

AFTER SORROW



AN AMERICAN AMONG
THE VIETNAMESE

LADY BORTON

ABRIDGED VERSION

AFTER SORROW is a book that spans an American woman's 25 years of experience in Viet Nam. It is the story of the ordinary Vietnamese women whom Americans fought against but never had the chance to know. Lady Borton has come to know these people intimately from her work there, first in a Quaker Service rehabilitation center for civilian amputees in southern Viet Nam (1969-71), and up to the present.

After Sorrow centers on the last eight years, during which Lady made repeated visits to three villages— one a former Viet Cong base in the Mekong Delta of southern Viet Nam, another in a rice-farming commune in the Red River Delta of northern Viet Nam, and the third, Ha Noi, the city which the Vietnamese call their "largest village".

In this deeply moving memoir, Lady's women friends recall the struggles that climaxed in the American War. These are war stories of a kind we have not heard before: women's stories of courage, guile, patience and fate; of climbing mountains and hiding in rivers and capturing prisoners; of carrying rifles beneath vats of fish sauce in canoes; of mourning husbands, of thousands missing.

In Lady Borton's previous book, *Sensing the Enemy*, she wrote about the Boat People who left Viet Nam. *After Sorrow* is the strong and uplifting story of the people who stayed.

— From the jacket notes of the first edition

AFTER SORROW

AN AMERICAN AMONG
THE VIETNAMESE

LADY BORTON



*The wheel of the law turns.
After the rain, good weather...
What could be more natural?
After sorrow comes joy.*

From
"The weather clears"
A Prison Diary
Ho Chi Minh
1890-1969

REMEMBER VIETNAM

After Sorrow

Copyright © 1995 by Lady Borton

First published 1995 by Viking Penguin

ISBN 0-670-84332-6

This abridged version published 2008
by permission of the author.

All photos by Lady Borton unless otherwise noted.

VIEWING & PRINTING

The pages of this abridged version of *After Sorrow* are designed for viewing and printing with Adobe Reader, either individually or side-by-side in pairs. Display options are selected via the “View” menu of Adobe Reader.*

At normal size (100%), U.S. letter-size paper is the most appropriate for printing. The A4 format is also suitable; but depending on the printer used, it may be necessary to adjust the size of the printing area. For details on all formats, see the “File/Page Setup” menu and “Printing” in the Help section of Adobe Reader.

*Adobe Reader is a software program that is now standard in most computers; otherwise, it may be downloaded free of charge from the Adobe website: www.adobe.com



CONTENTS

Author's Note

Foreword

BOOK I

**Ban Long Village
Southern Viet Nam**

1

BOOK II

**Khanh Phu Village
Northern Viet Nam**

65

BOOK III

Ha Noi

95

*For
all our
children*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

"We have never before told these stories," Second Harvest once said to me. "Not to each other. Not to anyone."

Vietnamese peasants— regardless of religious or political affiliation— share a Confucian background that defines their place in human and spiritual relationships. The modesty that grows from the Confucian legacy of Right Relationship often charms Westerners; however, at the same time, its focus away from the individual and onto the community can seem disconcerting.

For a Vietnamese peasant, telling her story as if it had some worth of its own is the epitome of arrogance. This is the reason that the villagers with whom I lived asked that I change their names. Although they remain recognizable to each other, these villagers feel that with their names changed they no longer call attention to themselves.

"Everyone in the world shares the same longings," Second Harvest said. "But the details of our lives are as individual as faces."

*Lady Borton
Ha Noi, Viet Nam
September 1994*





FOREWORD

Among the many inequities of the Vietnam War is the relative absence of personal testimony by the principal victims— the people of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. In part, that may be due to their lack of access to the sort of worldwide media apparatus with which the aggressor nation has propagated its self-centered and distorted perspective on the war and its aftermath.

But even if they did have the means to make their stories more widely known, it is far from certain that they would choose to do so. One reason is that the memories are so agonizing that for many, if not most, suppression has been a psychological survival strategy. In preparing a conference on the long-term consequences of the war, I once asked a Vietnamese ecologist to provide more details about the type and amount of damage inflicted on the environment of the Mekong Delta, her area of special expertise. “I will try,” she answered. “But it is painful to think and speak of such things.”

There has also been a strong impulse among survivors not to burden the post-war generation with the suffering and misery of its predecessors.

But probably the most important factor has been the constraining effect of deeply ingrained cultural norms dictating modesty and reticence. As Lady Borton notes: “For a Vietnamese peasant, telling her story as if it had some worth of its own is the epitome of arrogance.”

Accordingly, if such a story is to be told, it requires the mediation of a trusted outsider— a service that the author is eminently suited to provide. “Lady Borton is probably the only person who lived in [both southern and northern Vietnam] during the war,” noted U.S. author Grace Paley in her foreword to the first edition of *After Sorrow*, “and who also, through Quaker Service and with her facility in Vietnamese, worked among the Boat People in the camps of Malaysia. I was surprised that I didn’t know until just

recently that she was the woman who led the first reporters to My Lai." The last reference is to the site of the best-known massacre of Vietnamese civilians by U.S. troops.

Lady (her given name, not a title) has now spent four decades immersing herself in the life and culture of Vietnam. She has become adept at the Vietnamese language— an attainment that has eluded countless other Westerners who have tried— has spent long hours in casual conversation with people from all walks of life, and conveyed an illuminating selection of their personal stories in *After Sorrow*.

They are the stories of gentle but indomitable souls, in this case mainly women, whom the author's own country chose to designate as enemies— as "insurgents... communist aggressors... Viet Cong... VC... gooks...", etc. By giving them a voice in *After Sorrow*, Lady Borton has provided an invaluable service to everyone, everywhere who is concerned about the fundamental issues associated with the U.S. war against the peoples of Indochina. As the book is now regrettably out of print, extensive excerpts are reproduced here by permission of the author.*

After Sorrow is a unique document that is very much dependent on the rare qualities of its author. "There is an American woman working in Vietnam who always leaves a special impression on anyone meeting her, even for the first time," asserted *Vietnam Review* in a 1999 profile of Lady Borton. That certainly conforms with my own experience, and there is no one on this earth whom I admire more.

Grace Paley, recently deceased, was apparently of the same mind: "I would have liked to have done good on that Lady Borton scale," she confided in her foreword to the first edition, "with political understanding, offering knowledge and labor directly to those whose suffering was in some way my responsibility. I truthfully can't think of a better, more intelligently useful person than Lady Borton."

Al Burke
May 2008

*Available for downloading at: www.nnn.se/vietnam/sorrow.htm

BOOK I

*Ban Long Village
Mekong Delta
Southern Vietnam*

Rebirth

*Spring arrives, and a hundred flowers follow;
Spring returns with another hundred blooms.
My eyes watch the passing seasons,
My hair grays with the years.
But this spring not all the flowers faded.
Last night, a plum blossomed near my door.*

*Man Giac
1051-1096*

Ban Long Village

“Hands up, American!” Second Harvest said in Vietnamese. She poked my spine. “You’re under arrest!”

I lifted my sandals, one in each hand, over my head. In the delicate moonlight, cacti along the rice paddy loomed like phantoms with bizarre, prickly limbs.

“Forward, Little Sister!” Second Harvest said in a teasing, laughing voice. “You can’t run away now!”

It was the rainy season of 1989. Second Harvest was leading me and Autumn, a friend who had come with me from Ha Noi, into Ban Long, a village of eight thousand people in the waterways of the Mekong Delta seventy miles southwest of Sai Gon. I had first visited Ban Long two years before, in early 1987. That was also when I’d first met and become friends with Second Harvest.

I would make many visits to Ban Long over the next seven years, having chosen it as a village that seemed typical of many in the Mekong Delta. However, by that night in 1989, I had not yet figured out that during the war Ban Long Village had been a Viet Cong base.

The term Viet Cong— “Vietnamese Communist”— was originally a pejorative coined by American-backed South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in the late 1950s. However, by the late 1980s, Vietnamese in Viet Nam no longer considered the phrase derogatory. Even Second Harvest, a non-Communist nationalist who had worked for the Revolution, used Viet Cong and its GI derivative, VC, when referring to herself.

During the “American War,” as Vietnamese call the Viet Nam War, U.S. bombers had attacked Ban Long persistently, blasting houses into craters, families into corpses. Agent Orange robbed the earth of green. But by now, in 1989, fourteen years after the end of the fighting, the green had returned. Dense foliage obscured the

moon. The air smelled sweet with the fragrance of frangipani. An owl called out, *cu cu, cu cu*; two frogs croaked while, all around, cicadas buzzed in an insistent chorus.

As I walked on through the darkness, carrying my flip-flops, I could feel the path of packed mud with my toes. When we came to a moonlit clearing, I stopped. Nearby, gold and white frangipani blooms lifted like trumpets, their fragrance triumphant.

Amazing, I thought: The Earth has forgiven us.

During the war, I had worked in Quang Ngai, South Viet Nam, as an administrator for the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). Also known as Quaker Service, AFSC had been co recipient of the 1947 Nobel Peace Prize for its work “from the nameless to the nameless” during World War II.

My father, who is old enough to be my grandfather, had worked for AFSC in Germany and Poland after World War I. As I was growing up in suburban Washington during the 1940s and 1950s, he tempered my childhood affluence with stories from his postwar work in a refugee feeding program. He referred to this work—and his attention to its small but crucial details—as a “horseshoe nail.”

“There was plenty of food,” Pop would tell us over supper. “The problem was distribution. If we provided horseshoe nails, then sledges of food could run all winter. And so, in my family’s lexicon, the cliché “horseshoe nail” as in “For want of a nail the horse was lost” has evolved to mean instead a life work of service through small gestures.

My father was deputy director of export control for the Department of Commerce as I was growing up during the Cold War. His conversations with my mother over supper often included stories of people who had attempted to run around the stringent U.S. trade embargo then enforced against the Soviet Union and her allies. My father is an entirely scrupulous man. Although I’m sure it was not his intention to raise an outlaw, my dad’s small tales gave me an education in embargo-dodging techniques.

When the United States embargo against North Viet Nam began in 1964, it kept out, among many other things, Western

medicine and recent Western medical knowledge. By the 1980s, this included information about AIDS. To my way of thinking, the embargo was unconscionable; and so for most of the thirty years that embargo was in effect, I openly ran around it.

Standing there among Ban Long's frangipani, I thought of my dad and of a story he tells about his younger brother. At the time of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, my uncle Hugh was one of three American scholars of European ethnic background who could read, write, and speak Japanese. He temporarily left academia to work at the U.S. State Department.

At the end of World War II, Hugh served as vice chairman of the State Department committee responsible for recommending policy on postwar Japan. The chairman of the committee announced that Japanese Emperor Hirohito should be tried and executed for war crimes. Hugh understood that the Japanese people regard their emperor as a divine presence deserving their complete obedience. Trying and executing the emperor, Hugh asserted, would precipitate a war the likes of which the United States had never seen. But the chairman held his ground.

By chance, the chairman was absent with the flu the day the committee voted on Japan's postwar fate. Hugh prevailed. Emperor Hirohito was persuaded to support the U.S. occupation of Japan. According to my dad's version of the tale, Emperor Hirohito's cooperation allowed the American occupation to proceed so peacefully that U.S. General Douglas MacArthur stopped wearing a side arm within three weeks of his arrival in Japan.

Thinking of this story as I paused amidst the chatter of Ban Long's cicadas, I felt a recurrent sadness. Over the years, beginning with my time in South Viet Nam during the war, I had struggled to learn the Vietnamese language so I could understand the ordinary people with whom we Americans have been so intimately and devastatingly linked.

Throughout the years, I have felt rueful that history never provided me a one-time opportunity with Viet Nam as it did for my Uncle Hugh with Japan. I remain haunted by this and by the knowledge that, after all the carnage of the "American"/"Viet Nam" War, what I have to say about Viet Nam comes a generation too late.

As Second Harvest, Autumn, and I walked on between two rice paddies, I turned over in my mind how Viet Nam had tested my generation. Much of this contemplation was painful. How could it be otherwise? The war had forced young American men to choose: either fight, complete alternative service, desert, or go to prison. Yet we Americans knew so little about the country that gave the Viet Nam Generation its name. In ignorance, we even compressed Viet Nam into one word, Vietnam, thereby deflating the country's history.

The Vietnamese language is basically monosyllabic. Sometimes, particularly with words of Chinese origin, two words are joined to create a third. Thus, Viet Nam combines Viet, the name of the largest of the country's some fifty ethnic groups, and Nam, meaning "the South." "South" was used in this context to distinguish Viet Nam from China, which in the ancient times of Chinese domination was called "the North."

However, when the 1954 Geneva Accords provisionally divided Viet Nam after the Vietnamese War of Independence against the French, "the North" and "the South" took on different meanings. Vietnamese soon became re-engaged in a civil war and in a nationalist war against the United States, with the U.S. backing South Viet Nam against Communist and nationalist North Viet Nam.

Like most Americans, I watched the war on television. By 1967, I was teaching history in a Quaker high school in Philadelphia. Each evening, Vietnamese refugees streamed across a flickering grey screen and in to my living room. The strange tones of their voices haunted me deep into the night; the refugees' anguished faces stayed with me during the day. Perhaps it was my Uncle Hugh's influence, but as I watched the TV war, I felt driven to learn the Vietnamese language so I could listen to those peasants.

Quakers believe that there is "that of God" in each person regardless of race, religion, gender, economic status, or politics. This is the reason Quakers tend to be pacifists, since it follows that killing another person is equivalent to killing "that of God".

Working from a principle of nondiscrimination, Quaker Service assisted Vietnamese civilians on all sides of the Viet Nam

War. This included staffing and supplying a rehabilitation center in U.S.-backed South Viet Nam, providing medicine to areas of South Viet Nam controlled by the Viet Cong, and sending medical equipment and educational materials to North Viet Nam.

I helped facilitate the Quaker Service shipments to the North and to Viet Cong areas of the South when I worked in the AFSC national office in Philadelphia during 1968. This was the time of mass antiwar demonstrations in the United States and Europe.

I believed then, as I do still, that women and men should be equal. If the war forced young American men to choose, then I should choose, too. I realized that if I were a man, I would be a conscientious objector. And so, with this in mind, I persuaded AFSC to send me to Viet Nam for what would be equivalent to a conscientious objector's alternative service.

The Quaker Service Rehabilitation Center, where I worked in wartime Quang Ngai from 1969 to 1971, trained Vietnamese to make artificial arms and legs for civilian amputees. The Viet



Flower accompanied me around northern Viet Nam during my 1975 wartime trip, but I did not see her again until we both worked for Quaker Service in 1990. Here, Flower (right) and a friend are entranced by the Ha Noi Circus, a favorite wartime entertainment.

Cong controlled most of Quang Ngai province, which included the village of My Lai, where American soldiers had massacred over four hundred Vietnamese civilians in 1968.

When I arrived in Quang Ngai in 1969, indiscriminate killing of civilians on a smaller scale was common. The war and my white skin kept me from entering ordinary life during those years. I lived on glimpses, yet from those glimpses I saw in the Vietnamese a

delicacy and strength I found intriguing. Those wartime experiences compelled me to return to Viet Nam periodically from that time through the 1970s and 1980s.

Soldiers fight and then move on to another battle, but while in wartime Viet Nam I stayed in one place and saw what war left behind. Whatever their politics, our patients came covered with burns and blood. They came without legs, without arms; they were old and young, women and men; they were children and babies.

In 1972, I moved to the small, dilapidated farm in Appalachian Ohio, which remains my home. The starkness of Appalachia and the demands its harsh land puts on those who live there resonate with what I have come to feel about Viet Nam. For more than twenty years I have tried to create a whole life by being a semi-immigrant in both places.

In early 1975 I returned to Viet Nam, accompanying one of the AFSC shipments to Ha Noi and becoming one of the few Americans to visit North Viet Nam during the war. Later, in 1980, I lived and worked in Pulau Bidong, Malaysia's largest refugee camp for Boat People who had fled postwar Viet Nam. From the Bidong jetty I saw swamping boats arrive with men recently released from



Factory workers in Thai Binh, northern Viet Nam, when I visited during the war in 1975.

Communist re-education camps, with women whom Thai pirates had raped en route, with children dying from thirst.

But while on Bidong I wondered, too, about the huge majority of Vietnamese who remained behind, struggling to rebuild their war-ravaged country. They were shunned by the United States and its allies. To what purpose? I felt compelled to know those people who had chosen to stay. And so I made a short trip to Viet Nam in 1983, when I first met Autumn, and then I made other visits in 1987 and 1988. Now, on a moonlit night in 1989, the Vietnamese had sufficient trust in me that I was allowed at last to stay with a family in a village.

The spine of a tiger-tongue cactus pricked my forearm. I stepped away from the hedge, which separated a rice paddy from a mud house. The aroma of wood smoke and cooked rice was comforting, but the laughter of children made me shrink. If those kids spot me, I thought, they'll rouse the whole village.

My rational mind told me I was perfectly safe. But everything felt so strange. My bare feet didn't fit the footprints embedded in the path's mud. The night air with its eerie noises and exotic perfumes seemed alive with spirits whispering news of an intruder. Suddenly I longed to be home on my farm in the hills of Appalachian Ohio. No one would notice me there. I could listen without apprehension to the cicadas in the huge elm in front of my house and could delight in the whimsical sighs of the goats.

We were passing another house. In the moonlight, I could make out its thatch roof.

"Where will we stay?" I whispered in Vietnamese to Second Harvest.

"With an old man." Her voice carried respect.

"Who is he?"

"Just an old man." She spoke with that tone older sisters reserve for inquisitive siblings.

Grass underfoot tickled my arches, telling me I had strayed from the path. With my toes, I searched for packed earth. I felt annoyed by Second Harvest's lack of explanation. During previous visits, I had been allowed to stay only a few hours in Ban Long

and then only under close supervision. Everything had seemed so formal, constrained, oblique. Now I worried that this visit would also feel the same.

“Won’t we disrupt the old man’s family?” Autumn asked. She was a northern intellectual. Over the two years we three had been working together, she and Second Harvest, a southern peasant, had become good friends.

“No,” Second Harvest answered. “He lives alone. Here. Turn. There’s his house.”

We turned, and my toes gripped the path. I felt I couldn’t move. Frail kerosene light defined a welcoming doorway and the shadowy outline of a wooden house in a grove of trees. But between me and that doorway stood a creek and, spanning the creek, one last *cau khi*— monkey bridge.

I had already teetered across a dozen monkey bridges. Some had been two logs set side by side, others a single log with a flimsy handrail. But this last monkey bridge was a lone and graceless palm trunk. Muddy footprints greased its bark. “*Chet roi*,” I muttered, using Vietnamese slang for the insurmountable, literally “dead already”.

Second Harvest stepped onto the moonlit bridge. She was stocky for a Vietnamese and wore her peasant blouse and loose black trousers with the ease of middle age. Her round face was open like a lotus blossom at midday.

During the war, peasants like Second Harvest had fled from American soldiers. Now, after so many years lurking in the shadows and slipping away from American GIs, Second Harvest could at last linger in the moonlight, in full view of an American. She must have chuckled to herself as she watched me cower before a monkey bridge.

“You can do it, Last Child,” Second Harvest said, using my Vietnamese name.

In ancient times, particularly in southern Viet Nam, peasants never revealed a child’s name because it might summon the spirit of any deceased person with the same name. To this day parents tend to call children by birth order rather than risk evoking unknown spirits. Parents further confound evil spirits likely to

covet a firstborn by calling their first child "Second." They then name subsequent children by number until they come to "Last Child" or "Little One." Since I'm the youngest in my family, I now had a new name.

"Step up, Last Child," Second Harvest said. As I climbed onto the log, she took my hand. I could feel the calluses on her palm and the roughness of her fingertips. Tensing my arches, I spread my toes as if they were fingers and dug them through the mud into the rough bark.

In the moonlit darkness, balanced by this former Viet Cong woman, I edged across.

... Several women gathered in the gracious confines of my room at the Province Guest House. A breeze from a café by the My Tho River carried the plaintive voice of a soprano singing about her lover lost in battle. The conversation quieted. Except for Second Harvest and Autumn, all the women had lost their husbands in the war.

Second Harvest peeled one of the pomelos Second Blossom had given us. "Have we given you enough to eat?" she asked.

"Last Child complains we force-feed her," Fourth Flower teased, alluding to the days I was sick. Fourth Flower always spoke fast. She smiled, and I caught a glimpse of her gold tooth. Her voice turned serious. "We worry about you."

"Why?" I asked.

She gestured to the others. "We're afraid that when you return to America, the CIA will arrest you because you've been here with us."

I laughed. "No, I'll be all right."

"Last Child looks like a Vietnamese in her *ao ba ba*," Ninth Rose said of the collarless Vietnamese overblouse the women had given me. Ninth Rose's curly hair and howered shirt with its pointed collar made her seem Western. "A white *ao ba ba*," she added, emphasizing "white" as she touched my sleeve and turned to the others. "Maybe Last Child is a spy."

The women all laughed.

"I don't get the joke," I said.

"During the war," Second Harvest explained, "the Americans thought anyone who wore a black *ao ba ba* was Viet Cong."

"So then . . ." I was puzzled. A black *ao ba ba* and black trousers— called "black pajamas" by GIs— are standard peasant dress. After planting or weeding arm-deep in paddy mud, a farmer can rinse her black sleeves in a sluice and emerge looking clean.

Fourth Flower chuckled. "Your GIs thought anyone who wore a white *ao ba ba* supported the Americans."

Second Harvest touched my sleeve. "What did we do when we wanted to sneak past Americans?" she said. "We put on a white *ao ba ba!*"

"You just changed your blouse?"

"Not quite," Fourth Flower said. "We each had only the black *ao ba ba* we wore every day." Fourth Flower nodded toward Ninth Rose. «Ninth Rose used many costumes because she lived in town. Some days she pretended to be a schoolteacher and wore a long, flowing *ao dai*. Other days she dressed in the rags of a vegetable vendor. But we in the countryside were poor. We had to share our one white *ao ba ba*."

What a simple trick, I thought. And how like us Americans to polarize Vietnamese peasants into white blouses and black, as if the Vietnamese were extras— good guys and bad— in a Hollywood Western.

"Have we told you enough stories?" Second Harvest asked.

My head was full of stories. In addition to interviews, I'd been reading *Nu Chien si Rung Dua — Woman Fighter of the Coconut Forests*, a biography in Vietnamese of Nguyen Thi Dinh, a famous Viet Cong general. The book made me wish I had talked with some women soldiers.

"I know time is short," I said, "but could I meet with some *chien si*?"

"*Chien si!*" Second Harvest said, laughing. The other women were laughing, too.

I felt mortified.

Vietnamese is a tonal language. It sounds almost sung, rather than spoken. A given sequence of letters has only one pronunciation; however, that pronunciation can be sung with six different tones,

each defining a different word. For example, “*binh*” with a falling tone means “peace,” but with no tone means “soldier.” “*Ban*” with a low, hard tone means “friend,” but said with a rising tone becomes “sell.”

Maybe, I thought, I’ve used the wrong tone. Maybe I said something ridiculous. Or worse yet, obscene.

Fourth Flower leaned forward. “Last Child,” she said, “haven’t you been listening?”

“What do you think we were doing?” Ninth Rose added, fingering her pointed Western collar, then tossing her curls. “I told you how I rode in an American jeep into the headquarters of the U.S. Ninth Infantry Division. Don’t you see? That ride was a mission into the belly of the enemy!”



Photo: Ngo Vinh Long Collection

Whenever the Viet Cong women needed to work near Americans, they wore a white blouse because GIs assumed that any woman wearing white supported the Sai Gon regime, whereas anyone wearing traditional “black pajamas” was Viet Cong. Fourth Honesty (far right) was arrested three times; she spent sixteen years in prison.

"We did everything!" Second Harvest said. "We climbed mountains, we hid under rivers. We captured prisoners. We carried ammunition. We trained ourselves to use weapons. We guided the soldiers when they wanted to attack the American base at Binh Duc. We were the guides, we were the spies. Don't you see? Ours was a citizens' war. We were the woman fighters."

Second Harvest glanced at Fourth Flower, who had settled back in her chair. "For example, Fourth Flower," Second Harvest said. "She did everything. When you were sick, you saw yourself that she's a nurse."

But I was hearing other voices, as if a movie from some twenty years before were playing in my mind.

I was in my late twenties again, in wartime Quang Ngai, walking by myself on a village path. Two boys spotted me. They'd been shooting rubber bands at American C-ration cans in front of a mud and thatch house. The boys raced after me, dust billowing from their bare feet.

"*Ba My! Ba My!* — American woman! American woman!" they taunted, stepping on the heels of my flip-flops.

Another boy sprinted from a mud house across the path. "You, you, Number Ten!" he jeered, using GI slang meaning "the worst." Other children followed him, shouting obscenities.

I turned and, hunkering, engaged the boys in chitchat. I asked my usual questions: "How old are you?" "Are you in school?" "How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

Soon, a woman my age stopped. She was barefoot, her hair pulled back into the traditional nape knot. On her shoulder she carried a long bundle of sugarcane, which crinkled her blouse. The blouse was white, which struck me as unusual.

"How old are you?" the woman asked.

The woman was starting in on the "twenty questions" strangers always asked me. "How many children do you have?" "You're twenty-eight and don't have a husband yet?" "Where do you work?" "How much money do you make?" This last question was a favorite for, compared to Vietnamese, Americans in Viet Nam earned outrageously inflated salaries.

"I don't make any money," I said, "but Quaker Service provides for my needs— food and housing, these clothes. So I'm rich already."

The woman shifted her load. "We are grateful to you Americans for saving us from the cruelly vicious, wicked, imperialist Viet Cong."

I assumed as I always did when I heard overblown gratitude that the woman sympathized with the Viet Cong. "The Quaker Service Rehab Center treats any civilian amputee," I said. "We don't take sides."

"Is it true," the woman asked, tilting her head against the sugarcane, "about Americans demonstrating against the war?"

"It's true."

"Lots of them?"

"Lots of them."

I shook off my reverie and returned to the present of 1987. "You probably met lots of us," Second Harvest was saying. She peeled another of Second Blossom's pomelos and offered me a piece. "We built tunnels, and we dug trenches. We were the scouts, we were the supply route. We carried messages and maps. We formed the communications system. We were the liaison. I told you how we hid rifles under vats of fish sauce and carried them in sugarcane. We probably met you lots of times. We would have asked you lots of questions. We would have decided you were all right."

Fourth Flower laughed. Her gold tooth shone. "Carry rifles into the belly of the enemy," she said. Her tone was merry. "Along the way, meet an American who speaks Vietnamese. Stop. Ask her lots of questions. Maybe arrest her!"

I blanched, startled by my own naiveté. During the war, I'd walked everywhere, a woman alone and unarmed, chatting with anyone. I had often joked that I could talk my way out of capture by Viet Cong. Now, years later, I saw how often I had done just that.

I also saw my own blindness: Like the GIs, I had stereotyped Viet Cong as men. Now, I imagined American officers, their cheeks burning when they figured out how many of their fiercest opponents

were women. But I saw, too, how hard it would be to understand our former enemy: Even years after the war, these former Viet Cong women still camouflaged their feats with modesty.

"So, Last Child," Second Harvest said, "what do you think of us now?" She touched the back of my hand. Her gesture carried with it the gentleness of water lapping against a grassy riverbank.

"We have a famous poet-general, Nguyen Trai," Ninth Rose said. Her voice, smoother than the others', reflected her education at a French *lycée*. "He fought off the Minh Chinese in the 1400s. 'After war,' Nguyen Trai wrote, 'the people you meet differ so from former times'."

..."What a labor to clear the bombs," Autumn was saying to Fifth Harmony. The two women walked under the frangipani tree bedecked with fragrant gold and white trumpets.

"There was so much to rebuild," Fifth Harmony said. "And after the Agent Orange, not a single tree or water palm to rebuild with. We harvested bombs. I didn't help at the pagoda, but at my house, we found seven unexploded artillery, who knows how many M-79 grenades, and we had seven craters from five-hundred-kilo bombs."

"Mercy!" Autumn said. "For how big an area?"

"Six cong."

Six cong, I thought: Fifth Harmony had filled seven craters—each a small pond—in an area the size of my acre-plus yard at home. "How did you get the dirt?" I asked. We had reached the canoe; I scrambled toward the stern.

"Dirt?" Second Harvest said.

"To fill the craters." I knew a bomb, like a hammer blow, compacts the earth.

Fifth Harmony laughed, covering her overbite with one hand. She was as lean as a bamboo shoulder yoke. "Baskets! My mother and I had to move the earth."

Yes, of course, I thought. I remembered how during my wartime visit to Ha Noi I'd watched women carrying dirt, basket by basket, moving in determined lines to fill bomb craters near Dragon Bridge, then the sole road link between Ha Noi and Beijing.

"But the M-79 grenades were the worst," Second Harvest said, pushing us off from the bank and alighting in the bow. "They explode into a thousand fragments, each like a snip of barbed wire. Impossible to remove."

"Never pick up an M-79, Little One," Fifth Harmony added. "You never know when you've found an M-79 whether it's just a casing or a grenade about to explode. We have special cadre to defuse them. Oh my! We wore those brothers out..."

Sixth Rice Field touched Autumn's shoulder. "In the North," he asked, "do you still have *bom bi*?"

Terrible are the words like *bom* and *na pan* (the spelling reflects the Vietnamese pronunciation of a final *n* as our *m* sound) that the Vietnamese have adapted for use in their own language from the French and English spoken around them. The Vietnamese describe *bom bi* as a "mother bomb," which detonates in midair, spawning six hundred "baby bombs" that look like falling fruit. On impact, each baby bomb explodes into three hundred ricocheting pellets, or *bi*, each the size of a bicycle ball bearing. A baby bomb will not kill the victim unless she's hit directly; the pellets, however, create havoc from multiple wounds.

"We still find *bom bi* when we plow," Sixth Rice Field said. He shook his head, his cowlick quavering. "What kind of person would make those bombs? And then paint them orange to make them pretty!"

Fifth Harmony nodded toward four little boys traipsing across a monkey bridge. The two eldest held the hands of a three-year-old. "The children think *bom bi* are toys," she said.

"Can't you teach them?!" I asked, appalled.

"Oh we do!" Sixth Rice Field said. "But kids are so curious." His voice dropped in volume. "How long do you suppose *bom bi* hold their power?" he asked no one in particular....

I was utterly naive when choosing Ban Long. Only after five years of visits did I begin to put the pieces of stories together and figure out where I'd landed. In 1989, I learned from Senior Uncle that I'd chosen the region of Nguyen Hue's famous battle. Then, progressively during visits in 1990 and 1991, I began to

realize I had been living at a site of the famous demonstrations in 1930, of *the* 1940 Southern Uprising against the French, with the very people who then organized *the* 1960 Uprising against the American-backed Diem government.

These uprisings are the Vietnamese equivalent to the American Revolution's Boston Tea Party. In my naiveté, I had wandered down the dragon's throat. Now that I was here and welcome, maybe I could find out about these uprisings and how my hosts had participated in them over the years.

One evening in the rainy season of 1990, I was reading a Party history of Chau Thanh district. The tropics are not kind to books. Although this volume was only two years old, worms had nibbled its musty pages.

"What about Phan Boi Chau, Senior Uncle?" I asked, looking up. I knew that Phan Boi Chau, the great nationalist of the early 1900s, had been a friend of Ho Chi Minh's father. Ho Chi Minh had grown up listening to the two men recite patriotic poetry. "It says here that word of Phan Boi Chau's effort to train and organize youth reached Chau Thanh district. Had you heard of Phan Boi Chau when you were a young man in the 1920s?"

"Oh yes!" As Senior Uncle leaned closer, I could see that the lines on his cheeks cut as deep as furrows. He jabbed his finger with each point. "Phan Boi Chau taught us to organize. We had a Revolutionary Youth Association in Vinh Kim by the 1920s, and then when the Vietnamese Communist Party organized, a representative traveled from the mountains way up north on the Chinese border to choose three bases in the south. Vinh Kim was one."

"Vinh Kim, the market?" I asked, checking.

"Never underestimate a market, Little One," Senior Uncle said, shooing his small dog out for the night. He closed the accordion door.

"In 1930, in the Year of the Horse," he resumed, "we demonstrated at Vinh Kim Market, slogans and banners in May and again in June against Landlord Huong Quan Thieu, but the French arrested us. Beat us! For every eleven bundles of harvested rice, we could keep only one. And only one harvest a year! One bundle of rice! How could we feed our children?"



Photo: Ha Noi Women's Museum

A rare photo shows Mme. Nguyen Thi Thap (far left) and Mme. Nguyen Thi Dinh (center), the two southern women who served as president of the Women's Union from its beginning in 1930 through 1990. A mass organization, the Union mobilized women during the French and American wars.

Senior Uncle cut off his teaching to continue his evening rounds, his black *ao ba ba* melting into the darkness, his presence traceable by the whisper of his bare feet against the floor tiles and by the creak of hinges as, one by one, he closed the wooden shutters against the night.

Other "classes" came at the end of meals. "Last Child..." Senior Uncle would say as he stacked the rice bowls. He always spoke slowly when giving advice. "Never cook all your rice. Always keep some back for tomorrow. Do you understand, My Child? You never know when you'll have more rice."

One visit during the dry season of 1990, we were finishing lunch at the picnic table outside. Autumn and Fifth Harmony had moved to the hammock strung between Senior Uncle's jackfruit trees. A hen and her biddies chirped underfoot, nipping grains of fallen rice.