
MY HOME VILLAGE— A SONG

*Golden sunshine glitters through the trees
in the late afternoon.*

Birds sing their jovial songs.

*Leaning on doors, villagers stand and sit
sharing memories of their lives.*

*Across the sky wind hums through bamboo flutes
attached to paper kites.*

The golden rice dances as if joining in the gaiety.

O afternoon in my country, how tranquil and peaceful you are.

*I wait in the silence, watching the blue smoke rise,
waiting to fall in love.*

SOUTHERNERS AND NORTHERNERS

The South has only two seasons
dry and rainy.

In the North we had four.

In the South they eat sweeter food
with more coconut sauce.

In the North farmers rise at 3
to go to the rice paddies
no matter how cold it is.

Northerners work harder.

They plan for the future.

If I make 1000 piasters, I save 300
one day to buy a tael of gold.

In the South they spend it all.

They do not take life as seriously,
do not have death on their minds.

Even the farmers move easily
through their sunny fields.

GENEVA AGREEMENTS

We were told in 1954
that anyone not wishing
to live with the communists
could go south by plane or by boat.

My father wanted to leave,
said he knew the communists.
My mother had spent much of her life
in the four walls of our houses.
She did not want to go
to a strange new place.

My younger sister's husband
had been in Saigon.
He warned us against
the unfriendly people there
said he would never go back.

We were given 300 days to decide.

LOOKING FOR VOTES

We always thought we would go home to Hanoi.
Two years in the South, then with America's help
we would defeat the communists.

With America on our side, how could we lose?

In 1955 Diem proclaimed us a republic.
We were sent in groups from the ministries
to the villages to influence people
to vote for Diem as president.

We would bring food, explain his aims,
said we would vote for him.

At first I was afraid to speak.

They would know I was from the North.

They'd accuse me of taking a good government job.

The women in the South smoke and drink
and are generally easygoing.

We could hardly keep from laughing
when they offered us their cheap cigars.

They called their children
by where they came in the family
number two, three, four, five:

can hai, can ba, can tu, can nam

but never number one.

Number one son was called number two.

The name *number one* was reserved
for the head of the village, *ong ca*, Mr. One.

I would walk through the rice fields,
ask to enter their wooden houses,
sit with them as their children crawled
across the floor with the pigs and the chickens.

WAR IN THE STREETS

When I woke up,
I saw a man on a bicycle.
I stopped him, begged him to help me.
"Please. I cannot run or walk."
He asked if I knew how to ride a bike.
I said no but I could sit behind him.
He said he could not ride toward the fire.
It would be suicide.
On the way to his sister's, I recognized a road
and got off, thanking the man.

My mother's friend cried when she saw me
walking alone toward her house.
"Where is your family?
Where are your children?
You live where the fire comes from."
I stayed the night, returning home the next day.
I said I would rather die with my family.
I walked home slowly in sandals borrowed from their daughter.

The police tried to stop me from going near my house,
but I begged them to let me see my family.
Then I saw all of them alive—standing outside the door.
They were so happy to see me. Mother thought I was dead.
They had been trapped by the fire,
but our house was saved by the wind turning suddenly.
The ones at the back were burnt to the ground.
The wall of our house was full of bullet holes.

We believe in destiny.
Mother said she had prayed to Buddha.
For many generations our family had done nothing wrong
so this time Buddha protected us.