride*.

"Do you know 'My Son's Childhood'?" Rose asked. "It's Xuan Quynh's poem about her first son during the bombing. He's grown now." She began to recite:

*What do you have for a childhood
You smiling in the bomb shelter?
At three months you turn your head,
At seven you crawl. You toy with the earth,
You play with a bomb shelter.*

"Perfect," I said, remembering how much I enjoyed the way Vietnamese recite poetry. "We'll fax around the embargo."

The U.S. embargo against North Viet Nam began in 1964 and was extended to the entire country after the collapse of the Sai Gon regime in 1975. In 1994, thirty years after it began, President Clinton lifted the embargo. But in 1990 the embargo was still on, and it forbade telephone contact. Even so, I could fax from Ha Noi to the States because overseas calls went by way of Australia. When calls from Viet Nam arrived in the United States, they were indistinguishable from other Australian transmissions. I explained to Rose how friends in Bangkok had agreed to forward any faxes sent to me from the States.

"So, you are my sister after all," Rose said. "Stop by tonight to pick up your bicycle. You are always welcome at my home."

Within days of my arrival in late 1990, it was clear that, at least for me, the bamboo gate remained raised. During years of visits from 1983 until 1989, my talking alone with one person had been as unthinkable as a visit to the United States by an ordinary Vietnamese. But now I was able to speak freely with strangers on the street and could even accept spontaneous invitations to their houses. The period of strain from 1975 to 1990, what I call the "Years of Silence", had eased.

Vietnamese friends soon were dropping by my room on Hang Chao. *Hang*, meaning “wares”, is common among street names within old Ha Noi, where merchandise is still grouped by street; *Chao* is “rice soup.” Thus, Hang Chao is Rice Soup Street, having earned its name during medieval times, when scholars gathered for rice gruel outside the Temple of Literature, Ha Noi’s first university. From my window, I could see the arching eaves of the Temple.

An ageless medieval erudition had permeated the neighborhood when I first visited the Temple of Literature during the war; this feeling had lasted through the 1980s. But by late 1990, *Doi Moi*—Renovation—had arrived. Peddlers sold blue jeans from Thailand outside the Temple. Despite the embargo, others hawked Coca-Cola and Wrigley’s gum.

The late twentieth century dominated Rice Soup Street as well. At daylight, vendors strung tarps across the sidewalk and set out displays of motorcycle parts. “Ball Bearing Market,” Flower said, aptly



renaming the street. Indeed, Hang Chao, a shortcut between two major thoroughfares, had turned into a racetrack with motorcycles tearing past, horns blaring. Flower and I closed the shutters whenever we wanted to talk,

By 1990, buying and selling had begun to dominate life in Ha Noi.

but nothing could keep out the street's fine, metallic grit.

"This office is not permanent," we promised each other.

Between 1975 and 1990, Quaker Service administered its Viet Nam projects from Laos. During that time, the American Friends Service Committee was one among only four U.S. organizations with relief, reconstruction, and development projects in Viet Nam. As tensions between the United States and Viet Nam eased, the Vietnamese government allowed two American organizations—the Mennonite Central Committee and Quaker Service—to base staff in Ha Noi.

Part of my job was to set up smooth systems. Within four months, I would finish up old projects, start new ones, and arrange for my replacement's basic needs: a house, someone to cook, bicycles, banking, mail systems, and enrollment for their two children in Ha Noi's United Nations International School. These were administrative tasks: a thousand bicycle jaunts, none glamorous but all necessary.

From the outset, I loved the duck-and-dive of Ha Noi traffic. Oncoming bikers must have thought it strange to see a lone Caucasian in the mass of Vietnamese. But those coming up behind me would have assumed from my conical hat, drab parka, and baggy *quans* that I was just another Vietnamese. However, in October 1990, on the day of the sixtieth anniversary celebration for the Women's Union, I startled traffic in both directions: I wore an *ao dai*.

The *ao dai* is perhaps the most gracious and also the most uncomfortable garment created. The bodice—tightly fitted with long tapered sleeves and a high mandarin collar—precludes breathing. The skirt—two long flowing panels slit to the waist—is a hazard. Only the satin trousers make sense. Although the *ao dai* I wore was twenty years old, its embroidered white roses looked fresh, as if still dappled with dew. Taking care to keep myself free of the alley's grime, I pushed my bike into Hang Chao.

"Watch out!" called the ball-bearing vendor across the street. "You'll catch your *ao dai* tails in the spokes."

I clasped the rear panel of my *ao dai* against the handlebars

and climbed aboard my bike.

“Hold both panels!” yelled the vendor to my left.

“Hang your bag over the handlebars!” shouted the vendor to my right. “Someone may steal it.”

Off I went, thinking I had everything under control. But I’d forgotten that my hair hung in a foot of russet curls below my conical hat. A motorcycle coming from behind sped past. The driver, turning his head to gawk, didn’t notice an oncoming cyclist, who had also turned to stare. They collided. I stopped and, pushing up the sleeves of what would pass for an evening gown in the United States, bent the woman cyclist’s fender back into shape. Then I raced off to Viet Nam’s National Assembly Hall.

“Please,” the usher said in rehearsed English. “Invite you climb stairs, sit with foreigners.”

“Please,” I answered in Vietnamese, “if I sit with your foreign guests, I’ll feel awkward in an *ao dai*.” I pointed to an empty seat several rows away. “Couldn’t I sit with my Vietnamese friends?”

The usher nodded, Yes, showing me to the empty seat. I settled into a lush garden of *ao dais* made from brilliant brocades and silks



Lake of the Redeemed Sword in the center of Ha Noi is a favorite gathering place.

embroidered with delicate flowers. There were traces of perfume in the air and, all around, the soft sound of women's voices.

"And your work?" I asked the woman on my right after we'd introduced ourselves.

She spoke about family income-generation projects for rural areas. Good. I had promised some colleagues that I would help locate Vietnamese women to attend a Quaker Service conference in Laos on income-generation projects. Here, without looking, was my crucial contact. I wrote down her name as the band heralded the entrance of dignitaries, including Nguyen Thi Dinh, president of the Women's Union.

Mme. Dinh had been deputy commander of the South Viet Nam Liberation Forces when Sai Gon fell in 1975. It was she who had organized *Dong Khoi*, the 1960 Uprising. She had recounted for me once how, with homemade explosives and guns made from wood, she and other women had liberated three districts in Ben Tre province from the American-backed Diem government. News of the Ben Tre Uprising then traveled by the Market Mouth to Vinh Kim, where Second Harvest, Fifth Harmony, Sixth Rice Field, and others organized the Uprising that liberated Ban Long.

Mme Dinh spoke in a rush of southern Vietnamese dialect with a sound that was broad, flat, and rich like the Mekong Delta. Then she paused and, in the style of Communist Party congresses, raised her hands to chest level and clapped. The audience, bedecked in the vibrant colors of Renovation but still versed in the old ways, applauded in unison.

But except for speeches at similar formal celebrations, the rhetoric pervasive until the late 1980s had faded. I rarely heard the word *dong chi*—"comrade" anymore. In Ha Noi, socialist language became more moderate, shifting like Vietnamese musicians who, finishing an opening drum roll, set aside their drumsticks and, picking up bamboo flutes, capture the pathos of generations in trill after trill.

Even Huu Ngoc, one of the famous Vietnamese Marxist cultural workers, surprised me. His office was on the second floor of the old French villa that housed Ha Noi's Foreign Languages Press,