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Poems from COMING HOME IN VIET NAM

Edward Tick Ph.D.

Independent Practitioner and Scholardent

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Poetry From *Coming Home In Viet Nam*
With Photographs

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I. POEMS FOR MY VIETNAMESE DAUGHTER

Nguyen Thi Ngoc is my adopted daughter. She lives with her family in a poor and tiny hut in the small northern village of Hung Yen. Ngoc's older relatives fought for the North during the war and suffered much and their village was bombed. My American veteran and civilian travelers and I are the only Caucasians to ever visit. Each time we are welcomed as honored guests with love, generosity, gratitude, and great curiosity.

Ngoc and I are two people from cultures that had been in terrible warfare joining together in the community of the invaded to share, rebuild, heal, reconcile, and enter lifelong family relations. Ngoc proves to be an angel of mercy to our returning American veterans. She says, "Please keep bringing your veterans to Viet Nam so I can heal them with my love."

The following poems were written for Ngoc and about some of the experiences we have shared during these two decades of healing journeys I have led to Viet Nam. War alienates peoples and destroys communities. Efforts and relationships like these restore these critical components of our well-being so that we do indeed thrive, even after war.

THE RED BICYCLE

Ngoc and I met in 1995 at the 995th anniversary of the founding of Ha Noi. She interviewed me for her college newspaper at a literary celebration. The next day she rode for hours through thick traffic on the rickety bicycle that her aunt had used during the war to carry supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail from the north to their soldiers fighting in the south.

On this red bicycle –
wobbly wheels, broken spokes, rusted frame –
loaded with heavy sacks of rice and bullets
months to peddle south then back again
my aunt struggled down muddy trails.

On this red bicycle
my thin legs and small hands steer and strain for hours
under my load of schoolbooks, questions, hope,
down strange streets, between cyclos, motorbikes, fumes
to be sure I do not miss you.



Bicycles continue to be a major source of transportation in peacetime Viet Nam

HUNG YEN

Ngoc's northern village about 2 hours outside Ha Noi

Midnight

In this crumbling stone hotel
we are tonight's only guests.
Through its tall archway
outside our shuttered windows
fog and cricket song.

In The Dark

The only moon this black and heavy night
is a distant farmer's bobbing lantern
as he picks his way through mud and dung

Dawn

Sky, mist, rice paddies
a single sheet of dull gray
wrinkled by white ducks

Landscape

Gray clouds, gray buildings
horizon to horizon
black eyes, sunlight smiles



Ngoc with an elderly recipient of our philanthropy

LANGUAGE LESSONS

The broad sky and wide river
fade into a single blanket of darkness.

The steaming air cools.

Outside our window the neon lights and blaring music
of a reborn Hue awaken.

We pull the blanket over our toes
and snuggle into the deepening dark.

We open our volume of prison poetry
written by Bac Ho* while encased in hunger and gloom.

We read of labor and no water, lost teeth and friends
but laugh as she cannot pronounce "z"
and I choke on "ng."

Together in the small quiet room our prison bars
are thrown open. A dawn bursts.

We share a family blanket that is all we need
to chase the shadows of history from our hearts.

*Bac means uncle in Vietnamese. The Vietnamese people lovingly refer to Ho Chi Minh as Bac Ho.



Ngoc with American veteran Mike “Magoo” and my niece and her best friend Ut Quyen, learning each other’s ways

LETTER TO MY DAUGHTER AFTER VISITING MY LAI

Yesterday we walked side by side
and hand in hand through the petrified prints
of the bare feet of fleeing mothers and children
and the stomping combat boots of marauding GIs.

We stood in the kitchen of ghosts.

We hugged before the hats, shirts, canes
of those who no longer use them.

I felt such shame I could no longer feel
worthy to be your father. But all you did
was wipe my tears and call me *Bo*.

That cane, that hat, were worn by an old man
who walked into your dreams last night.

Terror in his eyes, last prayer on his lips,
he came with the one who married him forever –
the GI you saw beating, beating, beating
his head, his face, his arms, his body.

This morning your own head screams with his pain.

His eyes are behind your eyes.

This morning as my fingers try to squeeze your ache away

I see his wounds, his blood,
breaking through your gentle almond face.

You cannot stand the pain of your grandfather
or the long suffering of your country.

I cannot stand the pain of my daughter
or the endless shame of my nation.

Side by side, hand in hand,
we carry this pain together.

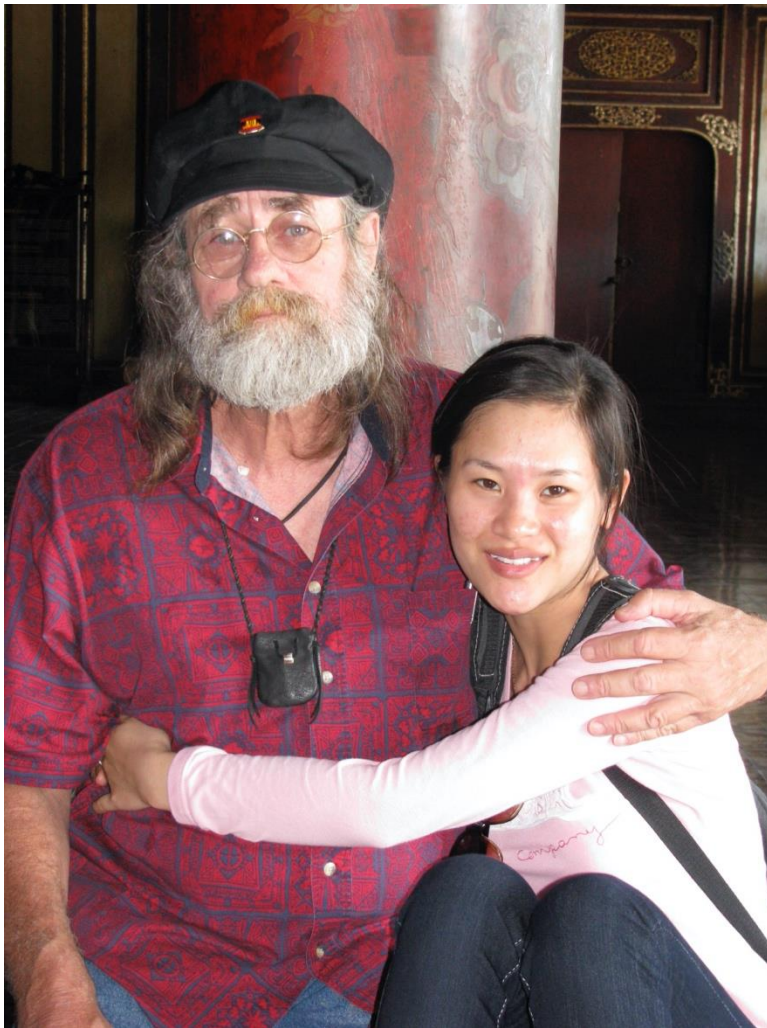
Side by side, incense between our palms,
we bow as one before the altar of the dead.



Thich Quang Duc Memorial on the street where he immolated himself in Sai Gon
in protest against the war and oppression of Buddhism

TEARS

My almond-eyed daughter
wipes the tears
of the sleep-sour veteran
then wrings her handkerchief
into the reservoir
in the heart of the world.



HIGH AND DRY

Together in Hoi An

The Dragon's mouth spurts, drawing
a soaking gauze curtain between us
and the teeming world beyond.

The Thu Bon River overflows its banks.

Sampans and tour boats float above the street.

The waters climb the stairs below
while hosts and helpers mop and bail.

My daughter and I sit on a terrace,
sipping mango, sharing rice and soup,
a simple meal on simple wooden planks.

We are dry behind the gauze and under a roof
with leaks that drip and plop beside us.

We are high for this single hour above these waters
that bring endless toil to the human flood
and tears from its endless surge.



Ngoc and Me (mother) Kate

ON LANG CO BEACH

My large bony white fingers
knit with your small soft yellow ones.
We twine a multicolored knot
as we walk through the scalding sands
toward the ocean's foam.
A butterfly leads the way.



II. THE FAVORITE POEMS OF WAR SURVIVORS IN VIET NAM

SONG OF THE VIETNAMESE WOMEN

I will grow my rice beside your craters.

I will place my body before your tanks.

I will give my hands to stop your helicopters

and give my legs to cut your wire.

I will mark your minefields to protect my village

and hoe all day and stand watch all night.

I will dig and chop and lash and haul

to open jungle trails to foil you.

I will go without rice so our fighters may eat

and sing in the foxholes beneath your burning rain.

I will wrap myself in chains to show what you do

and bandage your wounds when you call into my arms.

I will give my father, my husband, my sons,

and bless their leaving though I never see them again.

I will pray you return to your mother's arms

and forgive you though you take everything I have.

I will feed my men whose hands you have shorn.

I will carry my sisters through the bleeding night.

I will tend my buffalo as the bombs fall down
and rebuild my dykes after you have blown them.

I will aim my plow as straight as my gun
and plant young rice and forge new bullets.

Long after you are gone and have forgotten me

I will give my limbs to defuse your mines.

Made for feeding, caressing, sowing,
made for nursing, carrying, caring,
made for planting, harvesting, cooking,
made for threading, weaving, sewing,
made for singing, dancing, laughing,
made for acting, playing, loving,
come here with hatred and I will don
the helmet, the scope, the rifle, the bomb.

I am grandmother, mother, wife, daughter.

Make me angry and you cannot be right.

Make me mad and you cannot be just.

Make me rebel though all I am
wishes to birth and plant and grow;

make me resist and you show your heart.

Make me fight and you cannot win.

Make me stand and you will fall.

Return in peace and show me your wounds

and I will bind them with love and call you brother.



The author and his wife Kate Dahlstedt – the first westerners to visit this remote northern village. Every one of these women and men are noncombatant veterans of the war. “Every story is all our stories.

THE FAVORITE POEM AMONG AMERICAN VETERANS

POINT OF VIEW

A weary American Marine asked Nguyen Tam Ho, "Mr. Tiger," a veteran of 25 years of combat against three invading nations, why he did not suffer survivor's guilt as do Americans. "I am sad but not guilty," he answered. "Perhaps the bullet is the messenger of karma. Learn to see our lives from the point of view of the bullet."

From the point of view of the bullet one will live, one will die.

From the point of view of a man my life is his death.

From the point of view of the bullet you took the right step, he the wrong.

From the point of view of a man his death should have been mine.

From the point of view of the bullet fate is a swift straight shot.

From the point of view of a man fate is a fickle whore.

From the point of view of the bullet I am a servant of destiny.

From the point of view of a man destiny is a greedy whore.

From the point of view of the bullet his destiny was complete.

From the point of view of a man he left me to live for two.

From the point of view of the bullet you survived to finish your mission.

From the point of view of a man I wish I had died instead.

From the point of view of the bullet your service was not your mission.

From the point of view of a man my time in hell was enough.

From the point of view of the bullet life wants more from you.

From the point of view of a man tell me what I must do.

From the point of view of the bullet live for all who died.

From the point of view of a man too many lamenting ghosts.

From the point of view of the bullet those voices are now your voice.

From the point of view of a man those voices are now my voice.



Mr. Tiger, center, in brotherhood with American, Southern ARVN, and Viet Cong veterans