



*Dragon Dance at the funeral for the head of the Buddhist Church in December 1993. It was the largest funeral since the death of Ho Chi Minh.*

also called World Publishing. Although retired, Huu Ngoc worked half days as editor emeritus and also chaired the press's advisory board. I had seen him many times before, but our meetings— formal and ceremonial— had always been held in a conference room.

By 1990, I was enough of a regular that one of the employees simply pointed to Huu Ngoc's office door. That day I knocked and entered a tiny room, where every surface was piled with books that gave off the musty smell of decaying, high-acid paper. Motes of dust thickened the air. Huu Ngoc looked up from a manuscript he was writing in longhand. In his seventies, he was a gaunt man with a triangular face accentuated by dark glasses, sunken cheeks, and a narrow chin.

"Senior Uncle" I said after we'd exchanged pleasantries.

"Call me 'Older Brother'," he suggested. "It's more intimate."

"You speak French so well," I continued. "You must have been born into the Vietnamese administrative class." I had always wanted to hear Huu Ngoc's personal story, but I had never asked during the Years of Silence because in those days answers to personal

questions inevitably came in the form of “speak in general”. This time I pushed on. “How did you make the transition from bourgeoisie to Communist, Uncle?”

“‘Older Brother’, remember?” he corrected with a smile.

Huu Ngoc was always attentive to words. “Vietnamese is a dangerous language,” he was fond of saying. “Take my name, *Ngoc*, for instance. Say it with the low, hard tone and it means ‘Pearl.’ But say ‘*Ngoc*’ with a circumflexed *o* and a rising tone and you have ‘idiot’! For myself,” he would add, his hand opening in a gesture of humility, “I prefer to be called ‘Idiot’.”

But Mr. Pearl was no idiot. He told how he had grown up on Ha Noi’s Silk Street among retired scholars, who printed their Chinese texts with wooden blocks. His father had been an administrator for the French electric company. As a member of the privileged class, Mr. Pearl had attended French schools.

“When I was a young man,” he continued, “I decided I didn’t want to work for the French. I left Ha Noi in 1939 and taught secondary school in Vinh and Hue until 1945. In Hue I came to



*With Renovation has come renewed attention to traditional arts. Craftsmen in Khanh Phu did the renovation work for the Temple of Literature in Ha Noi.*

know revolutionaries, who invited me to join them. By 1946, I had started a Resistance newspaper, *L'Étincelle*." He looked at me, squinting. "That newspaper, *The Spark*, was directed toward soldiers drafted from the French colonies in Africa to fight here against us Vietnamese."

"But how did you get the newspaper to them?" I asked.

"Special emissaries." Mr. Pearl tapped the table with his pen. "We smuggled the newspaper into the restaurants and hotels frequented by the French legionnaires. We even smuggled it into the French military quarters! Then later I became chief of the army office responsible for reeducating French prisoners of war. We arrested soldiers from Morocco, Senegal, Algeria! And soldiers from France, too. We taught them about nationalism, then released them. Oh, they were dangerous! They organized for our cause within the French regiments!"

... Gentleness was already playing badminton, her nape knot of long black hair bobbing with each shot. I shed my wool cap, scarf, and sandals. Choosing a badminton racket, I joined Gentleness and her friend Beloved. I missed shot after shot. I couldn't see the birdie against the grey, predawn sky. None of the others, all older than I, wore glasses, so I'd left mine at home.

"How can you see that thing?" I called to Beloved, finally hitting the birdie over our imaginary net.

"Pretend you're watching for bombers," she said, returning my volley.

One by one, Gentleness's friends took me on. After demure Beloved came gracious Dove who, like Aunt Gentleness, wore the traditional round-necked *ao ba ba* and black satin *quans*. The women rested in turn, but I kept playing until I shed down to my own *ao ba ba*.

"Are you tired yet?" Determination asked, stepping in front of me. He was a wiry man in his early sixties. Years before, rheumatism had crippled both Determination's arms. Then he took up badminton as therapy, first for his right arm, then for his left. Now, he played with two rackets. Clapping their handles, he twirled between shots like a circus acrobat between feats.

Rainbow, unusual in her plumpness, took Leader's place. Her touch was soft and her movements graceful.

"I used to have a Westerner's belly!" she announced, waddling in imitation of her former self.

"Beautiful," she said each time I returned the shuttlecock. The birdie floated between us like easy conversation.

The sky shifted to light grey and then to blue. Rainbow and I joined two men using a net. My partner, the only other person playing barefoot, wore his beret tilted at a rakish angle. He served the shuttlecock as if firing a bullet.

"Chet!— Dead!" he shouted each time he whipped a return over the net.

"So many deaths," I said, laughing at his vigor.

"Like the B-52s," he answered. He sizzled the birdie at Rainbow, who lobbed it back to me. "I lost my wife and child during the Christmas bombing," my partner added. "Are you French?"

My concentration snapped. The birdie landed at my feet. It lay there, lifeless.

"Uncle, I'm American."

The corner of his mouth quivered. "My only son. He was two."



*In 1975, workers were still rebuilding BachMai Hospital, which was hit during Nixon's Christmas bombing in 1972.*

"So many deaths," I said. "So much pain."

He picked at a racket string as if playing the plaintive one-stringed zither. "Sometimes," he said, "an old sorrow is sharper than yesterday's."

From the next court came the *plick, plick* of a birdie bandied. Nearby, a man with one leg snapped fallen branches into burnable lengths and loaded them into a handcart. A kiosk vendor turned on his radio, and the park filled with news of Baghdad and U.S. preparations for war.

"Uncle," I said, "can you forgive us?"

He twisted the sole of his bare foot against the asphalt, then turned to face me. "It was a long time ago."

"Yes," I said. "But time is slow in its solace."

"But look at us now," he said, tapping his racket against the asphalt. "You and I on the same side, and we just lost a point! It's their serve, Older Sister."

The Christmas bombing of 1972 that had shattered my badminton partner's life careened into every conversation I had in late 1990. The United States was preparing for combat. The Gulf War may have generated ebullience among many Americans, but for Vietnamese it sparked a minefield of memories. I constantly blundered into explosions of pain.

One day just before Christmas, Aunt Gentleness and I sat down to lunch. Flower had gone off to a wedding. Aunt Gentleness filled two bowls with steaming rice. I set the spring rolls and fish soup on the table. Sitting opposite me, Aunt Gentleness paired the chopsticks according to height and offered me a set. I had only just moved into the house on Lotus Pond. This was the first time Aunt Gentleness and I were alone together.

"Please," she said, inviting me to eat. She dipped her chopsticks in the soup and placed a morsel of fish on my rice.

Always shy with strangers, I wondered what to talk about. I settled on a safe topic. "Tell me about your grandchildren," I said.

"I have a granddaughter in America."

The fish stuck like a bone in my throat. From the street outside came the laughter of children jumping rope. The rope struck the cobblestones, slap, slap.

"A year ago," Aunt Gentleness continued, "my daughter-in-law took my granddaughter to America through the Orderly Departure Program. My granddaughter was thirteen. I had raised her since she was two, but then her mother came and took her away to America."

Aunt Gentleness set a spring roll on my rice; she toyed with her food. "When you return to the States, will you carry a package to my granddaughter?"

"Of course."

The noon siren began with a low moan, then rose to the wail that had once announced American bombers.

"I went to Au Duong today," I said, changing the subject. An Duong had been the first site struck during Nixon's Christmas bombing in 1972 just as the Paris peace talks were ending. "They wanted an American to join their ceremony commemorating the people who were killed."

"That's when my husband died," Aunt Gentleness said, once again catching me by surprise. "During the last hour of the Christmas bombing."

What could I say?

Outside, the children skipped rope, Slap! Slap! Slap! "*Mot! Hai! Ba! Bon!*— One! Two! Three! Four!"

"I'm sorry," I murmured. "We Americans have never taken responsibility for what we did."

Aunt Gentleness placed another spring roll on my rice. "Will they do it again?" she asked. "Bomb the Iraqis the way they did us?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But why?"

"Greed," I said. "Oil. Pride. We lost the American War in Viet Nam."

"But suppose Americans had lived under bombs...." Aunt Gentleness looked at her hands. "Could you bomb so easily?"

Certainly not. Except for Pearl Harbor— and that was a military base— we can't remember war on our own land."



"A baby bomb would kill you," Autumn said. "The *bi* wounded."

I nodded. I knew the tactic: Don't kill; instead, maim. An enemy buries its dead and moves on. But the maimed immobilize the enemy's resources by tying up medical staff and family members. I jabbed the dart against my fingertip, feeling its prick. "In the United States," I said, "we call this a 'flechette'."

"Will they use flechettes on the Iraqis?" Vigilance asked.

"Yes," I said, "but this time, they'll use plastic."

"Plastic?" Autumn served me more rice and stir-fries. "Because it's cheaper?"

"No," I said. "X rays."

"X rays?" Autumn's brow furrowed. Then her eyes widened. "Oh! Then the arrows won't show up!"

"Exactly," I said.

"I have two flechettes," Vigilance said. "If you want, you can take that one back to America."

And so I did.

At home in the States, I carry Vigilance's flechette in my wallet as a reminder of how I, a taxpayer, bought and continue to pay for the American War.

Sometimes late at night I awaken from a recurring dream, where Americans and Vietnamese pluck those flechettes from earth and flesh, gathering them from the face of Viet Nam and from the faces of Vietnamese. Together the Americans and the Vietnamese lay the arrows side by side, end on end, until their flanges fuse into a span of steel strong enough to carry the silences that separate us.

... More than anything else, Second Harvest and Fifth Harmony longed to pay their respects to Ho Chi Minh. Autumn was taking care of her grandson that day and Sixth Sister had gone to Ha Bac to visit her relatives. Second Harvest, Fifth Harmony, and I hailed a cyclo and set off for the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum.

In his last will, Ho Chi Minh had asked that his body be cremated and that some of his ashes be sent to the "compatriots in the South" should he die before Viet Nam was reunited. He



further requested that there be a plan for planting trees around the sites where his ashes were buried so that the trees could “multiply with the passage of time and form forests.”

However, at the time of Ho’s death at the height of the American War, Party leaders decided instead to preserve their leader’s body. They built a stolid Soviet-styled mausoleum with granite, marble, and precious woods collected from all over Viet Nam. The Mausoleum was dedicated on September 2, 1975, thirty years to the day after Ho Chi Minh read Viet Nam’s Declaration of Independence at that same site.

Some twenty-five hundred visitors pass through the Mausoleum each day. Second Harvest, Fifth Harmony, and I took our place ahead of a group of school children. At the entrance, we passed between two guards, their rifles held stiffly at attention. Then we stepped under the lintel inscribed with Ho Chi Minh’s famous quotation, “Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom.”

The air inside was bracing, as if winter had returned. I tightened around my neck the grey-checked peasant’s scarf Second Harvest had brought me from the south. We followed a uniformed guard up the red-carpeted steps and entered the tomb. The huge room

*Known at one time as Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot), Ho Chi Minh, age thirty, attended the French Socialist Party Congress in December 1920, when the Communists broke away to form their own party.*

*Photo:  
Ngo Vinh Long Collection*



was silent except for the faint hum of the lights, which gave off a pink glow, adding color to Ho Chi Minh's cheeks.

I stared into Ho's face. It was delicate, the pale skin almost translucent. It seemed strange to gaze down upon a corpse but, standing there between Second Harvest and Fifth Harmony, I found the experience profoundly moving. Both women had followed a vision of independence and freedom long before they ever heard of Ho Chi Minh. But Ho, along with Mao Tse-tung, had done something extraordinary among nationalist leaders from the Third World. He had urged women to play a forceful role in Viet Nam's Revolution. Women like Second Harvest and Fifth Harmony had listened to Ho's teachings, taking in his words as they would those of a beloved uncle.

Now, as we three stood before Ho Chi Minh, Second Harvest and Fifth Harmony's shoulders drooped as if bent by a generation of sorrow. Both women wept. I wept, too.

... As we walked back past a new one-hour photo shop, six preteens joined us. They were still giddy from their escapades during Teachers' Day, a holiday when schools close and children cruise the city on their bicycles, taking presents to their teachers. A tall girl with hair pulled into a ponytail tugged my sleeve.

"Westerner," she said, using the Vietnamese word for a Caucasian that had replaced "Soviet".

"Not true!" Aunt Honesty said, stopping in mid-step. She pointed to her own graying hair, as curly as mine. "Can't you see? We're mother and daughter, though it's true, her father's a Westerner."

"You're too big to have a Vietnamese mother," a boy with a Tiger-beer T-shirt said to me. He was tall and lean, like a bamboo sapling.

"Aren't you as tall as your parents but still growing?" I countered.

"Well, yes," he admitted.

"Come on, Daughter," Aunt Honesty said, taking my arm. "Time to take your old mother home."

Arm in arm, Aunt Honesty and I followed Second Harvest and Fifth Harmony. We passed a tea stall, where three old men

shared a bong of *thuoc lao*. Across the street, traffic whirled around bicycles clustered outside a cafe. The cafe stereo was playing "A Drop of Rain on the Leaves", a song written by Trinh Cong Son, a famous Vietnamese songwriter living in Sai Gon, and sung by Khanh Ly, an equally famous singer living in the States. I stopped, letting the song's poignant yearning for peace in a troubled land wash over me.

During the war, the cafe outside Quaker House in Quang Ngai often played a tape with that same song. The Sai Gon government police would confiscate the tape, but several days later I'd invariably hear the same song playing once again. When I lived in Pulau Bidong, the Malaysian camp for Boat People, the Vietnamese camp police would also confiscate tapes because Trinh Cong Son was considered disloyal for choosing to stay behind in Ho Chi Minh City, as Sai Gon was then called. Meanwhile, in Ha Noi, the tapes were forbidden because Khanh Ly had fled to the States.

But all that was long ago. Now, the tape of the songwriter and singer who, for me, hold within their combined voices the sorrow of war played openly on a major Ha Noi street. I had to pause: In that moment, for me, the American War was finally over.

Aunt Honest tugged my sleeve. "What is it, Daughter?" she asked, her voice light with jest. "Did you forget something?"

"No, *Ma*," I said, "I won't forget." Suddenly I realized that Aunt Honesty must have thought I was talking nonsense. "I just had to listen, *Ma*," I explained. "That's all."

Aunt Honesty and I caught up to Fifth Harmony and Second Harvest at Quang Trung Street, named for the emperor who had hidden his junks up Roaring River and whose "citizens' war" at Tet had defeated Chinese invading Ha Noi. Motorcycles whipped by, their taillights merging into a red swirl. Second Harvest backed away from the curb.

"Scary," she muttered.

I put my hand on her shoulder. "Ha Noi's traffic is your monkey bridge," I said, teasing. Then I took her hand, feeling once again the calluses on her palm and the roughness of her fingertips.

"You can do it, Older Sister," I said.

In the moonlit darkness, led by an American, Second Harvest edged across.

One evening, Fifth Harmony left to visit a nephew, who had settled on one of the few remaining state farms. When Autumn left for home, Second Harvest and I were alone in the house. The radio carried news of Typhoon Six battering the coast. Rain rattled the glass in the windows. The wind shrieked. Next door, the metal roofing banged, each slap like a mortar exploding.

Second Harvest looked up the stairwell of the house on Lotus Pond. "Two people in two rooms on two floors," she said, toying with the light switch. "I'm afraid."

Here was a woman who had been imprisoned by the French when she was two. She had stood up against bombs, mortars, and Agent Orange. She'd suffered years of hunger and had lived with a bounty over her head sufficient to marry off a hundred daughters. She had faced armed GIs, her hands "loaded" only with birthing mucus. This was not a woman afraid of the dark.

But Second Harvest had always lived in the Mekong Delta, where the genies are kinder; she had never faced a typhoon raging like war itself. Still, I knew her expression of fear alluded to something more resonant than a typhoon. Vietnamese rarely sleep alone, for to be alone is to be unbearably sad. That's why in Khanh Phu, River would slip through the garden gate to sleep with Mrs. Spring Rain, and why in Ban Long, Third Success would come over to sleep with Senior Uncle.

"Would you feel better if I slept with you?" I asked.

"Yes."

That evening I had a report to finish writing. By the time I turned in, the storm had ebbed. The rain was steady and soft, as soothing as the sound of a Vietnamese zither. Second Harvest was already asleep, a blue quilt pulled up to her chin. I gazed at her face. She breathed deeply with every breath, her black curls quivered against the white pillowcase. In the dim light, the lines around her eyes had softened.

She had been our enemy. Why?

Reaching up, I let down the mosquito net, taking care that it not touch her face. I tucked in the edges. Then I turned off the light and slipped inside.

Second Harvest stirred. "Last Child?" she whispered.

"Yes."

She turned toward me, her features further softened by the shadows. "We've known each other a long time," she said. "Seven years! You've made so many trips to visit me, and now I've come to see you." She reached under her pillow and retrieved a tiny red tin with a gold star on its lid. Opening it, she dabbed tiger balm onto her forefinger and then rubbed her temples. "Now we've finished our book," she said. She reached over and dabbed tiger balm onto my forehead. "Will our friendship stop?"

I inhaled the balm's pinching fragrance. "Not unless you want it to. Do you?"

"No." She raised up on her elbow. "When you write to your father, will you give him my greetings?" She paused. "Tell him my father treasures the picture he sent of his house by the river with sweet water the color of tea."



She lay back, staring at the netting, which wrapped us in the same cocoon. "When you next write a letter home," she added, "will you send my greetings to all the American women, and to the men, too?"

"Yes," I said.

Second Harvest settled her hand onto mine. "Have we done enough for today?" she asked.

"I think so."

"Then we can rest," she said.

*Photo: 'Autumn'*

*Lady Borton and Second Harvest*

# AFTER SORROW

## LADY BORTON

"I knew how the Vietnamese died. I have wanted to know for years how they lived, how they fared as fighters, what they thought about us, what they talked about. In *After Sorrow*, Lady Borton has given me the answers, and I am grateful."

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"In these pages we come to know some valiant Vietnamese women who fought the Americans, and others who once fought the French. One of the many accomplishments of *After Sorrow*, though not intended, is to make us love the American who wrote it, a Quaker who was in Viet Nam during the war and has returned often. What a heroic spirit she possesses, and what a journey she leads us on."

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