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

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All photos by Lady Borton unless otherwise noted.

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*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**

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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


CHINA
LAOS
THAILAND
VIETNAM
CAMBODIA
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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.

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.

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 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 Gls 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.

"Senior Uncle," I asked, "why did you leave your ancestral home for Ban Long?" I knew a Vietnamese peasant's *que huong*—the site of his ancestors' graves— is the wellspring of life. Given the choice, Senior Uncle would have stayed to tend those graves and draw guidance from his ancestors' spirits.

"I had to flee," he said. "The French were going to arrest me!"

"But why you, Senior Uncle?"

"Father, what are you talking about?" Second Harvest asked. She brought a plate of water apples from the kitchen, a separate building made of tarpaper and water-palm thatch. She waved to two women paddling a canoe up the creek. "Coming back from market, are you?" she asked them.

"We're talking about the French," Senior Uncle said to Second Harvest. Then he turned to me. "We fled after the 1940 Uprising. The French were arresting us to fight the Germans, they raised our taxes for their war, I couldn't feed my children, don't you understand? We were starving! People died because of French taxes!"

"Were you a sharecropper, Senior Uncle?" I asked.

"No, no, not sharecropping." Second Harvest divided a water apple between her father and me. The fruit, the size of a crab apple, was pink and hollow, its translucent meat crisp and coarse.

"When I was small," Senior Uncle said, "my family had enough money to send me to school. But in 1940 I refused to be a soldier for the French in their war against the Germans. I fled, and then the French burned my house and all my rice." He held out his hands. "I only had these two hands left. I had to work like a serf."

"Like France in the 1300s," Autumn said, taking half a water apple.

"We were all serfs," Fifth Harmony said. "For one thousand square meters of land, we paid twenty kilos of unhusked rice, but sometimes we didn't even harvest that much. We had no land of our own, no way to eat."

Senior Uncle cupped his hands into an empty bowl. "When insects ate most of your harvest, the landlord took whatever was

left, and then the landlord took back his land, and he would take your house, and if you had a pretty daughter, he took her. If you still couldn't pay, he beat you! Do you hear me, Child, the landlord beat my grandfather to death!"

I had been rubbing the belly of Senior Uncle's small dog with my foot. I stopped. Small Dog nipped my toes, her teeth like nails.

"We were slaves!" Senior Uncle said.

"These were French landlords?" I asked.

"The Vietnamese landlords paid the French," Second Harvest said. "We were starving. That's why my parents joined the Uprising."

Autumn peered at me over the glasses perched at the end of her nose. "The French didn't want peasants to organize. That's why they kept them illiterate, so they couldn't communicate."

"Like me," Second Harvest said. "I didn't learn to read until I was ten, and then I finished only the third grade."

The French colonialists educated only the Vietnamese administrative class, leaving behind a five-percent literacy rate. Below, Second Harvest shows how her father taught her to write on the back of banana leaves.

Autumn turned to Second Harvest. "I got to go to school, but you know what the French taught me? King Louis this, King Louis that! Can you imagine? On their maps of Viet Nam, they wrote 'France Overseas'! And when I went to Paris, the only thing the French students I met knew about Viet Nam was that we had rubber and coal. They knew nothing about our culture, but only about what the French took from us back to France." She looked at me. "Why, Viet Nam didn't even have a name. 'Indochina' they called it! That's India and China, two giants. Where were we?" Second Harvest split another water apple. "Maybe most of us didn't learn to read until we were grown," she said, "but we knew our history, and we sang our poems to give us determination."

"We had to rise up," Senior Uncle said. "For our children."

"Where was this uprising in 1940?" I asked.

"At Vinh Kim Market," Second Harvest said. "Where we bought fish this morning."

"We only had banners and signs, just like in 1930," Senior Uncle said. "No weapons. Still, the French burned our houses and rice. I escaped to Ban Long, but it was worse for the others." He tapped his temples. "With my own eyes, I saw the French soldiers drive nails through my neighbors' hands, can you picture this? The French roped my neighbors together and dragged them into the river until the water filled their mouths and choked their cries."

"The bridge at Vinh Kim," Fifth Harmony said, pushing her foot to make the hammock swing, "the one where we tied up our *zuong* this morning. The landlords would bind the hands and feet of those who couldn't pay their taxes and shove them off the bridge. That's why we call it 'Forever Silent Bridge'."

"One piece of land, so much blood," Second Harvest said. She looked out toward the stream, her face as calm as the water with the tide about to turn. "A span of bridge, so many splinters of bone."

"*Nam Ky Khoi Nghia*." Autumn spoke the phrase for "the Southern Uprising" as if in prayer.

We settled into silence broken only by the biddies chirping beneath the table and the slow creak of the hammock.

… Last Gust loved to reminisce. "I was so excited," he would often say, "when I first heard about the Party! I was only eight,

but I knew we would be free!! Of course that was 1930, and I was young and naive. Freedom took a long time coming."

"Senior Uncle," I asked, leaning forward, "can you remember *Nam Ky Khoi Nghia*?"

"As clear as [the TV program] *Mariana* last night!" Last Gust stared at the bubbles rising through his orange soda. "I was in high school in My Tho in 1940. My job was to organize the youth in Vinh Kim. I knew about the planning for the Uprising, not because I was a leader— I was too young— but because I knew how to write. I was useful as a secretary.

"I was eighteen. In 1940 the Party was weak. Then the Germans invaded France. Imagine! France became a colony! Just like us! But then the French became even more vicious masters. They increased our taxes to pay for their war against Germany, they drafted us to be their soldiers against Hitler. We couldn't stand any more!

"The Resistance center was Long Hung, only three kilometers from Forever Silent Bridge. Long Hung was the brain, but Vinh Kim was the mouth. We spread the word, from Long Hung through the Market Mouth to Binh Trung, Phu Phong, Song Thuan, Dong Hoa, and on and on."

From the river came the hum of approaching motors and of voices rippling back and forth.

"You spread the word over the south?" I asked.

"No! Not at all. *Nam Ky Khoi Nghia* happened right here. The Uprising was planned to be all over southern Viet Nam, but then one of the cadre in Sai Gon was arrested and tortured and gave names. The French then arrested our leaders in Sai Gon, all our top leaders! Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, the famous revolutionary, do you know about her?"

I shook my wrists and fingers, in the Vietnamese gesture for "No".

"Oh! She was one of Uncle Ho's most famous students. Minh Khai came from the center of Viet Nam, from Nghe An, Uncle Ho's home. Her father was in the administrative class serving the French. She and her younger sister went to French schools. Her sister married our famous general, Vo Nguyen Giap, and died in

prison. Minh Khai's husband died in prison, too, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

"In 1929, a group of youth left Nghe An by boat for China to study revolutionary strategy with Uncle Ho. Minh Khai was nineteen and the only woman to go. She went on to Russia and was the first Vietnamese woman revolutionary to study there as well.

"It was hard to organize in the north and center of Viet Nam because the French were so vigilant. Sai Gon was more fertile ground, particularly with the port and the ships coming in and out. The laborers on the ships and the stevedores on shore linked us to the worldwide Communist movement. Minh Khai traveled from Russia through France, Germany, and Italy and returned to Viet Nam to organize in Sai Gon."

The author with Mme. Nguyen Thi Thap (second from left), who helped organize the famous 1940 Uprising against the French at Vinh Kim Market. Autumn (second from right, next to Second Harvest, far right), a northern intellectual, was arrested for writing a letter to a schoolmate, who had joined Ho Chi Minh in the mountains. During the American War, Third Fragrance (center) was raised by relatives inside Sai Gon-held territory while her parents worked for the revolution.

Uncle Last Gust paused, lacing his fingers together across his chest. His voice dropped to a murmur as he went on. "Minh Khai was one of our key organizers among factory workers in Sai Gon from 1936 until 1940. Oh, it was a sad day when the French took our leaders out onto the Cu Chi Road and executed them."

Uncle Last Gust rubbed his chest. "It makes my heart stop to think of Minh Khai. The French never let the prisoners have anything they could use to communicate— no pen or paper, no bit of metal to scratch the walls." He stuck his forefinger into his mouth as if to bite it and then drew in the air. "Minh Khai used her own blood as ink, her fingertip as a pen. She wrote a poem on the prison wall for those she left behind." Uncle Last Gust's voice had a gravelly sound as he recited:

Remain resolute whether in public outcry or quiet liaison.
Both pliers and pincers serve their purpose.
Sacrifice yourself? Strive to serve our cause!
The only withdrawal comes with death's release.

A breeze rustled the leaves of cucumber vines growing over the arbor in front of the house. Uncle Last Gust leaned forward. "When our Sai Gon leaders were arrested," he continued, "Central Headquarters decided the Party was too weak for *Nam Ky Khoi Nghia* to succeed. If we didn't succeed, the French would obliterate us! Central Headquarters sent messengers to tell us to wait until our Movement was stronger, but the French arrested the messengers who'd been sent to warn us. The word never arrived."

"So you were the only ones?" I said.

"A few other localities rose up, some villages in Ben Tre, but Ben Tre province was a younger sister to My Tho. You've lived here, Little One. You know the sounds of nighttime, only the cicadas singing, the bamboo whispering, maybe an owl. But oh, that night, what a ruckus!! The word went out, 'Hurry! Hurry to Vinh Kim!' "

I pictured the scene: hundreds of canoes hurtling along the dark, mysterious sluices that fed Roaring River.

"Once we'd gathered at Vinh Kim, we moved up National Highway 4— we call it National Highway 1 now— to the house

of Landlord Nguyen Thanh Long. We were starving, but he had storehouses full of rice. We divided his rice among the poor, and we divided his rice fields, too! Oh, I've never seen such celebrating!

"The flag!" Last Gust pointed to the tiny flag atop his TV. "For the first time in anyone's memory, we had a country, and our country had a flag! Glorious red with a vibrant gold star in the middle!"

I leaned forward. "Mrs. Thap mentioned a flag when I met her."

"Indeed she might!" Last Gust tapped the table with his fingertip. "Mrs. Thap and her husband were among the chief organizers. She was a seamstress, she sewed the flags. Our very own Nguyen Thi Thap was the first person to raise the national flag of Viet Nam!"

So that's what Mrs. Thap had tried to tell me. However, she had written her autobiography with such humility that I missed a crucial fact: I'd met the Betsy Ross of Viet Nam.

Last Gust looked out the doorway at his orchids, which were sparks of color trailing from their planters. His angular features turned somber, and his voice took on a rough edge like the sound of a gravedigger's shovel slicing the earth.

"The French retaliated the next morning. In 1940, northern Viet Nam wasn't much of a threat to the French. That's how the French could concentrate their power here. You know how busy Vinh Kim Market is at seven-thirty if the tide is up. Besides, everyone had gathered to celebrate! That's when the French bombed. The wails, the wounded. In my thirty-five years with the Revolution, I never heard such terror. Thirty or forty killed, one hundred twenty wounded. Then the French sent in the Foreign Legion. Do you know about the Legion?"

"A little," I said. I remembered the day I'd been so sick and how Third Mother had told me she'd spread pig dung on her face to frighten off Foreign Legion soldiers so they wouldn't rape her.

Last Gust wove his fingers together. "There were two types of Foreign Legion soldiers. The first were white people, but they

Tending the ancestors' graves is an important part of Tet. Fifth Harmony stands by the grave of her mother, who, as a "mother of soldiers", fed and clothed guerrillas during the French and American wars.

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were orphans and prisoners, the people the French didn't want. They were terribly cruel. The second were soldiers drafted from the other French colonies, but we didn't have them until 1945. The white Foreign Legion burned Vinh Kim and Long Hung. They burned any village that had taken part in the Uprising. Houses and rice, burned! Whatever they wanted, stolen. Anyone they found, raped, then shot! Oh, it was terrible.

"Everyone fled. People so feared the French Foreign Legion, they didn't gather the dead. Ninety percent of our leaders, killed on the spot. Or taken for torture, a mass migration to Con Dao Prison Island. The remaining ten percent were youth like myself. I escaped to Ben Tre.

"I was a student, and so when the older Party members sent me back to Vinh Kim several days later to care for the dead, I wore my student's uniform as a guise and spoke to the soldiers in French. The Foreign Legion had dumped the bodies or what was left of

them into a bunker. Oh my God, the heat and the flies swarming, never ever has there been such a smell."

Last Gust coughed, and I was aware of the strain that remembering placed on his heart. "After two months," he continued, "we had nothing left of our new independence. Nothing. I was just a student, but I could tell the French had snuffed out our flame. What could we do? How could we have a revolution with an uprising in only one place? What we had learned here must flow to the rest of the country. We had to teach others.

"We had determination, and we had the Party. The Party was crucial. If we'd had many political parties, our push for independence would have failed. But Uncle Ho united us behind one party. Oh my, when Uncle Ho died in 1969, the bombing in the South was ferocious. As if the Americans thought bombs could break our will!"

Autumn folded the stems of her glasses in on each other. "When Uncle Ho died," she said, "Ha Noi wept tears. In the South, the sky wept bombs."

From the river came the receding put-put of a *xuong* and then the sound of its wake lapping against the shore. Last Gust gazed at his soda, its bubbles rising. "Thirty-five years from *Nam Ky Khoi Nghia* until peace. In 1975, we who survived came home with tears in our eyes. Our joy faced sorrow when we learned the fate of friends we'd lost. None of us who survived can ever live free of memory."

"Whenever anyone talks about prison," Autumn said later that night as she climbed under our mosquito net, "my blood runs as fast as the outgoing tide." She tucked the net beneath the reed mat, then stretched out next to me. The net's ribbing cast a shadow like welts across Autumn's chest. She shuddered.

"You were in prison?" I turned onto my side and propped my cheek on my elbow. I could hear Vigor singing from his bed in the back room. The song was a ballad about a Resistance fighter in the Truong Son Mountains, the Vietnamese name for the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

"I was imprisoned when I was eighteen," Autumn said.…

"In the early 1950s," Autumn said, "I was in the *lycée* in Ha Noi. I joined a group of students in the Resistance against the French."

Now I was more perplexed. "Your mother and grandmother were in the Resistance?!"

"Oh no! Our group met in secret. Our *lycée* had been named for the Trung sisters, who had liberated Viet Nam from the Chinese in A.D. 43. We girls followed their example. I wrote a letter from our group to one of our students with the medical corps in the mountains. The police intercepted my letter."

"You'd signed your name?"

Autumn looked over at me and laughed. "I wasn't that naive! I only used the name 'Trung Sisters Student'. I signed in the name of our school. It took the police two months to find me."

Autumn ran her fingers over the netting. "I'd moved on to the second baccalaureate. There were only five girls in the second baccalaureate. Since forty students were needed to make a class, we girls were transferred to the boys' lycée, which was named for Nguyen Trai, the great poet-statesman. The police checked my handwriting on the letter against the exam papers in the Trung Sisters lycée and then followed me to Nguyen Trai. I was in class when they arrested me."

Autumn sighed. "They beat me for three days, they used electricity, but I refused to name others in our group. They went to my mother's house, caught my mother by surprise. She hadn't known about my activities! I was in prison a month with buyers and sellers, peasant women who'd been arrested in the market. We were like a club, reciting poetry, singing, trading stories and experience."

…"Such a cruel time!" Fifth Virtue said, exhaling smoke through the gap in his teeth.

"Like my family," Second Harvest said. "When Father fled, the puppets threw my mother into prison. I was thrown into prison with her. I was two, so I don't remember this, but Mother often told me what a comfort I was."

"Can you imagine, Little One?" Fifth Virtue added. "In 1940 everyone bombed us! First, after the Uprising, the French. Then

the Japanese invaded us. Then the Americans bombed us because of the Japanese. The Americans were the worst. They bombed everywhere."

"World War II," I said, nodding.

"Yes!" Tenth Treasure said.

"We had nothing!" Second Harvest pulled at the sleeve of her *ao ba ba*. "No cloth. No matches. No lamp oil."

"It was embarrassing to have no cloth," Sixth Rice Field added, covering his mouth. "Imagine! We made clothes out of leaves and stitched them with banana thread! A husband and wife might own a single pair of shorts. When the wife wore the shorts outside the house, the husband hid inside."

"How could we kids study?" Second Harvest said. "I didn't have clothes to wear to school. I had only one pair of shorts. No shirt! We didn't have paper. I learned to write my letters on the back of banana leaves, their veins for lines, a sliver of bamboo for a pen."

"It was different for the British colonies," Autumn said, turning to me. Her accent— the crisp sound of a Ha Noi intellectual— was always easier for me to understand than the rural southern accent used in Ban Long. "In India, the British built factories, but the French took our raw materials to France and brought back the finished goods for us to buy. There was one Vietnamese match factory in the north, and the textile mills were in the north, too. That's why we in the south had nothing." She turned to the others. "But at least people here didn't starve."

"No more than usual," Sixth Rice Field muttered.

"The French took our land, Little One," Second Harvest said. "Without land and water, how could we eat? We had no industry here, like they had in the north. Have you seen any machines? Our hands and our feet, deep in the mud— that's what makes rice grow, rice we can put in our mouths." She cupped her left hand like a bowl close to her lips, the two forefingers of her right like chopsticks, her mouth open.

"That's why Uncle Ho formed the Viet Minh," Sixth Rice Field said.

"Did you know about Communism in 1940 or hear about the Viet Minh in 1941?" I asked Sixth Rice Field. I knew that during the

late 1930s, Vietnamese Communist Party members who favored an international Communist revolution had disagreed with Ho Chi Minh's wish to include merchants and small landlords in his nationalist emphasis. But by 1941, with both the French and Japanese occupying Viet Nam, the Party acceded to Ho's wish to widen the nationalist movement. Independence, the Party agreed, must come first; Communism's social revolution would become a part of the independence struggle. And so in May 1941, Ho Chi Minh announced the formation of the Viet Minh— *Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi*, or "Alliance for an Independent Viet Nam."

Sixth Rice Field drew his fingertips along the table as if they were harrow tines. "Most of us here had never heard of Communism or the Viet Minh in 1941! We were hungry. We wanted rice."

"The hunger was even worse in the north," Autumn added. "The Japanese forced the peasants to grow jute to make rope for their war industry. By early 1945, there was no rice. Our rice was growing— you could see the bursts of gold, but by May the peasants were as thin as rice stalks. They wandered, searching for food. They died on the road."

Autumn looked out the door at a boy buying an ice-cream stick for the child on his hip, then continued. "No one knew the names of the dead. Then when the harvest came, more people died because they ate too much! And after that, cholera, and still more died. In all, two million people died during the first six months of 1945. One person out of six."

Fifth Virtue spread another pinch of tobacco on a rolling paper. All the while, he clicked his tongue against his teeth.

Autumn's voice turned grey. "The corpse cart made a *re re re* sound as it came. Terrible. A cart with bodies stacked like sticks of firewood. I was ten. I would hide whenever I heard the *re re re, re re re*. Once I saw a dead woman leaning against my neighbor's door. It was early morning, with mist all around. The woman's *ao ba ba* was open. The baby at her breast was still alive, sucking at the corpse. That's when I understood the meaning of 'dead'."

"I'll tell you, Last Child," Second Harvest said, "about the time I first learned about 'dead'. My maternal grandfather— he was my great-uncle, but since he'd raised my mother, I called him

'Maternal Grandfather'— and his best friend had just celebrated Tet when the French Foreign Legion entered Ban Long. The women had fled because they were afraid of rape. The French would have asked my grandfather whether he was Viet Minh."

Second Harvest held her hands up and rotated her wrists in the southern gesture for "No". "That's what Grandfather would have said, 'No.'

"I came back from working for the rich landlord to find the two elders lying on the earthen floor." She lifted her hands over her eyes. "Grandfather had bullet holes through his hands, bullet holes through his eyes. That was 1948. I was ten. From that moment on, I knew I would resist the French."

… One evening in the dry season of 1990, Autumn and I were sitting with Second Harvest's son, Third Ability, at the round table in the corner of the side room at Senior Uncle's. In those days, before Ban Long had electricity, we spent our evenings talking. Second Harvest dozed in the hammock. The baby lamp on the table cast a gold light on her feet with their toes spread from gripping monkey bridges. Senior Uncle was in the other room, listening to his radio. It carried news of the Vietnamese Communist Party's sixtieth anniversary celebration.

Autumn touched Third Ability's wrist. "There may have been a big crowd in Sai Gon today," she said, "but there's never been such a crowd as Independence Day in Ha Noi after the Viet Minh defeated the French and Japanese in 1945."

"You heard Uncle Ho?!" Second Harvest asked. She climbed out of the hammock and joined us.

"Oh! So many went to hear him!" Autumn said.

"Could you see Ho Chi Minh?" I passed the peanuts we'd been nibbling to Second Harvest.

"Oh, yes." Autumn laughed. "But he was tiny. There were people from here to forever."

"What else?" Second Harvest asked. She rubbed tiger balm on the back of her hands to ease the stiffness from poor circulation. The balm's pungent scent penetrated the oily smell of burning kerosene.

"My mother gave us money for ice-cream sticks!" Autumn said.

I chuckled. In those days, still the time of rhetoric, most Vietnamese I knew would have launched into a speech about how Ho Chi Minh had quoted the American Revolution's Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. But not Autumn. She remained true to her childhood memory.

"It was midday and hot," Autumn said. "People were fainting from the heat. We'd walked all the way— several kilometers— to Ba Dinh Square. I only had one *hao* for an ice-cream stick, but I was so thirsty! I took off my conical hat and dipped water from the public fountain and drank that."

"Your mother let you?" I asked.

"Oh no. Mother stayed at home to light the incense. I'd gone with my older sister. Oh! There was such a clamor! As soon as Uncle Ho declared independence, the pagoda and church bells rang out all across the land. And then the fragrance of incense! So many of our ancestors had died for the cause. In each house someone stayed home to light the incense and bow before the family altar so our ancestors would know that at last we were free."

Senior Uncle, Second Harvest's father, tinkers with a radio he has used since 1940. During the American War, Senior Uncle listened to Ho Chi Minh's poems broadcast from Ha Noi at midnight on the eve of Tet.

"We even had Children's Tet!" Autumn added.

Centuries before, Mid-Autumn Tet— the lunar solstice— was a festival to urge the sun to return in time for spring planting. However, in recent times the festival has become a children's holiday somewhat like Halloween.

"We'd only had independence for ten or twelve days," Autumn went on. "There was still famine, and floods, too. But Uncle Ho loved children. He asked the youth to organize Children's Tet. There has never been a Children's Tet as joyful as the one in 1945. Lanterns everywhere after years of curfews and blackouts!"

Autumn gazed out the door at the blackness, then at the tiny American lamp. "Uncle Ho gathered the children of Ha Noi together in front of the Government Guest House across from the French Bank of Indochina and the Metropole Hotel. There were no adults! Only Uncle Ho and us kids and the youth who had brought us. I was so far away, I couldn't see Uncle Ho, but I could hear the loudspeaker. Uncle Ho spoke to us as if we mattered."

Autumn turned to me. "You're a Westerner, Little One. You might not understand that this gesture was revolutionary. Ours was the Confucian age, where children had the lowest status. Uncle Ho kept the good in Confucianism, but he threw away the outmoded. Never before in Viet Nam had an adult spoken to children as if they were people with value like adults." Autumn passed the peanuts around. "Once I met Uncle Ho," she added almost as an afterthought.

"Father!" Second Harvest called. "Come quick."

"Why?" Senior Uncle appeared in the doorway. He ran his finger around the collarless neck of his black pajama shirt.

"Autumn met Uncle Ho!"

"Where?" Senior Uncle asked. "In a dream?" He pulled up a stool, his eyes shining.

"This was in 1964," Autumn said, "at a meeting of four hundred women from all the provinces and ethnic groups of the North. It was the first time I had seen ethnic minority people. So many different kinds of dress! And such colors in the fabric! I was there as a representative of teachers in Ha Noi. We four hundred women were to be emulated for having the Five Attributes."

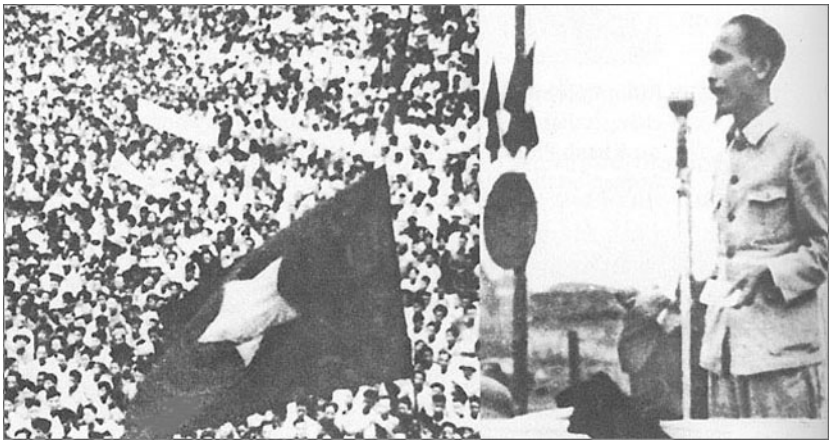


Photo: Ngo Vinh Long Collection

Autumn was a child in September 1945 when her mother took her to Ha Noi's Ba Dinh Square to hear Ho Chi Minh read his Declaration of Independence. Ho had modeled his text on a copy of the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

"And they were . . . ?" I said.

"First, 'Unite for Production'. Second, 'Work and Study'. Third, 'Manage Well'." Autumn popped a peanut into her mouth. "Oh dear! What was the fourth? I forget."

" 'Labor Well'," Second Harvest said.

"No," Autumn countered. "Labor was part of 'Unite for Production'. 'Economize!' That was it. 'Economize Time, Resources, and Energy'."

"Yes," Second Harvest said, "and the fifth was 'Raise Your Children Well'."

Autumn turned to me. "You weren't good enough if you had the first four attributes. To be emulated, you must think about the next generation. And you had to think about how to enlarge the Confucian idea of family to include your school, neighborhood, factory, or cooperative."

"And Uncle Ho?" I asked, passing the peanuts to Autumn.

"All the important people sat at a long table up front." She passed the dish on. "You remember when we met Nguyen Thi

Thap in Sai Gon. She was president of the Women's Union then. She introduced Uncle Ho. He was very far away, but I could tell by his long, white goatee that he was an old man in his seventies. In his speech, Uncle Ho said the North must help the South. We must work double, once for ourselves, once for a woman in prison in the South. That's when we began *ket nghia*— the sister provinces between the North and the South."

Autumn pushed her stool back from the table. "Then when Uncle Ho finished talking, do you know what he did? I was sitting in a middle row. There was one empty seat in the hall. It was not directly in front of me, but one over. Uncle Ho left the table of honor, walked to the middle of the hall, and took that seat!"

Senior Uncle slapped the table. "To think of it! To meet Uncle Ho in real life!"

Autumn reached across Second Harvest and touched Third Ability's shoulder. "For the next hour I sat as close to Uncle Ho as I am now to you, Nephew. I could see the age lines around his eyes."

Second Harvest covered her mouth with both hands. "What did you do?"

Autumn smiled. "I didn't hear another word of the entire program. I stared at Uncle Ho, and I tried not to breathe too loudly."

I laughed. I loved being in a society so newly independent that people could remember meeting the father of their country; I relished the way that, in these anecdotes, Ho Chi Minh always foiled the Vietnamese formalities surrounding Right Relationship and Precious Guest. But I was also aware that many stories about Ho Chi Minh had shifted from history toward legend; although I believed Autumn's story, I often wondered how many others I'd heard were apocryphal.

As he often did, Senior Uncle jabbed the air with his forefinger. "Uncle Ho taught us so much, Last Child, he taught us always to be clean in our cooking, he said we shouldn't drink out of the river anymore, but should drink rainwater, that we should boil our water. When Uncle Ho was traveling and it would be time to rest, he would inspect the kitchen where he stopped, do you

see? If the kitchen wasn't clean, Uncle Ho kept walking until he found a clean kitchen."

Senior Uncle leaned toward me. He was so small that, even sitting, his head came only to my shoulder. "One time Uncle Ho was supposed to visit the soldiers at seven P.M., but instead he came at six P.M. and by the back path. The leaders had made everything on the main path beautiful in honor of Uncle Ho, can you catch my words in time? The leaders were so proud of their work. They went out to meet Uncle Ho, but Uncle Ho slipped in the back path and found a dirty kitchen. He left without eating and without meeting the pompous leaders!"

"Once I met a man from Nghe An," I said, referring to Ho Chi Minh's birthplace as I traded stories. "He was young when Uncle Ho first returned to his *que huong* after thirty years away. Ho had been all around the world, in England, France, the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. Now he was returning as president of Viet Nam. The village elders built a new road especially to welcome the president, but he insisted on taking the old one. He left those elders waiting under their fancy decorations, too!"

The hand-pushed bicycle used to supply Dien Bien Phu and the Ho Chi Minh Trail is still a common means of transport in rural Viet Nam.

I passed the plate of roasted peanuts to Senior Uncle, taking some for myself and savoring their crunchy texture. "Senior Uncle," I asked, "when did people begin to call Ho Chi Minh 'Uncle Ho'?"

"After the August '45 Revolution," he said. "Uncle Ho was fifty-five years old. He was gaunt, his hair was thinning, he had a long beard, and he'd lost some of his teeth, do you see? This was before he had false teeth. But before 1945, around here, we'd never heard of Ho Chi Minh or of Nguyen the Patriot or of any of the other names Uncle Ho used. Maybe people in the city had heard of Ho Chi Minh, but not us country people."

Senior Uncle leaned close. The yellow lamplight deepened the furrows in his face. "You should follow the teachings of Uncle Ho, Little One, do you catch my words in time? He taught us how to work with the people, how we should always think of three things, *cung an, cung o, cung lam*— eat with the people, live with the people, work with the people. Do you understand?"

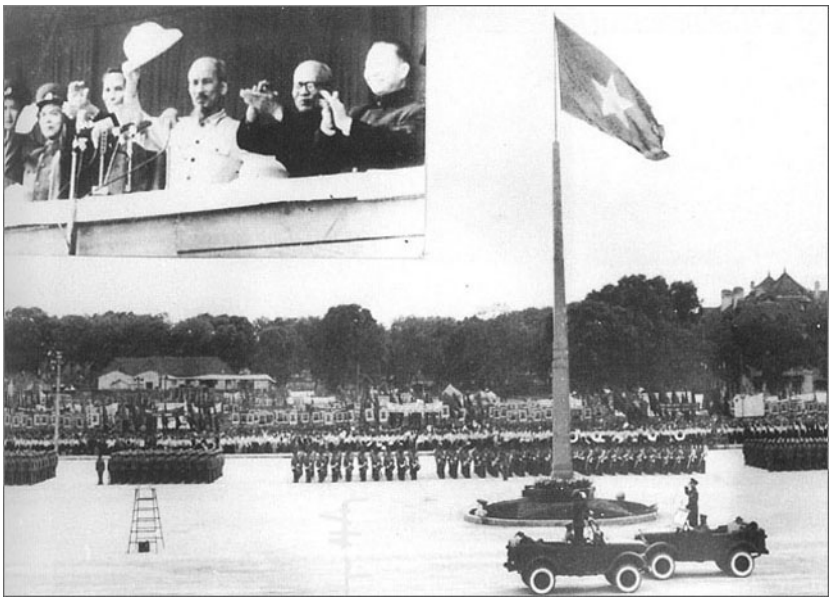


Photo: Ngo Vinh Long Collection

A formal ceremony on 1 January 1955 celebrated the total liberation of North Viet Nam from the French.

"Yes, Senior Uncle," I said. "I understand."

… Fifth Harmony split a water-palm stem. She slit one piece of the stem into slivers for thread. "I remember after the 1945 August Revolution, when Uncle Ho read the Declaration of Independence. We sat quietly together like this for the first time ever. We sewed thatch to rebuild our houses. Twenty-one days of peace! That's all we had. Then the French invaded again. They were vicious, Little One," she said, turning to me. "They beat my father so hard that he died shortly thereafter in 1946. 1 was thirteen."

I shuddered. I knew that in October 1945 the United States transported thirteen thousand French troops to Sai Gon. The Second French War, which started with those soldiers' arrival, was also a beginning of the American War. I folded a water-palm leaf over my stem and stitched it. Had officials in Washington read Ho Chi Minh's Declaration of Independence? Didn't they have any idea of Viet Nam's history of resistance against foreign occupation?

Fifth Harmony leaned toward me. She took a palm leaf and folded it over my split stem. "Do it like this, Little One," she instructed, tacking the leaf down with palm-stem thread. "My mother," she said, continuing with her story, "was a Mother of Soldiers. All the time I was growing up, Mother hid Resistance fighters, tended their wounds, mended their clothes."

Autumn reached for a sliver of thread. "I've read that the U.S. Army had nine soldiers in the rear to support every fighter at the front."

"We women did that work!" Second Harvest said. "No one paid us."

"And you?" I asked Fifth Harmony. I folded a second pinnule over my first, overlapping half.

"After my father's death, I worked for the Resistance and fell in love with a nurse, also with the Resistance. My mother had other marriage plans for me." Fifth Harmony covered her overbite with her long, thin fingers. "Fourth Handsome and I eloped. Mother was so angry that she beat me! Two months later, Fourth Handsome left for Regrouping in the North after the Geneva Accords. This was the time of Ngo Dinh Diem in the South."

Fifth Harmony's southern pronunciation of Diem's name sounded like "No Dinh Yiem." The Vietnamese alphabet has two

Ds, one hard, the other soft. Ngo Dinh Diem's name contains both letters. "Dinh" has the hard D, which is written with a bar across the stem and pronounced like the English D. "Diem" has the soft D, which is pronounced like a Y in the south and like a Z in the north.

Autumn reached for another pinnule. "The Americans brought Diem here to be prime minister at the time of the Geneva Accords in 1954," she explained, using the northern Z pronunciation. "Diem had been in the United States the four years before! From 1950 to 1954 in America! How could he be a Vietnamese leader?"

"I know," I said, feeling my face flush with embarrassment and rage.

I knew CIA pilots using U.S. planes had supplied the French at Dien Bien Phu and that the U.S. had paid 75 percent of the French costs at the end of the French War. But I'd only recently learned that the United States, a participant in the Geneva Conference, had refused to sign the Accords. Simultaneous with the signing of the agreement and contrary to it, Colonel Edward Lansdale, working for the CIA, had begun intensive covert actions in both North Viet Nam and South Viet Nam to subvert the Geneva Accords.

Second Harvest folded and sewed her leaves with deliberation, her fingers stiff. "In 1956," she said, "we wrote a petition to Sai Gon to ask Diem to carry out the elections required by the Geneva Accords. He refused. Then came 1957, 1958, and 1959. Diem started his five-family units, five families forced to live together like one, with a watcher! You had to report everything to the watcher. Anyone with family in the North for Regrouping had to post a sign announcing they were Viet Cong."

"We'd never heard of Viet Cong!" Ninth River said, her blunt fingers sewing quickly.

"Who were Viet Cong?" Fifth Harmony asked. "Diem made up that word. My family had a sign because my brother, brother-in-law, and husband were in the North. So many men went north. They had to! That was part of the Geneva Accords. We thought they would return in 1956 for the elections."

Second Harvest chose another leaf. "I bought a small *xuong* and set about buying and selling on the river. When one of our

soldiers was wounded, I took care of him. I began to organize other women to help. We were a small group, very small, only a few of us in 1958 and 1959, but we were growing. Then came the 10/59 Law."

"10/59?" I asked.

"October 1959," Ninth River said, tapping my thatch. "After you fold the leaf over, bring your thread up just beyond the middle."

"Any citizen," Fifth Harmony said, "who didn't report a Resistance cadre had to face the *may chem*."

"This was some kind of machine?" I said, recognizing *"may"*.

Autumn set her thatch aside. In the dirt, she sketched a frame with vertical slides. "Guillotine," she said in French, adding a suspended blade, a yoke to support the neck, and a basket for the head to roll into.

I sat back. "Heavens," I said. "I thought beheading stopped with the French Revolution!"

"Maybe in France," Autumn muttered.

"Everyone had to watch!" Fifth Harmony said. She tied off the last leaf of her thatch. "If you shuddered when the head hit the dirt, the Diem soldiers said you were Communist. You'd be next. The beatings— you recall meeting my older brother, the one we call Fourth?"

"Yes." I remembered how Fourth had sat on the board bed in Fifth Harmony's house, his back against the wall of plaited water-palm leaves, his white goatee resting against his chest. He stared straight ahead without blinking.

"The puppets drove nails into his ears," Fifth Harmony said. Setting aside her thatch, she slapped her head on one side, then the other. "They beat Fourth Brother until blood flowed. To this day, he doesn't know anything."

"This was before the Americans," I said, checking.

"No!" Sixth Rice Field shouted. He dragged another palm branch from the sluice. "Diem belonged to the Americans! They brought him here! By 1954, we already had American advisors in Sai Gon and in My Tho, too. This was 1959! "

"The puppets arrested my mother," Second Harvest said, "and beat her until they thought she was dead, then threw her into the morgue. But the women prisoners begged to have her corpse. She was only unconscious. The women revived her. After that, my mother couldn't walk. That's how they treated people at Phu Loi."

"We heard in the North about Phu Loi Prison," Autumn said. "We demonstrated after the guards poisoned the prisoners."

"The guards poisoned six hundred people!" Second Harvest said to me. "Don't you understand? The prisons, the beatings, the 10/59 Law, that's why we organized Dong Khoi."

I paused, thread in hand. "You mean the 1940 and the 1960 uprisings both happened here?"

"Both!" Ninth River said. She leaned over and looked at my work. "Small stitches to be beautiful, Last Child."

As is the case with the 1940 Southern Uprising, American histories also seldom mention *Dong Khoi*— the 1960 Uprising. However, the 1960 Uprising is so famous among Vietnamese that at the end of the American War Dong Khoi became the new, official name for *Tu Do*— Freedom —Street, wartime Sai Gon's notorious bar-and-brothel strip.

Second Harvest set aside a finished layer of thatch, its leaves neatly parallel, their fringe edges even. "The people in Ben Tre rose up first, in January 1960. We had our Uprising in the early spring, when the rice was ripe."

Fifth Harmony pulled her thread through the leaves. "Whenever a Diem hamlet chief beat his brass gong," she said, "we all had to show up for a meeting. If you didn't show, you were Viet Cong. One night, the hamlet chief beat his gong for the next day's meeting. We beat gongs in response! Whoever didn't have a gong, beat an old pot."

With a palm leaf, Fifth Harmony tapped the thatch blanket in her lap as if it were a drum. "We hated living five families together! It was so hard on Fourth Brother. He couldn't remember anything because of the nails they'd driven into his head. We had to drag him hither and yon, every morning, every evening. We didn't

Photo: Ha Noi Women's Museum

With most of the Viet Minh men in the North, women became the main organizers and participants of the 1960 Uprising.

want to live communally. We didn't want to pay Diem's massive paddy rents. That's why we beat our rice pots all night long.

"The puppets brought in more soldiers," she continued. "We called the women together to present a petition to the soldiers to stop their shooting. Rows and rows of women from villages all around here gathered in Vinh Kim. We were unarmed, three thousand of us! I stood way in the back. I could see all the conical hats, like thousands of ripples in the Eastern Sea. The soldiers shot into the crowd. They ripped off our hats. They arrested women and interrogated them. They beat us. What could we do?"

"We had to rise up!" Second Harvest said. "Anyone who had family in the North faced life in prison. The Diem soldiers were arresting our women to be their prostitutes, our children to be their soldiers. They were poisoning us in prison. And the guillotine taking our leaders, head by head. Someone had to take responsibility, or we would all be killed."

Second Harvest picked up a clean palm stem and held it like a rifle. "We made fake guns out of water-palm stems. Women did! Our men were gone, in the North for *tap ket*— regrouping.

At dusk we put on masks and, taking our fake guns, circled the puppets' outposts. We set off homemade explosives. Boom! Boom! Smoke and light silhouetting us and our guns. We looked like real soldiers attacking!"

She set down her make-believe rifle. "The Diem soldiers were terrified. The next day they asked us citizens, 'How many Viet Minh soldiers are there?' 'Too many to count!' we said. 'They're streaming down from the North!' we added. 'With big guns!' We never let on that it was all make-believe!

The next night, we set off more explosives, women with wooden guns running this way and that through the smoke. The puppets thought a Viet Minh company had surrounded their outpost. They dropped their weapons and ran. We snatched their guns. That's how we armed ourselves!"

Like a fairy, you glide over the bamboo footbridge.
My sister, you are the guerrilla who keeps us alive.
Our hearts vibrate with the rhythm of your steps.

Le Anh Xuan, 1940-1968

Second Harvest nodded toward Sixth Rice Field, who sliced leaves from a stem. "People like Sixth Rice Field who knew how to use guns taught the rest of us. But our first guns were only shadows. The Viet Minh soldiers in the North didn't come south to rescue us. We women rose up! That's how we liberated Ban Long in 1960, when the rice was ripe."

Sitting on his heels, Sixth Rice Field sketched a map of Roaring River in the dust. He drew in the communes, then added arrows pointing toward Ban Long. "We were the only liberated commune in My Tho province," he said. "People came to us from Vinh Kim, Kim Son, Phu Phong, Binh Trung because we had become the Resistance base for the province."

"But who organized all this," I asked, "if your leaders were in the North or in prison?"

Second Harvest laughed as she dropped her thatch into her lap. She gestured toward Sixth Rice Field and Fifth Harmony, her hands held out, palms open and empty.

"We did," she said.

"You?" Autumn and I spoke in unison.

Second Harvest's laugh displayed her perfect teeth. "Yes. We were the core. And Uncle Last Gust in Vinh Kim."

I felt shaken. I found myself looking at Second Harvest through a tumble of complex feelings. What was right in all this? How could I reconcile my youth of affluence and freedom with hers of squalor and persecution? What would I have done in her place? Didn't pacifism become academic when speaking out brought death by guillotine? Would I have had her courage? No, I decided with a sigh. No.

I reached for another palm leaf, thinking the feel of its smooth texture in my fingers might be soothing. "So cadre came from Ben Tre to help you?" I said into the silence. Once Nguyen Thi Dinh, who is renowned in Viet Nam as leader of *Dong Khoi* in Ben Tre, had recounted for me how the Ben Tre women terrified Sai Gon soldiers at dusk by slipping through the shadows with pretend wooden guns. Under Mrs. Dinh's command, the women liberated three districts. Mrs. Dinh went on to become the Viet Cong general whose forces helped capture Sai Gon in April 1975.

Second Harvest picked up another leaf and bent it around her palm stem. "People from Ben Tre didn't help us, but we heard about their Uprising through the Market Mouth. The women buying and selling, that's all we talked about—*'Dong Khoi!' 'Dong Khoi*!'— how our men had all been sent to the North by the Geneva Accords, but now women in Ben Tre were rising up! So we here thought, Why don't we rise up, too?"

"The Americans never did understand the power of women!" Sixth Rice Field said as he added arrows crisscrossing between the villages on his map in the dust. He drew canoes and then wavy lines to show the *xuong* darting back and forth. "Women are the ones who buy and sell. They carry our news. Women were crucial in *Dong Khoi* and in the Tet Offensive, too."

Second Harvest folded a last water-palm pinnule and stitched it. "I told you how I bought and sold from a canoe while my mother was in Phu Loi. I organized at the same time." She began to tie off the end. "But our independence in Ban Long brought

such revenge! Bombs, mortars, rockets." She lifted her finished layer of thatch and held it up for me to see.

"How," she said, "can a house made of thatch like this withstand American bombs?"

…"Ours was no world for children! I had to change it, for my son's future." Second Harvest nodded at Eighth Senior Uncle. "That's why, when Longevity was three months old, I gave him to this family to raise. For three years, from 1972 until peace came in April 1975, I was never sure whether my son was alive."

I later learned that many women gave up their children to work for the Revolution. Once in Sai Gon, I talked for some hours with Nguyen Thi Ngoc Dung, the Provisional Revolutionary Government's representative to the Joint Commission responsible for implementing the Paris Peace Accords in 1973. After the war, Mrs. Dung was Viet Nam's ambassador to the United Nations. Born in My Tho, she had joined the Resistance base in Ban Long after *Dong Khoi*. She'd given her son to relatives to raise in 1952, when he was two, and did not see him again for twenty-three years; by then, in April 1975, her son was himself the father of a two-year-old.

Another time I visited women who had lived in the Cu Chi tunnels, a revolutionary base twenty-five miles northeast of Sai Gon. Near a major American compound, the Cu Chi tunnels included a two-hundred-kilometer web with underground classrooms, meeting rooms, a smoke-tight kitchen vented into a nearby river, and a field hospital. In an effort to capture Cu Chi, the American military turned the area into the most bombed, defoliated, and gassed region in the history of combat.

The Cu Chi women had never before met an American. They were reticent, with the exception of Sixth Candy, who was in her mid-seventies. Sixth Candy led me through a tunnel that had been enlarged to accommodate Western visitors and then into a meeting room dug into the earth, its roof of camouflaging thatch only a foot above the ground. She invited me to sit at the table made of lashed bamboo. Opening her basket, Sixth Candy set out rice cakes, peanuts, bananas, and hard candies.

During the war, Sixth Candy had supplied the men and women defending the Cu Chi tunnels. This was among the war's most dangerous missions because she had to cross through heavily contested territory. Like other women, she smuggled rice and ammunition in her yoked baskets, but only Sixth Candy was famous for tucking sweets for the soldiers into the pocket of her white *ao ba ba*.

Now, layer by layer, Sixth Candy unfolded the steamed banana leaf wrapping on a rice cake. As she began to tell her story, the other women leaned forward. Only Third Fragrance, a young woman who'd come with me from Sai Gon, turned away. She'd been a sunny companion, but now her expression turned dour.

"My son was only a few months old," Sixth Candy said as she offered me the rice cake, green from hours steaming inside the banana leaves. "I gave him to a cousin to raise. My breasts were so full of milk! I could stand that pain and even the pain of separation. But to think about my son inheriting my life— that pain was unbearable."

She set before me a pile of peanuts and added a toffee candy. "I said to my cousin, 'Say I am dead! For my son's safety, don't

Fifth Harmony (far right) demonstrates how she once hid amid the water palms along the bank of Roaring River until American and Sai Gon helicopters passed.

When the men went south during the American War, the women learned to plow and to run the large irrigation pumps. Both jobs had previously been done by men.

Photo: Ha Noi Women's Museum

say that I died for freedom. Just say I'm dead. My son must never miss his mother, but I will always miss him'." As Sixth Candy spoke, a tear slid over the dark wrinkles on her cheek, but her voice remained steady. I felt my throat catch. Third Fragrance wept openly.

Later, as we were leaving, I put my arm around Third Fragrance's shoulders.

"I never understood," she said, staring at the camouflaging thatch.

"Understood…?" I asked.

"During the war, my mother gave me up to cousins in Sai Gon. A11 through my childhood, I thought my father and mother were dead. Then when I was fourteen my cousins decided I was old enough to know about my family. They told me my parents were with the revolutionaries in the jungle. I was furious! I hated my mother for abandoning me. When peace came, I met my mother. I was sixteen. For years I was silent and sullen."

Third Fragrance rotated her watch back and forth across her wrist. She watched a butterfly flutter through trees thriving in what had been the Cu Chi wasteland. "Now," she said, "I'm a mother raising a daughter and a son. You'd think I would understand a

mother's feelings. But only this afternoon while listening to Sixth Candy did I finally understand my mother's sacrifice."

… "I wasn't married then," Second Harvest said. She cupped her hands as if catching a newborn. "I didn't know how babies came, I saw that baby coming. Oh! Shocking!"

"Our hero fallen," Fifth Harmony teased.

Second Harvest laughed; her cheeks took on a rosy hue like prize milk fruit. "I'll tell you another funny story, from several years later," she said, picking her pineapple up again. She finished slicing. "Sixth Peach Blossom was in labor when our scouts warned that the Americans were coming. The helicopters landed, but by then the baby had started to crown. I caught the child, cut the cord, and gave the baby to Sixth Blossom. I was about to flee. They'd posted a reward for me dead or alive!"

Second Harvest shaved the rind off another fruit. "But then I noticed Sixth Sister's belly was still huge. What should I do? There had to be a twin inside. By now I could hear the Americans shouting. I was catching the second baby's head, like this"— she cradled the wet pineapple— "when two GIs entered. The first GI was black. They always sent the black soldiers first to trigger our traps. The black man took one look at that baby coming out. His skin turned as white as yours, Little One! The white man fled first. The black man fled after him."

I laughed and popped a nubbin of pineapple into my mouth. Its sweetness startled me. "Now what's this about a reward?" I asked.

"You know Forever Silent Bridge," Fifth Harmony said. "The puppet troops were terrified to cross over from their base at Vinh Kim because Second Sense controlled the territory on the other side."

"Who's Second Sense?" Autumn asked.

Second Harvest grinned. "Me."

Senior Uncle came around the corner of the house. "She had an extra sense, like an extra set of eyes," he said, lifting the bamboo ladder off the fresh water urns and propping it against a jackfruit tree. He climbed up and scraped a wormy spot out of

a young jackfruit. "She was like a mosquito inside the enemy's sleeping net, do you understand? They knew she was there, but they couldn't catch her. Not even with their huge reward!"

Fifth Harmony poured sugar into the basin. "Little One, you remember piasters from when you lived in the South." She turned to Autumn. "Five hundred thousand piasters, Autumn. It was a fortune! A teacher's salary for more than a hundred years. Enough money to marry off over a hundred brides from wealthy families. Still, no one fingered Second Harvest."

"This is true, Little One," Second Harvest said, touching my fingers. Flecks of gold pineapple freckled our hands. "Once, I was among villagers the puppet soldiers had rounded up. I was terrified! This is it, I thought. 'Where is Second Sense?' the puppets demanded. 'Take us to her, you'll win the reward!' I was standing there among the villagers when the puppet soldier said that. But no one betrayed me."

"This must have been the Phoenix Program," I said, referring to a joint effort between the South Vietnamese government and the CIA to "neutralize" the Viet Cong infrastructure largely through assassinations.

"I don't know what you Americans called it," Second Harvest said. "I only know there were different rewards, beginning with twenty-five thousand piasters for people they didn't care much about. The puppets offered ten thousand piasters for an old photograph of me, but to get the five hundred thousand, villagers had to bring me in alive. The people were told that if they had to shoot me, they were to wound me, but if they killed me by mistake, they were to bring back the corpse. The women in the strategic hamlets knew there was a reward for me. They lit tiny lamps, the ones we call 'American lamps', as a signal when it was dangerous for me to enter."

"But why did they put such a price on your head?" I asked. I couldn't imagine anyone wanting Second Harvest dead.

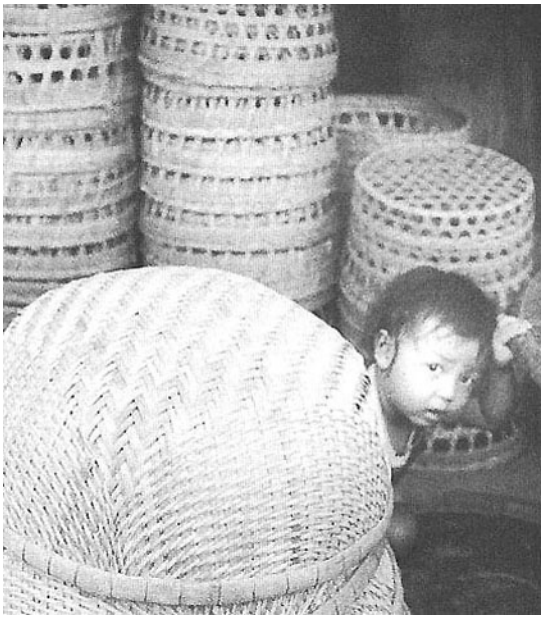
"I carried a rifle," Second Harvest said, "and I shot that rifle, but I'll tell you the truth, Last Child. I never killed anyone." She sliced another pineapple. "I'll tell you why they posted such a reward. Because I fought with my mouth. That's what made me effective: what I had to say, the truths I told.

"Once," Second Harvest continued, "I ducked into Sixth Spring's house. This was inside the puppets' strategic hamlet. Terror! Puppet soldiers sat on the bed! Sixth Spring wasn't home. Her four-year-old son was there. I don't know how he knew to do this, but he cried out, *'Ma!'* He ran over and hugged my knees. Such a little child. How did he know to do that? No one had taught him. He saved my life."

"Another time when I was at Sixth Spring's house, the puppet soldiers were about to arrest me. Sixth Spring wasn't there that time, either. All four of her children clung to my trousers. *'Ma, Ma!'* they cried. 'Don't leave us!'

"'Where's your father?' the puppets asked. The oldest boy was seven. 'Dead and buried under the earth,' he said. He pleaded with the puppets. 'If you arrest our mother, who will take care of us?' "

Senior Uncle leaned over the side of his ladder to examine another young jackfruit. "If any of those children had called her 'Aunt Second Sense' or 'Aunt Second Harvest'," he said, "she'd be dead now. We never taught the children what to say. They just knew."



During the French and American wars, children as young as three and four could tell who was friend and who was foe. Once when Second Harvest slipped inside a Sai Gon-controlled strategic hamlet, a friend's four-year-old saved her from arrest by Sai Gon soldiers when he clung to her legs, crying, "Ma! Don't leave me!"

Fifth Harmony (left) helps make rice flour cakes for Tet.

Fifth Harmony wiped her hands and gave the towel to Autumn. "Once the puppets thought they'd captured Second Harvest," she said. "There was this journalist named Phuong who'd come down from the Central Women's Union, from Ha Noi. She was captured and killed, her body turned in for the bounty."

"Phuong!" Autumn dropped the towel. She stared at Second Harvest. "I knew Phuong by her photo. I never thought of it until now, but you do look like her, the same round face and full lips."

"Phuong and I had spent the day working together," Second Harvest said. "We were near the American base at Binh Duc and were to work together the next day, too. I told Phuong she should cross over to Ban Long for safety, but she said, 'No, I'll sleep here', so I went on to Ban Long. The puppets arrested Phuong that night. When she resisted arrest, they killed her, thinking she was me."

Second Harvest's face sagged and her voice took on a bitter cast. "The puppets put out the word that I was dead. Third Pear heard about my death from Tenth Treasure while she was in Vinh Kim Market picking up medicines. Third Pear paddled back to Ban Long to give my mother the news. My mother cried herself to exhaustion."

"One of the old women told me," Fifth Harmony said. "I cried and cried. Then I decided to go look at the body— the puppets had put it on display— just to be sure. I checked the teeth and knew it wasn't Second Harvest."

"I refused to believe the news," Senior Uncle said, climbing off his ladder, which he set back on the fresh water urns. "I knew the puppets couldn't catch Second Harvest."

Second Harvest wiped her hands on a cloth. Settling into the hammock strung between two jackfruit trees, she stared up at the small fruit. "I've never before told those stories," she said, speaking softly, as if to the air. "Who would want to think back on those times?"

… I had first met Fourth Honesty in early 1987, when I was still confined to the Province Guest House in My Tho. The main room of the province Women's Union office, which was filled with women, fell silent the moment Fourth Honesty entered. No one, it turned out, had ever heard Fourth Honesty's story. Until I arrived in the province, no one had ever asked.

During every subsequent visit I made to the Mekong Delta, Fourth Honesty repeated her story for me as if doing so might help erase it from her mind. "If you ever visit Con Son Island," she would say, "you will see the sixty tiger cages." Now, sitting in Senior Uncle's main room, Fourth Honesty pointed to the rafters as she repeated her story. "A catwalk ran across the top of our cage so the guards could look down on us. Each cage was 1.2 meters wide and two meters long. Five sisters in that space! We slept two on the bottom, three on top."

"Same for the men!" Sixth Rice Field said. He wore a new white shirt for Tet.

Fourth Honesty tucked a strand of hair into her nape knot. "I had epileptic seizures from so many beatings, and then I would bleed. There was a hole in the floor with a wooden bucket inside for our excrement. For eight months I had to sit on that hole so that my blood would not mess the cage. Up above us on the catwalk, the guards kept a bucket of lime. If we sisters sang or spoke to each other, the guards would throw lime down on us. But we had to sing and ask about each other! Otherwise we would surely die."

Sixth Rice Field shook his head; his brush of white hair wavered. "So many died from starvation," he said. "One night I heard a shudder. The man lying on my right died. I heard another shudder. The man on my left died."

"We lost so many." Fourth Honesty spoke just above a whisper. "The gruel stank. It wasn't fit for rats! We organized a hunger strike. Then the guards took away our bathing privileges. Six weeks without a bath!" Fourth Honesty fingered the embroidery on the cuff of her *ao ba ba,* which was as white as her hair. "Our clothes rotted. Our hair fell out. Finally they let us wash, but in only one liter of water!"

The United States and Sai Gon governments had denied the existence of the tiger cages. But in July 1970 Tom Harkin, then a congressional aide and subsequently a senator from Iowa, and two congressmen, Augustus Hawkins and William Anderson, visited Con Son Island with Don Luce, a journalist working in Sai Gon. Released detainees had given Don a map of the prison. With Don as guide, the congressional delegation came out onto the catwalk on top of the cages.

Fourth Honesty pointed once again to the rafters. Her voice lightened. "We looked up through the catwalk— Americans! We were so surprised! They were talking in English to Tao in the next cage. They took pictures. We looked so terrible, filthy, our hair gone, we were bald— the lice. But within a week the guards moved us to a larger cell. The puppets claimed we were hardened criminals until we smuggled out a list of political prisoners."

Several years before I held that list in my hands during a visit with Tao, the woman who had spoken to the Americans in English. Tao had been eighteen and a senior at Sai Gon's prestigious Marie Curie School when she and her sister Tan, then fourteen, were arrested for taking part in a student demonstration.

When the Sai Gon and United States governments denied the prisoners' existence, Tao and Tan's mother secured a list of prisoners' names, ID numbers, parents' names and addresses. The list was written in compressed lines on a woman's underblouse worn by a released detainee when she left the prison. The fabric I held some fifteen years later was as frail as gossamer, but the inscribed names made the cloth feel as heavy as marble.

Fourth Honesty nodded toward Senior Uncle's calendar with the photograph of the Louvre. "They presented the list of our names at the Paris peace talks! The Americans and the puppets could no longer deny that we political prisoners existed. They had to release us in exchange for the American pilots."

"But why were you arrested?" I asked. I knew Fourth Honesty had been captured three times and had spent a total of sixteen years in prison.

"I was caught!"

"But three times?!"

Sixth Rice Field laughed. "You don't understand, Little One. Fourth Honesty did liaison work." He touched the sleeve of her white *ao ba ba*. "She put on the white blouse and crossed from our base here at Ban Long into puppet territory. She memorized messages, carried maps, gathered intelligence. For women like her, the chance of arrest was so great!" He ran his hand across

Photo: Ha Noi Women's Museum

Viet Cong women guerrillas in Quang Ngai province, the central Vietnamese province where I worked during the war, prepare booby traps for enemy soldiers.

the top of his head, ruffling his hair. For a moment he sat still, his forearm resting on top of his head.

"Good liaison work was essential," he added, "but so dangerous. Much more dangerous than combat."

… All the people who gathered at Senior Uncle's and whose houses I visited during the holiday had participated in the 1968 Tet Offensive, but they knew nothing of the plan for the offensive until the last minute, and even then, their knowledge was local. However, I wanted an overview so that I could understand how the Vietnamese had organized simultaneous attacks on a hundred province capitals and district towns with such secrecy the CIA never noticed.

During the American War, Last Gust had been president of the My Tho province People's Committee for the National Liberation Front ("Viet Cong"), precursor of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Viet Nam. At the end of 1992, Autumn and I made another trip, particularly to see him. I did not know it then, but that would be the last time I would see Uncle Last Gust. He died of heart failure shortly after Tet in 1993.

"Uncle Last Gust," I said as Autumn, Second Harvest, and I sat over tea in his house near Forever Silent Bridge, "did you know about the Tet Offensive before it happened?"

"Indeed I did!" Last Gust moved from the table to his chaise lounge made of rattan. He had a chiseled face, as craggy as the limestone karsts common in northern Viet Nam. But unlike other Viet Minh who fought against the French, Last Gust had not gone to the North in 1954 for Regrouping.

"I told you," he said, "how I went underground after I retrieved the dead from the 1940 Southern Uprising. In 1967, I was working at Central Headquarters at our Political Affairs Center in the jungle west of Sai Gon. Pham Hung was general secretary, I was deputy chief of cabinet. Our task was to prepare for the Tet Offensive."

"Political and military," Autumn said, lacing her fingers together so that her palms locked. "The two hands."

"Indeed!!" Last Gust said. "You know about our other uprisings, but this one was different. By 1967, we'd built a movement among

Photo: Ha Noi Women's Museum

During the American War, women did much of the heavy industrial work. Many factories were evacuated to the countryside to escape U.S. bombing.

the students in Sai Gon. We decided to try again, this time not just in one place but in many. Day and night—we didn't sleep. We prepared everything."

I had respect for the detail encompassed by Last Gust's sweeping statement. I once met a man from Sai Gon whom the Viet Cong had trained as a political organizer. For the two years of his training, he wore a cloth sack over his head even when eating, sleeping, and washing his face. He removed the sack only when changing it for a clean one. Keeping his identity anonymous would prevent any unraveling of the Viet Cong network in Sai Gon in the event of arrest and torture.

Last Gust coughed. "How could we fight in Sai Gon? I'm from Vinh Kim, from the countryside! I wouldn't know how to hide in a city. I'll tell you the secret of how we organized: Women. Some

women went to the North for Regrouping, but mostly men went. The women stayed behind. The 1960 Uprising showed the power of women— women soldiers, women cadre, women guerrillas! Women like Second Harvest, our Second Sense. No matter how great our force of arms," Last Gust said, "if we hadn't had women, there would have been no victory,"

"A body with blood vessels," Autumn added, is worthless without blood."

Last Gust gestured toward Roaring River, a patch of blue beyond his garden of orchids. "When it came time for the Tet Offensive, the women notified people hither and yon. The women told the people just what to do and where to go, told them the day, the hour. Ours was a guerrilla war! We had to slip around undercover amidst the enemy.

"From 1967, we began first to organize in Sai Gon and then later in the provincial and district capitals. Those towns were the centers of the system belonging to the Americans and President Thieu. Their power was so great that we had to be fierce organizers. You must have a huge number of people to rise up."

"Ninety percent," Autumn said to me.

"That's what Khe Sanh was about! We attacked on January 21, 1968. Your General Westmoreland thought Khe Sanh was our attempt to have a victory over the Americans the way we had over the French at Dien Bien Phu. Ha! General Westmoreland was cocky. He thought his American soldiers were better than the French. He thought the Americans would win their Dien Bien Phu at Khe Sanh. But that's not what Khe Sanh was about! We didn't want that hill!!

"No, no, we just wanted to distract the Americans while we finished preparations for the Tet Offensive ten days later. We listened to the American radio! Your president was talking about Khe Sanh every day! A hundred thousand tons of bombs the United States poured on Khe Sanh. An armada of airplanes and helicopters. Plus all those American troops, and how many more supporting them behind the lines?? General Westmoreland thought he was fighting a traditional army. Ha!"

Uncle Last Gust's voice turned light. "Westmoreland and

Johnson never did realize that they were fighting us, the Vietnamese people. They never understood they were fighting women!! So yes, the North Vietnamese Army distracted the Americans at Khe Sanh! Meanwhile, all over the country, women like Second Harvest and Fourth Honesty and Fifth Harmony and Third Pear were preparing for Tet. But they didn't know they were part of a great offensive. Secrecy! The web!"

I thought about Ninth Rose, whom I had first met in early 1987. Then, she had pretended coyness as she told me about donning an *ao dai* to ride in a jeep driven by an American soldier into Binh Duc, headquarters for the U.S. Ninth Infantry Division. She described how Viet Cong working inside Sai Gon-controlled territory divided themselves into units of three people each. Only one of the three reported to one person in a superior unit. Should a woman be arrested and tortured, she could give information about only four people in the vast web— the other two in her unit, the person reporting to her from below, and the one to whom she reported.

Ninth Rose had also described the spontaneous party celebrating liberation in My Tho on the night of April 30, 1975, and how she was surprised to find so many people there whom she hadn't known were part of the Resistance. The web in My Tho, she would often remind me, had been a tight one carried out largely through the Market Mouth.

Uncle Last Gust shifted in his chair. "We couldn't write out our orders—"

"Death!" Second Harvest said.

"How's that?" I asked.

"The courier might be arrested!" Autumn said.

"Everything had to go by mouth," Last Gust said. "The Market Mouth! In Sai Gon, women in the Special Task Force worked in the hotels where the Americans stayed. They worked in the American bases. They watched and listened. They were our eyes and ears. That's how we knew what the American officers thought. The women played coy and dumb. All the while, they kept an eye on the officers' maps, and they counted the newly arrived munitions."

In the night rain, my dreams are cast
to the trembling glimmer of the lamp.
After war, the people you meet differ so
from former times.

Nguyen Trai, 1380-1442

I found myself thinking back to wartime Quang Ngai, where one of my chores had been to pick up the Quaker Service mail at the American army compound. Since the Viet Cong controlled 90 percent of Quang Ngai province, I assumed that most Vietnamese I met, including those working inside the American base, were VC sympathizers.

I often chatted in Vietnamese with the women who cleaned the officers' quarters. They were straightforward with me since I was a woman and could talk, but with the officers they were flirtatious. I always assumed the women measured and counted as they swept and that no change in military activity escaped their notice. I used to watch with amusement as the military police searched the women's reed baskets when they left at the end of the day. It seemed never to occur to the MPs that whatever the women carried out of that American base resided inside their heads.

"Women were our spies!" Last Gust was saying. "And our guides! Brother Kiet, now our prime minister, talks about when he went to Sai Gon, how the women took him here and there. They knew every alley, they knew which Sai Gon police they could trust, which they couldn't. In all the war, Little One, this was the most dangerous work. The women were facile. They knew the paths, they knew where the enemy was camped.

"The children as well! The kids would play with the American soldiers. They knew your soldiers' routines. Some of the children even learned English. Wonderful, the kids were. Smart. Busy with their little fishing nets, their fish baskets. All the while, their ears alert.

"We had a web of secrecy. The people like Fourth Honesty who were liaison knew only a little bit of information. To this day they can't tell you much. The chance of arrest for them was too great. This way, if they were tortured, what could they reveal? Not much because they knew only a tiny bit of the web."

"We even had secrecy in the North," Autumn said. "Nothing on paper and you wouldn't tell anyone anything, not even your husband, not even your friend."

"Just like here," Second Harvest said. "We knew only one spot of reality. We had the three 'No's'. Whenever we were questioned, we would answer, 'I didn't see', 'I didn't hear', 'I don't know'."

"During the bombing," Autumn continued, "I taught in a school outside Ha Noi. Once, when my husband came to visit, he left Ha Noi at, eleven at night, first by train, then by bicycle. On the train he met a colleague of his. 'Where are you going?' Vigilance asked his colleague as they left the train. They started pedaling down the same road. 'To visit my husband', his colleague said. They kept biking and they kept making the same turns until

Photo: Ngo Vinh Long Collection

On 15 May 1975, two weeks after the fall of Sai Gon, there was a nationwide celebration of victory.

they turned into the same gate! Only then did Vigilance realize that his colleague's husband was a colleague of mine."

"Here's the result of secrecy," Last Gust said, laughing. "Just before Tet, we read Westmoreland's speeches. He said the war was almost over. There was a light at the end of the tunnel. Ha! The Tet Offensive of 1968, the Year of the Monkey, was the light at the end of the tunnel! Uprisings in one hundred cities and towns, but did your CIA know? No! We penetrated the American embassy! Where was the CIA? They never knew a thing! Secrecy, that's what did it. Secrecy and stamina. Look, I'll show you."

Last Gust went to the cabinet with the family altar on top and removed an old photo album, which he set in my hands. Mold had eaten its binding. He opened the book to its first page. "See this picture of me? Hardly more than a schoolboy! I went underground in 1940, changed my identity. For thirty-five years, I didn't exist. That schoolboy you see in the photo disappeared. No one heard of him because I took on a whole new identity. That's what secrecy means."

"Uncle Last Gust . . ." Second Harvest's tone carried expectation. She leaned forward, her eyebrows drawn together; she rubbed her thumb across her forefinger as if paging through papers. "Do you by chance have a photograph of my mother?"

Last Gust rubbed his chest. "Child," he said to Second Harvest, using the intimate address, "your mother was my dear sister. How I miss her! I wish I did have a picture of her."

"You could check," I said when I noticed Second Harvest examining every face in the photos in my lap.

The album gave off the musty smell of decay. Together we turned pages, searching through eroded snapshots that had survived the French and American wars but not the humidity of the tropics. When we had finished looking, there was nothing for Second Harvest to hold on to but the soft blue-grey powder of dried mold on her fingertips.

That evening in 1992, Second Harvest and I sat outside at the picnic table, a tiny American lamp throwing a flicker of light on her placid face. A generator across the narrow sluice by the outhouse

kicked on. From the side addition under the thatch roof came the laughter of teenagers— Vigor and Third Ability and neighbors. They were playing cards. Senior Uncle was folding away the red tablecloth for next Tet, the Year of the Monkey. Autumn, suffering from chronic bronchitis, had turned in early.

Second Harvest glanced at a passing *xuong* with a woman paddling in the stern. The sound of the paddle against the gunwale was but a murmur in the darkness. The woman's husband sat mid-canoe, their daughter in his lap. The girl, perhaps six, sang softly, her voice quavering.

"Our lives are like the river," Second Harvest said, watching the canoe disappear around the upstream bend. "Whenever I meet the elders who remember my mother, I come back home to this house my mother never knew, and I see her face. I remind myself that she's gone, but then I walk into another room and I see her face again. I can almost hear her voice.

"I have plenty of food now, and I live with the peaceful sounds of birds and cicadas. Still, the sadness never leaves. Can you understand, Little One?" She paused, gazing at the stream. "Our sorrow comes and goes like the river. Even at low tide, there is always a trickle."

… Second Harvest took the peanuts I offered her. Their aroma mixed with the tangy fragrance of jackfruit. The hammock made a creaking sound as we swung. I looked at Second Harvest, thinking that now I would broach the question I had longed to ask. "Older Sister," I said, touching her sleeve, "are you a Communist?"

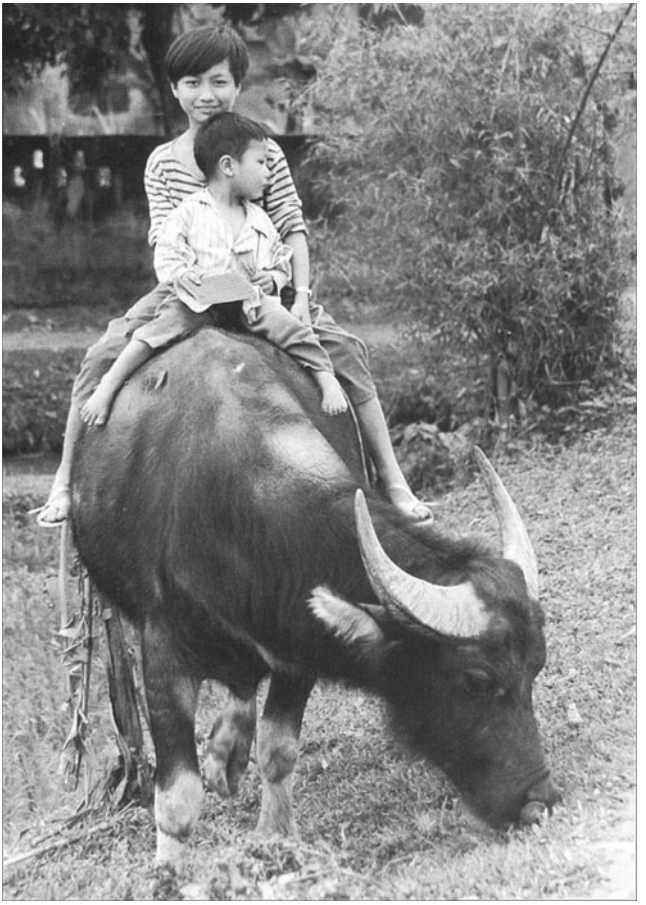
"Me?" she said, laughing. She shook her wrists, "No".

"And Senior Uncle?" I asked.

Once again she shook her wrists. "No. Only Uncle Last Gust. None of us you've spent time with here in Ban Long are members of the Communist Party."

A *xuong* passed, a woman paddling bow, a man in the stern. Between them, on a reed mat on the floor of the canoe, three little boys slept curled around each other like bananas from the same stalk. The cicadas buzzed; a tree frog chortled. Somewhere in the distance, an owl called *cu cu*, sounding its name in Vietnamese.

"Don't you understand, Little One?" Second Harvest said, gesturing toward the creek and the house with its ladder of light lying on the fresh water urns under the thatch eaves. "This is all we wanted."



Uncle Dutiful's grandsons at work tending the family's water buffalo.

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.

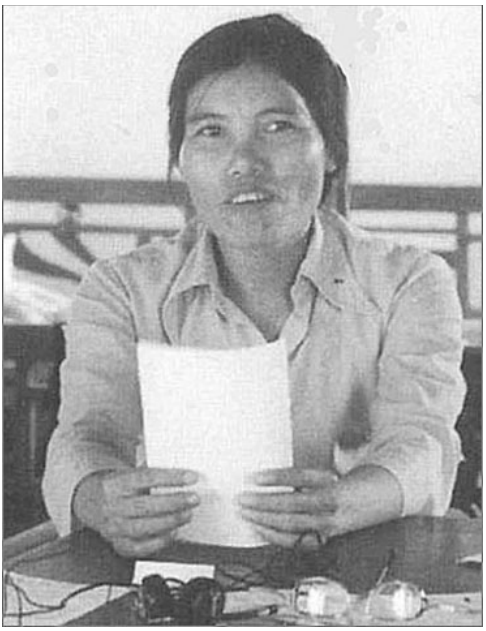
New Moon was about forty years old, with blunt hands and widespread eyes. Strands of hair slipping from her nape knot gave her an appearance of openness. "Oh no!" she protested, taking the bucket from me. "You must have hot water."

"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.

Photo: Ngo Vinh Long Collection

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

"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

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, H*u', 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 plower'. 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."

"Ruuuu, ruuuuuu!" 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 mooed. 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 mooed. 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."

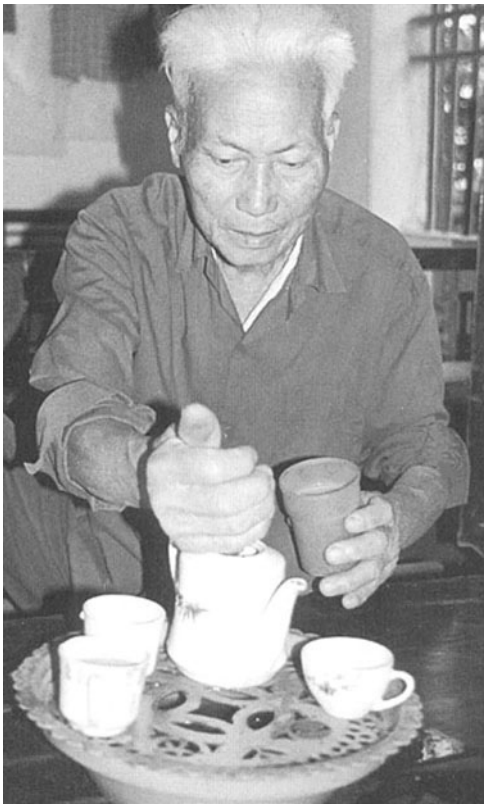
Uncle Firmness pulled a yellowed photograph from his shirt pocket and handed it to me. "The peasant guerrillas after a meeting with their district managers," he said.

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.

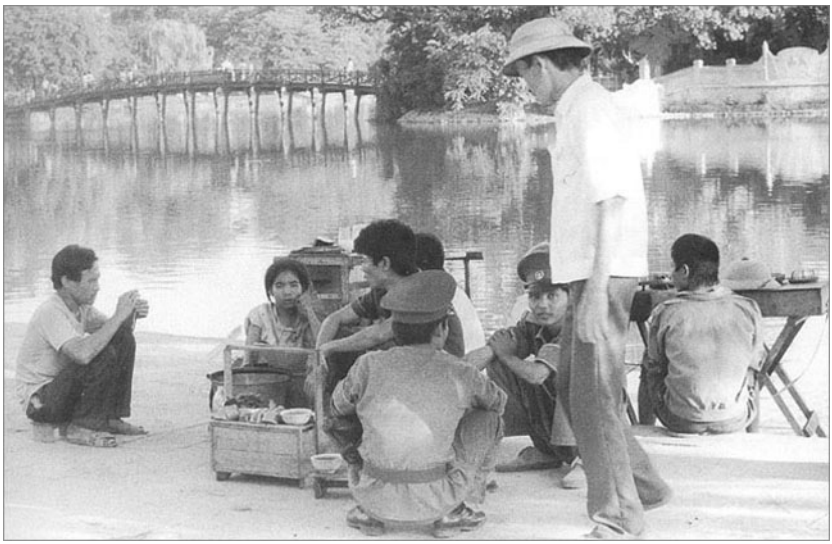
"Hang your bag over the handlebars!" shouted the vendor to my right. "Someone may steal it."

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,

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."

"We're so different," Aunt Gentleness said, touching her hair, which had strands of grey. "People my age, we've scarcely known peace."

A month later, when I left Ha Noi for the States, Aunt Gentleness gave me a Vietnamese cookbook to take to her granddaughter in America. For my father on his ninetieth birthday, she sent a youthful beret and lotus-seed candy. My gift was a photograph of her family taken on the anniversary of her husband's death.

In the photograph, Aunt Gentleness stands in the rice paddy where the fateful bomb exploded. She bends in prayer over a white crypt. Smoke from the incense sticks pressed between her palms drifts over her grown sons and daughters, their spouses and children. One grandchild is missing: She is somewhere in Massachusetts, far from her grandfather's grave.

Conversations during the fall of 1990 invariably came to silence. Always, out of the silence, came the same question.

"They won't bomb, will they?" Autumn asked at supper one evening at her house.

"Yes," I said. "They will."

"*Bom bi*," her husband, Vigilance, muttered. "How can the Americans bomb again?!"

"*Hrmmmmmmmmmm*," Autumn said, imitating a bomber. "Boom! And then the *bi* clatter." She held her thumb and forefinger an inch apart. "When the bombers came, we would jump into the manhole shelters. They had straw lids like the shield you tried on in Khanh Phu. Once, I found a piece of shrapnel stuck in the straw of my manhole lid. It had fallen from one of our own shells shot at a bomber." She held her thumb and forefinger two inches apart. "I was that far from death."

"Americans don't know about bombing," I said. "After all, I've never seen a *bi*."

"Oh!" Vigilance said. "I'll show you." He left the table and, pulling a box from under the nearby bed, rummaged. He handed me a tiny package. "The baby bombs each burst into hundreds of these *bi*."

Bi is the Vietnamese word for "marble", but what Vigilance set in my palm was no toy. Here was a dart the size of a straight pin but with flanges of steel.

"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."

Photo: 'Autumn'

Lady Borton and Second Harvest

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.

AFTER SORROW

Lady Borton

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