Occasional Papers

([ON])

Practice & Form

Tea in Tuy Hoa

A Writer Makes Peace with the Vietnam War

Lary Bloom

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Welcome Table Press

Tea in Tuy Hoa [†]

A review of a war and its literature might logically begin in what generals refer to as a theater of war, but as I have always preferred a different kind of theater, I'll start on Broadway.

In the spring of 2008, I bought tickets for the revival of the musical South Pacific. I had high expectations. The reviews had been glowing. More than that, I'd known the Rodgers and Hammerstein score all of my life—as a kid delivering newspapers, I sunk all my profits into piano sheet music of favorite shows. Even so, I was unprepared for what I saw that afternoon at Lincoln Center. We had just taken our seats when I noticed the honor the production paid to the author of the World War II novel on which the musical was based. A scrim hid the proscenium, and on it, reproduced in typewriter script, were the first three paragraphs of Tales of the South Pacific, by James Michener. The first sentence breaks rules of writing that I and other professors teach in creative writing programs: It is tentative, lacking authority. It hints at no story. And yet it made me weep. "I wish I could tell you about the South Pacific," Michener writes.

Once upon a wartime, long before Americans became familiar with names such as Fallujah or Kabul or the Taliban or Osama bin Laden, other references fed the daily news: Ho Chi Minh, the DMZ, the Viet Cong, the Tet Offensive, the doomed hamlet of My Lai.

Vietnam. The very name transcends identity and geography, and still defies convenient explanation. For veterans of the war, and citizens who lived through that period—who remember the bravado, the deceits, and the deaths; who remember "America, love it or leave it," or the four dead students at Kent State (as if the killing by Ohio National Guardsman of Allison Krause, Jeffrey Miller, Sandra Scheuer, and William Schroeder happened yesterday and not May 4, 1970)—Vietnam remains a raw subject. As CBS correspondent Morley Safer writes in Flashbacks, his account of returning to scenes from which he reported the war,

> Each witness to Vietnam has his own sets of "flashbacks," his own scrapbook of conflicting verities. As different as each is, they all seem to point to the same conclusion: We are all still imprisoned, in one way or another, by that place and time.

Writers who participated in the Vietnam War carry a special burden, because we are obliged to take on, and to try to illuminate, what nonwriters can't. And yet, the question I kept asking myself over decades: where was my own commentary?

By the spring of 2008, I could point to a few literary accomplishments. I had written nonfiction books and published many articles about difficult subjects. As a magazine editor and teacher, I had counseled hundreds of writers on how to address the deep scars of their lives. I had, on occasion, addressed some of my own wounds but never from that seemingly indefinable war. To me, this represented abject failure.

Where was the narrative that captured the bizarre juxtapositions of my own experience, not only in country in 1966 and 1967 but ever since in persistent nightmares, and by the fact that I survived the war when so many hadn't? Indeed, I had stories to tell.

My childhood friend and alter ego grew up in the same neighborhood and studied with me at the same Hebrew school. Years later, Harmon Polster and I both went off to Southeast Asia. Only one of us

[†] Tuy Hoa is pronounced, roughly, twee-whah (listen at: www.forvo.com/word/tuy_hòa/#vi) .

came home, the other left behind, somewhere near the Ho Chi Minh Trail. During four decades, no one knew whether he was alive or dead. Not his wife, not his parents, not his sister, not the US government, and certainly not I. Not for a long period. Not until it was far too late.

Many writers inspired me, applying art to an inhumane phenomenon. "I wish I could tell you about the South Pacific," James Michener writes, and then he proceeds to do just that. "I wish I could tell you about Vietnam," and hope that I may do so.

But I do it with a caveat. In his collection of Vietnam tales, The Things They Carried, author Tim O'Brien includes a section called "How To Tell a True War Story." He writes,

> A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing things that men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude. There is no virtue whatsoever.

O'Brien here is at his darkest, taking on jingoism and what we have come lately to call wars of choice, and the deadly garden path down which we continue to send our young men and women. And yet he is onto something more significant.

One of the duties of the writer is not merely to document what has happened but to affect the public discourse, to open eyes. For what is the point of writing unless, as reward for subjecting yourself to persistent rejection, you perform your own form of rejection—challenging the common wisdom and adding something new to the reading experience: your voice, your passion, your singular point of view, your sense of craft, because no one else on earth has those commodities in the combinations that you do.

The writer must press on, even if no one is paying attention. Irony number one—for those who are counting—is illuminated in a poem from Hayden Carruth, who laments his lack of influence as a writer. In this particular poem, Carruth shows that the marketplace and convenient ideas have nothing to do with real writing, and that no matter the obstacle, the writer persists.

On Being Asked to Write a Poem Against the Vietnam War

Well I have in fact
more than one and I'll
tell you this too

I wrote one against
Algeria that nightmare
and another against

Korea and another
against the one
I was in

and I don't remember
how many against
the three

when I was a boy
Abyssinia Spain and
Harlan County

and not one
breath was restored
to one

shattered throat
mans womans or childs
not one not

one
but death went on and on
never looking aside

except now and then like a child,
with a furtive half-smile,
to make sure I was noticing.

How did I notice? I was a high-school senior the day Robert Frost opened the inauguration ceremony for John F. Kennedy. I heard the very new president say, "Let every nation know…that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty."

It sounded terrific to me. John F. Kennedy seemed so determined, so statesmanlike, so Harvard. Yes, we will bear any burden. But then something changed. The burdens we knew—the threat of nuclear weapons—were replaced by something more subtle, too subtle for convenient categorization, and yet devastating all the same.

Two years after Kennedy's speech, I watched film footage from Vietnam, shown on the nightly news. A Buddhist monk had set himself ablaze in the heart of Saigon. It seemed unfathomable to me. Eventually, the newspapers were full of political and military arguments—the North against the South, communism against democracy, the Domino Theory, the Balance of Power. It was tragic oversimplification, the kind of sloganeering pioneered by those who see only in black and white, and an obfuscation of the real issues of occupation and nationalism, of religious and political self-determination, and how it came down in the streets, where burnings in protest proliferated. As spectacle of protest, self-immolation has no rival, as described by the Vietnamese poet Trinh T. Minh-Ha in her "Love of Another":

Crossed feet joined hands
a man without words without cries
confesses his flame on the screen
behind the fire the witnesses watch.
The flickering in the last tongue of flame
for awhile still it burns

the living torch of an entire people
of an entire people reduced to silence.

At Ohio University's graduation in 1965, secretary of defense Robert S. MacNamara was awarded an honorary doctorate in humane letters at the same time he was sending American troops to their deaths. I had earned a commission in the United States Army, as a second lieutenant in the Quartermaster Corps, a distinction that promptly provided an all-expense-paid, twelve-month trip to a place that one of my history professors then referred to as French Indochina.

By the time of my commission, the United States Congress had already passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, based on lies—on false information of attacks on an American ship. It was another Remember the Maine, or a precursor to the certitude that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Or the very idea that because we're Americans, we can do anything we want at any time we want to do it. The poet D. C. Berry describes it this way:

Nevertheless, President Johnson
gets sixteen wise men. They push
two long tables together, two oak tables
mightier than aircraft carriers. The guns
are a dozen ashtrays.
It's the year of the dragon—time, dammit, to nail
Ho's pecker to the wall, boys, and do it today.
My fellow Americans, my fellow teenagers of the world,
let's rock. We can't let Uncle Ho shoot the bird
at John Wayne.

And so I went, in the fall of 1966, in the great buildup of American troops, sent with my supply unit to the provincial capital of Tuy Hoa, where, it was reported, the Viet Cong held sway on its outskirts. There, I was at first the leader of the bakery platoon. Yes, what, Daddy, did you do in the war? Well, at first, I was in charge of forty-four bakers, who made 7,500 loaves of bread every twenty-four hours. Do you want to know the ingredients in case you must some day feed an army? Take this down: 250 pounds of flour, 500 gallons of water, twenty-seven pounds of sugar, seventeen pounds of shortening, eleven pounds of salt, three pounds of yeast. One egg.

I lived in a tent with Second Lieutenant Saul F. Broudy, a singer of antiwar songs. At night, monsoon rains pounded the canvas, giving us a great sense of security, as though no members of the Viet Cong were likely to brave these same storms, or as if a sign had been hung: War Postponed on Account of Rain. Saul sang songs he had written himself, and others. His "Green T-Shirt Blues" (all armed-forces personnel were required to dye their underwear) became for me a lasting anthem. Its refrain lamented,

I got the Green T-Shirt Blues
Way down, way down, way down
At the bottom of my com-com-combat boots
And if I ever get out of this place
I'm gonna go back and join the human race
Lord, Lord, Lord, I got the Green T-Shirt Blues.

Oddly, it was a tune that, twenty years later, at a folk-music festival in Connecticut, I had to teach to its composer—Saul had no recollection of "Green T-Shirt Blues," or having written it. Then, in 1992, he sang his rediscovered tune on a CD titled In Country.

Saul was versed in pidgin Vietnamese. The song "Saigon Warrior," also on that CD, is about officers who push papers all day and have no idea about what is going on in the field:

> Singing dinky dau, dinky dau, dinky dau doo,
> With their hands in their pockets and nothing to do.
> When this war is over and you all go home
> You'll meet Saigon warriors wherever you roam
> You'll know them by sight and they're not in your class
> They don't have diarrhea, just a big chairborne ass!

Dinky dau doo is a corruption of the Vietnamese phrase dien cai dau, which means "crazy in the head." It was a phrase that the poet Yusef Komunyakaa, also a veteran of that war, chose for the title of his Vietnam collection. In it, he pointed out the daily juxtapositions—what poets do especially well—juxtapositions that I knew but could not yet express.

You remember the image perhaps: A young girl unknown to us at the time, but whose name is later revealed, Kim Phuc. She is eight years old, running down the highway with other boys and girls, running naked, crying, burning from napalm that was dropped on her village. It was this photo as much as any other that seemed to symbolize what we had gotten ourselves into, and what we had done. But listen, for a moment, to the poet's account of such scenes, Komunyakaa's eloquence in "You and I Are Disappearing," in which he points out that along with the child, we are victims, too:

> The cry I bring down from the hills
> belongs to a girl still burning
> inside my head. At daybreak
> she burns like a piece of paper.
> She burns like a fox-fire
> in a thigh-shaped valley.
> A skirt of flames
> dances around her
> at dusk.
> We stand with our hands
> hanging at our side
> while she burns
> like a sack of dry ice.
> She burns like oil on water.
> She burns like a cattail torch
> dipped in gasoline.
> She glows like the fat tip
> of a banker's cigar,
> silent as quicksilver.

Like most of the written work about Vietnam that sunk into the public consciousness, Komunyakaa's poem was written well after the peace accord was signed in Paris.

By the fall of 1966, the only book of any wide circulation that had captured the national imagination about Vietnam—which then seemed a winnable war—was Robin Moore's The Green Berets, a work that fed the patriotic fervor of American exceptionalism and its constant companion, bigotry.

The book was made into a film with John Wayne as its star. Wayne was the Dick Cheney of his day—the hawk, the patriot, who fought hard to get deferments during World War II, claiming economic hardship, but who nevertheless was thought of universally as courageous. Like Dick Cheney, John Wayne never knew what it was like to have a real bullet fired at him. But, in the example of John Wayne, you have the real problem—perception, magnetic power of personality, leaving truth somewhere behind in the tropical dust.

In his Vietnam memoir, In Pharoah's Army, Tobias Wolff writes,

> We were lied to, and knew it. Misinformed innocently, and by design. Confused. We couldn't trust our own intelligence, in any sense of that word. Rumors, lies, apprehension, distant report, wishful thinking, such were the lenses through which we regarded this terra infirma.…Where were we, really? Who was who and what was what?

It was so hard to know. This was an underlying theme in the most ambitious nonfiction book to emerge from the Vietnam War. Neil Sheehan spent sixteen years investigating the life and death of Army Lt. Col. John Paul Vann, who spent much of a decade in Vietnam, and who at first believed in the war, but then began standing up to the military and to others in power who couldn't see the inevitable dangers or that indiscriminate bombing of populated areas was inhumane and self-defeating. The book that Sheehan produced, A Bright Shining Lie, underscores exactly what we're up against when policy makers remain willingly ignorant of reality, a circumstance that, alas, never disappears.

The themes in A Bright Shining Lie echo in other memoirs and novels that bring readers into the field. In A Rumor of War, for example, Philip Caputo writes,

> The war was mostly a matter of enduring weeks of expectant waiting and, at random intervals, of conducting vicious manhunts through jungles and swamps where snipers harassed us constantly and booby traps cut us down one by one.

Michael Herr's Dispatches is considered by some to be the most eloquent book on war ever written. Here he describes a marine who represented the disillusionment of the young men who'd wrapped themselves in the flag:

> He had one of those faces, I saw that face at least a thousand times at a hundred bases and camps, all the youth sucked out of his eyes, the color drawn from his skin, cold white lips, you knew he wouldn't wait for any of it to come back. Life had made him old. These were the faces of boys whose lives seemed to have backed up on them.

I was struck, too, by the lyricism of Tim O'Brien, who in his very idea—the things that GIs carried—tells a larger story through a kind of human inventory (it is called fiction, because we need labels, but it was also true):

> They carried stationery and pencils and papers. They carried Sterno, safety pins, trip flares, signal flares, spools of wire, razor blades, chewing tobacco, statuettes of the smiling Buddha,

> candles, grease pencils, fingernail clippers.… Twice a week, when the resupply choppers came in, they carried hot chow in green mermite cans and large canvas bags filled with iced beer and soda pop. Mitchell Sanders carried starched Tiger fatigues for special occasions. Henry Dobbins carried Black Flag insecticide. Dave Jensen carried empty sandbags that could be filled at night for added protection. Lee Strunk carried tanning lotion. Some things they carried in common. They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear. Often, they carried each other, the wounded or weak. They carried infections. They carried basketballs, Vietnamese-English dictionaries, rank insignias, Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts, plastic cards imprinted with the Code of Conduct. They carried malaria and dysentery. They carried lice and ringworm and leeches and rice paddy algae and various rots and molds. They carried the land itself—Vietnam, the place, the soil—a powdery red dust that covered their boots and fatigues and faces. They carried the sky.

O'Brien has a gift for describing communal experience. But notice the similar litany in a very different kind of narrative—Ron Kovic's memoir, Born on the Fourth of July, the screed of an entirely broken man who hasn't yet reached his twenty-second birthday:

> Oh God, what is happening to me? I want to get out of this place! All these broken men twisted in these bed sheets.…This isn't like the poster down at the post office where the guy stood with shiny shoes; this is a concentration camp.…Nobody wants to know that I can't fuck anymore. I will never go up to them and tell them that I have this big yellow rubber thing sticking in my penis, attached to the bag on the side of my leg. I am afraid of letting them know about how lonely and scared I have become thinking about this wound. It is like some kind of numb twilight zone to me. I am angry and want to kill everyone—all the volunteers and the priests and the pretty girls with the tight short skirts. I am twenty-one, and the whole thing is shot, gone forever. There is no real healing left anymore, everything that is going to heal has healed already and now I am left with the corpse, the living dead man, the man with the numb legs,... the sexless man, the sexless man, the man who can't make children, the man who can't stand, the man who can't walk, the angry lonely man, the bitter man with the nightmares, the murder man, the man who cries in the shower.

While these authors, and others, portrayed the absurd life in the field, many elements of the war were still missing from the literature—including my experience as a supply officer, and my friend Harmon's experience as an Air Force navigator on an F-4 fighter jet, a so-called "backseater," who on the night of July 15, 1969, the very night that the Apollo 11 crew rocketed toward the moon, took off on a much different mission from Cu Chi Air Base. The plane was to seek out a spot on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos suspected of being a vital supply route for the North Vietnamese army and Viet Cong. The mission was referred to, in Air Force lingo, as Cobra 61.

I don't know if I would have recognized Harmon that night—my memory was of a boy with so many freckles, he even had them on his lips—a boy with an eternal optimism. Everything, in his view, was possible. By his fiftieth mission, he'd admitted his disillusionment to his wife, Kay. Yet, he went ahead, as always. In the minutes before takeoff, he walked out to the aircraft with Captain Michael S. Walker, his pilot. The things Harmon carried in his flight bag: a helmet, an oxygen mask, flares, a pistol, a drinking flask filled with water, compasses, a radio, a beeper, and other gear. He checked the F-4D Phantom jet's arsenal: the five-hundred-pound bombs attached to the wings, along with an array of rockets and air-to-

ground missiles. Then he climbed the six rungs into his tight quarters to prepare his "nest." He plugged the attachment of his G-suit, the gear that would regulate oxygen, so that despite the pull of gravity at high speeds, there would be enough blood in his upper extremities to keep him from passing out. He connected his torso harness, the device that connected him to his seat. It contained a parachute so that, should the occasion arise, the seat, along with the navigator, would fly from the cockpit to, perhaps, safety. Harmon then attached his kneeboard, on which he clipped the maps necessary for the night's travel and one unauthorized item—a photograph of Kay, newly crowned in the Miss Cleveland beauty pageant. He checked the instruments in front of him. When he was settled in, Harmon tapped Captain Walker on the shoulder, and the two were off on Cu Chi's single runway. Fifteen minutes later, at 10:00 PM, the pilot of the other jet on the mission saw a ball of flames—Harmon's aircraft exploding. There was no indication whether the crew had bailed out—whether they had been killed, or landed safely, or had been taken prisoner. No hint of their fate, as there had been no hint of more than two thousand others lost on combat missions during the war.

By that time, my tour had ended. And the danger I had faced, while real, was nowhere near what Harmon and his peers endured on a nightly basis.

I was made the food supply officer for the middle section of Vietnam after my predecessor was fired for refusing to drive through dangerous territory. "I might get my ass shot off," he had complained to the captain, to which the captain responded, "I don't care if you do."

The job I inherited had other pressures, including accounting for and delivering an enormous amount of food to more than 100,000 American, Australian, and South Korean troops. The idea was to attempt to provide as much fresh meat and produce as possible, most of it shipped from the US, but augmented by what I could purchase locally.

One day, during a produce shortage, I took a convoy of trucks to downtown Tuy Hoa to buy vegetables in bulk at the outdoor market, a place of more than one hundred vendors, mostly barefoot women in peasant outfits who peddled, along with familiar goods, many I'd never tasted: mangosteens, milk apples, Asian pears, dragon fruit—all delicious. None of the vendors, however, had sufficient quantities, and I was resigned to failure until I came across a woman who, unlike the others, was dressed more formally—in the traditional ao dai worn typically by the educated class.

"Lieutenant," she said in perfect English, "how may I help you?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "I suppose you can sell me some fruits and vegetables."

"Please sit down." She pointed to a chair near her display. "Would you like some tea?"

"That would be nice."

"What do you take in it?" As she sat, she adjusted the bottom of her ao dai so that the edges would fall gracefully to the ground. She poured the tea from a silver pot. I noticed her long raven hair and its three strands of gray.

"Do you get your crops locally?" I asked, not really to know but, for the moment, knocked off kilter by my hostess's charm.

"Most of our fruits and vegetables are from Dalat. You know Dalat?"

"I've heard of it."

"It is beautiful there, Lieutenant."

"It is beautiful everywhere," I said, remembering my first shock of war. I'd had in my mind a picture of a hellhole, but as I stood on the deck of the ship that brought me to Southeast Asia and when it anchored, I saw the white sands, the palm trees and, behind them, the majestic heights. A tropical paradise, it had seemed to me.

"But Dalat is special," she said.

"How so?"

"Central highlands. You should go, see for yourself, Lieutenant, the hills and the fertile soil, and the French influence. You speak French?"

"Only high-school French, and bad high-school French at that."

"The emperor's summer palace is still there, in Dalat."

Vietnamese history remained a vague notion.

Then I explained our predicament, the shortage of fresh produce.

A pained expression washed across her face.

"I am short myself on supplies," she said. "Still waiting for watermelon, pineapples, bananas, peppers, and cabbage—the war, you know."

"Yes," I said, nodding. "The war."

"But I can sell you some bean sprouts," she said.

"Bean sprouts?"

"Good for pho, salads, noodle dishes."

"Yes," I said, though I didn't know. She spoke to one of her assistants in Vietnamese, and in a few moments the assistant produced a small container of sprouts.

"Would you like to taste, Lieutenant?"

I could see instantly these were different from anything I'd ever seen. Thick, and long. When I ate one, I was astonished by the flavor. But bean sprouts. Please. The mess sergeants who would receive them, and who already had the lowest possible opinions of lieutenants, would not be charitable in their comments. Even so, it was the best I could do.

"Wonderful," I said. "How much do you have?"

"About 150 kilos."

"Good, I'll take them."

"But that's my whole supply."

"Don't worry. You'll be paid within the week. I guarantee it."

"Would you like more tea, Lieutenant?" she asked.

In the decades that have passed, I have often thought of the woman who sold me bean sprouts. As much as anyone, she exemplified the humanity of a country that we had dehumanized. A month after my meeting with her at the market, she came to the food supply yard, asking to see me. When we sat down, I had no tea to offer her. "Lieutenant, do you think I will ever be paid?" she asked.

I don't know when, or if, she got her money. I was transferred soon thereafter. And, in the years that followed, I knew that if I ever returned to Vietnam, I would try to find her and offer my lame apologies for my failure to deliver on a promise.

There are other images and memories, too, that have lingered, scenes I have written that are missing from most Vietnam war stories—including overblown accounts of bravery in applications for medals, or stories of escorting stars of the stage and screen on USO tours.

But what weighed on me was Harmon—and how his family had been so damaged by the deepening mystery of his disappearance. I wanted to write about it. But how? I couldn't go alone to the hills of Laos—no way to find the wreckage. The American military, which for the last forty years has sent out forensic teams to remote spots to recover remains, was not eager to escort me there. How could I use my skills as a writer to call attention to the problem of the missing?

We writers must use our weapons—our passions for just the right word, the right image, the small moment of truth that can speak to the larger point. The fiddler on the roof scratching out a simple tune. Something that touches. That moves. That changes things, for somebody, somewhere.

Teaching memoir, I often use the word immersion. There is no dabbling in memory. There is no easy path to literary richness. It takes hard work, and commitment. As Anthony Trollope says, "Inspiration is for amateurs." And so I traveled to California to see Harmon's wife, Kay, and to Florida to see his sister, Jackie. I talked to his old childhood friends. I went to Washington, DC, to the annual meeting of the National League of Families of POW/MIA. I made requests to the Library of Congress for all formerly top-secret documents pertaining to the missing crewmembers of Cobra 61 on the night of July 15, 1969. I read books about conspiracy theories, and sightings of prisoners of war in enemy hands, and theories about cover-ups, and prisoners of war never accounted for—theories in which Harmon's wife, Kay, believed.

But what to do with it all? Investigation? Unlikely. Nonfiction narrative? No. Fiction. Perhaps? Nothing seemed ideal.

Part of the answer came from a panel discussion I moderated at Eastern Connecticut State University. One of the speakers was Larry Heinemann, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, Paco's Story. That story shows a different way to document the war, using a foot in the present and flashbacks.

When I met Harmon's widow—and saw for myself the way her own gaze still clung to the past, to the hope and belief that after four decades, her husband was still alive, perhaps being held as a prisoner of war in some old Soviet gulag—I knew this was my story, especially when I discovered that Harmon's sister had kept the old tape recordings that Harmon had sent to Kay.

Finally, I saw the answer—the way to bring this story to life, to show the plight of those who, even after all these decades, carry war wounds with them. But I knew that my own story of war also had to be a part of it in some way—because my experience, played off of Harmon's, showed the extremes of that war.

The story I would tell affected only a few people. But I had to keep reminding myself that it was a worthy enterprise—that the small story stood for a much larger tragedy. I thought, too, about Michener's book, and the musical play adapted from it.

World War II was, from a numeric point of view, by far the most catastrophic event in human history, resulting in the death of more than fifty-five million people through one form or another. In Tales of the South Pacific, in all of Michener's 384 pages—only one of the leading characters is killed: Lieutenant Cable, a young officer in the Army Air Corps (precursor of the Air Force). When it happens, readers are devastated. As remarkable a number as fifty-five million is, it is impersonal. But we can fully understand the death of one. The story of one. That's the lesson for the writer: one can stand for fifty-five million, if the story is eloquent and provides proper context. Of course, I saw that Michener, in documenting the loss of just one—and a young Army Air Corps officer at that—was speaking directly to me, friend of a lost, young Air Force officer.

All of this drove me at last to write the play Wild Black Yonder, inspired by the case and by my visits to members of Harmon's family and all I had learned and read—capturing three days in the life of a former beauty queen who has lived her life through fantasy, and is confronted by a writer who knows he has failed in his duty to research and report the best story of his life.

The tapes that Harmon sent to Kay gave me a way to make him real on stage, though the time of the action was 2009. The flashbacks consisted of him at his bunk, dictating into his recorder in real time—the days leading up to Cobra 61, and his descent into disillusionment.

The play premiered at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center in Old Saybrook, Connecticut. It addressed, finally, my duty. As I stood in the back of the theater during all the performances, pacing,

hoping the prop phone would ring at the right time and the stage lights would go on when they were supposed to, I nevertheless felt a great sense of satisfaction. Here was a captive audience, laughing, sobbing—in short, reacting to my own fiddling on a roof.

But the real ending of the whole story was yet to come. As the play was in the works, two bones were discovered on a hillside in Laos. They were sent to military labs, and tested for DNA. They were, indeed, the remains of my friend Harmon Polster. I learned this in an e-mail message from Kay. The subject field read, "The end of the line."

But even after visiting the new grave at Arlington, and having staged the play inspired by the case, there was something else I knew I had to do—I had to go back to Vietnam, to create, in a sense, a bookend to the narrative that had been so central to my life.

In January 2011, my wife, Suzanne, and I embarked on a trip along the coast on our own, taking planes, buses, trains, and cyclos. And so, to conclude this survey of literature and folly, I offer three brief contemporary scenes.

1. Ho Chi Minh City, January 7, 2011

The young curator at the War Remnants Museum wears a luminous smile and a green and blue ao dai. "I am Ngan," she says when I ask her name. "I work here seven years."

That is long enough for Ngan to know by heart the most damning exhibits of what was formerly called the Museum of American War Crimes. "There is no museum in the world like this," Ngan says. I don't mention that the exhibits I have just seen, though accurate in their detail, make no attempt at context—this museum features, obviously, a history written by victors, cleansed of perspective, or even of Ho Chi Minh's admission that inhumane acts were committed by his own forces. There is no point in bringing this up. After all, there is no moral equivalency. It is their country, not ours, to do with as they see fit.

And, alas, My Lai is My Lai. For his crime—the massacre of scores of women and children (some of them infants)—Lieutenant William Calley spent but three years in prison. In essence, the US Infantry lieutenant got away with murder. The chain of command above Calley got away with murder. A great nation got away with murder. And here I am, a former officer in that great nation's army, talking with a beautiful young woman born long after any of this. What have I gotten away with?

"And you have been to our country before?" Ngan asks. Aha.

"Yes." I pause. "It was forty-five years ago."

The math is not hard to do. So I figure I should clarify my role in the war and take myself off the hook. "I was in supply."

She looks at me curiously. The smile remains luminous, but its character changes slightly. She tilts her face, as if to gain a reliable measure of my veracity. Then she says, "All American veterans I meet. Nobody killed anybody. All in supply, or nurses, or dropped food or medicine from helicopter. Never once people say, 'I'm sorry.'"

2. Hue, January 9, 2011

Suzanne and I talk, through interpreters, to families who live in very modest houses along a tributary of the Perfume River. In one of the houses, we speak to members of four generations. They show us around, including the corner where they keep their hen, who has just provided a fresh egg. And their most prized possession, a water faucet. For the first time in their lives, they can wash their vegetables and fish with

fresh water, not the polluted river water. That they can do this is the result of the work and generosity of a group called the DOVE Fund, organized by former American servicemen, veterans of the Vietnam War.

Later that day, our guides take us to two schools that the DOVE Fund had paid for. These, among the forty-two this remarkable group has built in the last decade are one way to say, "I'm sorry."

3. Tuy Hoa Bus Station, January 16, 2011

The final story shows that if, as a writer, you open yourself to all possibilities, your theme, no matter how well developed, will be undermined by the unexpected, the inexplicable.

The gray-haired man in a blue shirt and dark trousers looks to be about my age, perhaps a little older. He senses our confusion over which bus in the parking lot is the right one to board.

"Where you go?" he asks. I see that he also has suitcases.

"We have tickets for Nha Trang," I say. There is only one scheduled bus each day from the provincial capital of Tuy Hoa down Highway 1 to the resort city.

"You stay Tuy Hoa?" he asks. There is a look of incredulity in his eyes. American tourists, clearly, haven't circled Tuy Hoa on their maps. Even the Lonely Planet guide, our travel bible, says, "Most people give it a pass."

I tell the man we had stayed for two days, without going into why, or saying anything about my search for the Bean Sprout Lady. I did not, alas, find her, nor did I really expect to, though I am surprised that at the expansive market in the heart of the city, I found no bean sprouts either.

"Soon. Bus to Nha Trang come soon," the man says. "But never mind. You just wait here. I wait for bus to Saigon, but will show you." He is one of several Vietnamese we've met who still refers to Ho Chi Minh City in that way. And he is the only one we have talked to, by this point, who is of our generation. For one thing, English is routinely spoken by younger people—it has been a required subject in schools for many years.

Other differences are obvious. Younger people do not seem obsessed with what in Vietnam is called "The American War." Almost invariably, they consider it important history that shouldn't impede relations today. But here is a man at the bus station who, for all I know, had been either in the army of the Republic of Vietnam, or in the Viet Cong, or in Ho Chi Minh's North Vietnamese forces.

Whatever his past, his aid is welcome, and typical of what Suzanne and I have found throughout the country—people eager to come to the assistance of travelers.

The gray-haired man asks Suzanne, "Your first time in our country?"

She says it is.

"You like?"

"Very much," she says. She has sent home e-mail dispatches to family and friends in which she raves, among other things, about the warmth of the people and the culinary riches we are finding.

She nods toward me. "Lary has been here before," she says.

He looks me over. "When?" he asks.

I think back to the conversation in the War Remnants Museum. In the forty-five years between my stints in country, I have somehow avoided any great sense of responsibility from participation in that misbegotten war. I can define, in a general sense, our nation's collective culpability. But I haven't thought of myself as aiding and abetting an inhumane mission. It is that smile that did it—that smile of the museum curator. And here I am, being inspected in a similar way by a man who, unlike the curator, actually had been there, had witnessed the horror.

He says, “When you come here last?”

I tell him straight out. 1966. This time I make no further clarifications about being in supply, or anything else.

The man puts down his suitcase and stretches his arms toward me. He says, “Now I hug you and I kiss you.”

In the embrace that follows, he says, “Thank you for helping our country.” We stand there, together at the Tuy Hoa bus station, two old soldiers declaring an end, at last, to war.

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