

POEM BY A VC

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Translated from a Vietnamese text published in *Tu Do*, 30 September 1965

By Ton That Thien

Translator's Note: the poem you will read below was found on the body of a Vietcong soldier infiltrated from the North who died at Duc Co some weeks ago. It was addressed to Ms Tran Thi Phan, Hai Duong, North Vietnam, and his mother. The name of its author is not given, and I do not know if the authorities have it. In any case, rarely have I found a poem of such beauty. It has richness, and a depth of feeling. Together with a beautiful form which strangely reminds one of Rupert Brooke. I am convinced that it will rank as one of the most beautiful poems written in recent years. I have attempted to give as near a translation of it as possible. Alas, traduttore, traditore. (Readers will find the Vietnamese text in Tu Do, September 30, 1965). Lastly this poem can be considered to mark a turning point in the war, and raises also the question are the people on the other side all communists?

Mother, sweet and dear,
You remember that morning bright and clear,
When I bid you farewell, without sorrow,
Outside the gate of our little house?
I was moved, but so proud.
I was going to the South.

With my comrades I walked through Laos,
And then, day after day, ever deeper into the South,
Through jungles green and deep,
Up and down mountains blue and steep,
Scorched by the sun on the sand along the sea,
Drenched by the rains pouring down the forests through the trees,

It was hard. But what did it matter?
We were young, our life was like a blooming flower,
For peace we were fighting,
For peace we accepted suffering.
Day after day, month after month, we marched,
Our stomachs were empty, our throats parched,
Our feet were wet, our shoulders cold;
Against the rocks and the thorns our shoes and shirts could not hold.

Beloved and respected mother,
When dusk falls, and I have nothing other,
Than the complete silence of the Truong Son for company;
Then before my eyes floats the image of our village and family;
The blue smoke drifting lazily in the breeze,
The lovely pumpkin plants spreading their luxuriant green leaves,
The small butterfly fluttering happily about,
The curved roof of the village temple, so old and proud.

Oh! How much I wish to be there, to smell and touch, and see,
The thousand little things that means so much to me;
And now, here I am, in the South, land of our dream and our aim,
Where to me people's faces are unfamiliar, and things do not look the same,
Yet, it is our country,
For here also grows the coconut tree,
Here also the roads smell sweetly
Of ripe golden paddy,
Here, blue smoke also drifts with the breeze
Over the fences and through the trees,
Here too at dusk, the sailing buffalo slowly treads his dusty way home,
While his little master plays a plaintive tone
On his bamboo flute,
The way our boys at home also do.

What then is liberation?
I searched my mind for reasons, fiercely and with desperation.
But round me, what do I hear and see?
Markets crowded and merry, rice fields vast and green like the sea,
The sounds of bells from the near-by pagoda carrying the worshipper's message,
Singing children filling the schools with their voices loud and happy,
And, in the cabbage field, atop the golden flowers,
Little butterflies murmuring in each other's ear; drink, my dear, drink of the sweet nectar,
From one end to the other of the village life flowing rich and full.
Then why burn and destroy? Why was I ordered to pull?
The trigger that would make of a happy child an orphan and his mother a widow?
There were times when my hands shook like a willow
On laying the mine that would spill
The blood of people like you and me, our kin,
Those were nights when my face was wet with streaming tears,
When I twisted and turned on my couch, haunted by a thousand nightmares...