

The Emotions after War in Viet Nam. Poetry from my Reconciliation and Healing Journeys

By Edward Tick

Seeking the most comprehensive and holistic healing of war wounds possible, I have been leading annual reconciliation journeys to Viet Nam for veterans and other war survivors every year since the twenty-fifth anniversary of the end of the war in 2000. Encounters between survivors of all sides squeeze long-ago memories and feelings out of American and Vietnamese alike. Through poetry I record the voices and stories of women and men who lived through extraordinarily close encounters during war and again on meeting today. These encounters show the depths and complexities of our emotional lives during times of warfare and its aftermath when we can transform fear and hatred into understanding, compassion and love.

This story was told to me by a farmer in northern Viet Nam who recovered a downed American pilot during the war. We were the second Americans he had ever met.

First Meeting

I saw the steel bird fall from the sky,
wings on fire, a phoenix dying.
Only a boy floated to earth.
Through the smoke of our burning grasses
I looked into his rolling eyes,
bloodied face, trembling hands.
He too had a mother in grief.
I laid down my scythe. I fed him some rice.
I washed and wrapped his torn skin
then sent him in an ox cart to Ha Noi.

And this from a gentle older woman who survives by selling small bags of fruit juices off a simple pushcart on the busy Da Nang streets.

Street Vendor

My name is Hoa. Captain name me Suzy.
 I grow rice. Captain teach me type.
 I speak Viet. Captain teach me English.
 I believe we friends. Captain leave me 40 years ago.
 Captain go home. I homeless.
 Now I sell juice on street.
 This small wagon my shop.
 I strain and strain to remember your words.
 This first time I speak English since Captain.
 I say we friends but he forget.
 You come back. You buy juice. You talk me.
 Maybe you not forget.

My group stops at Chu Li where the first battle of US against Viet Cong forces took place. We want to pray at a Windy Tomb, an empty cairn or monument built for souls whose bodies were never recovered. An earlier travel group had built one for an American MIA from that battle. We believe this memorial at Cu Chi is the only one for an American MIA in all of Viet Nam.

Beth Marie Murphy, a woman in our group, had been a nurse on hospital ship USS Sanctuary stationed off Da Nang during the war. In addition to wounded American troops, she had nursed a Vietnamese child whose legs had been blown off and loved her like her own. She asked to build a second Windy Tomb for this child close to the first.

The American War Nurse Builds a Windy Tomb

For Beth Marie Murphy

My back is bowed from decades
 of carrying the soul of the legless girl
 who began as my patient but became my niece
 as we flew colored kites in the wind off my ship.

In dreams my eyes are pink and swollen

with the ocean of tears both shed and withheld
 since the angry wounded called her *VC child*
 and desperate arms snatched her back to the jungle.

Today I carry one stone at a time.
 With each dripping tear I recite her name.
 Gently I let her down off my back
 and give my lost niece this tomb for a home.

Eight children tumble round my fractured legs
 to help me lay the last stones on her cairn.
 A single red dragonfly hovers in our wafting incense
 and a sweet breeze kisses my cheek with her name.

My travelers and I trek through remote countryside thick with greenery and small houses. We stop in front of one small colorful home with a row of gravestones alongside. The Vietnamese prefer to bury their loves ones close to the family home where they can visit with their spirits. Here the living and gone live as one.

Lan's House

The footfalls of the world
 tramp the mud in my front yard
 and pass my small altar to our land god.
 People smile. They say *xin chao*.
 They may even stop to shake my hand.
 But you ask my name, my age,
 my family and – more precious than rice –
 you ask of the graves beside my home.
 I only have this small bit of land.
 It does not matter. My wife, my mother and hers,
 My grand mum all sleep side by side.
 Those who were and those yet to be
 are one in us and through us.
 So you light my incense,
 bow and pray to spirits and those you never knew.

You are the first. You are kind.
You lift the sorrow from my heart
and gift me this lucky day.
In the smoke of incense and the rising prayers
you and I are also one.

On every visit to Viet Nam I bring my group to the Mekong Delta home of Tam Tien, a Viet Cong veteran left for dead in a jungle firefight with Americans during the war. That ordeal of survival shaped him into one of the most loving and joyous, kindest and most welcoming men I have ever known. He makes his home the home for the hearts of our aching warriors.

Tam Tien was a guerilla fighter. His comrades would suddenly appear out of spider holes in the middle of an American base. They were called "the flowers that bloomed inside the enemy." They were once the source of terror.

Flowers Blooming inside the Enemy

For Tam Tien Vinh Long

Once you were the flower
that blossomed on my base.
Your petals spit fire.
Your leaves blazed hate.
Your spider-webbed face
taught me how to fear.

Today you are the flower
that blossoms on this river.
Your petals drip kindness.
Your leaves caress mine.
My lost years fade to nothing
as you teach me again to love.