

The background of the cover features a monochromatic blue-toned image. At the top, a line of soldiers in silhouette is shown marching across a field. They are carrying gear and rifles. Below them, a body of water reflects their forms, creating a symmetrical effect. The overall mood is somber and reflective.

Veterans  
*of* War,  
Veterans  
*of* Peace

*Edited by*

MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

Veterans  
*of* War,  
Veterans  
*of* Peace

*Also by Maxine Hong Kingston*

The Fifth Book of Peace

To Be the Poet

Hawai'i One Summer

Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book

China Men

The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts

Veterans  
*of* War,  
Veterans  
*of* Peace

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Maxine Hong Kingston

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positions at evening, their images reflected in a rain-filled crater, at  
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## Contents

- Maxine Hong Kingston, *Introduction: Tell the Truth, and So Make Peace* – 1
- Louise Amlong, *Finding My Heart* – 4
- Yigal Ben Haim, *Gallipoli Beach 1913* – 16
- Shepherd Bliss, *Sound Shy* – 20
- Carroll Parrott Blue, from *The Dawn at My Back: Memoir of a Black Texas Upbringing* – 28; *Camp Pendleton, California—May 1975* – 33
- Bonnie Bonner, *For Soldiers Not Known* – 39
- Nancy Sue Brink, *The Night the War Begins in Iraq, We're Learning CPR* – 43; *Wintering Cranes in the San Joaquin Valley* – 45
- Joe Brotherton, *Voyages of the SS Joshua Hendy* – 47
- Sean McInain Brown, *Dear Commander in Chief* – 56; *Easter* – 57; *Spin Drift* – 58
- Jim Castellanos, *Voluntary Disarmament in Iraq* – 60
- Tom Currie, *Liberation Day* – 68
- Denis Dass, *The McGuffin* – 71; *How Low is It to Be a Mouse, a Spider, a Snake?* – 71; *WHY DID I LET YOU LIVE* – 72; *Fred said, COMPASSIONATELY WITNESS TRIGGER . . . DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER* – 73
- Dennis Drury, *Good Time* – 74
- George Evans, *A Walk in the Garden of Heaven* – 84; *Spring Dawn* – 92
- Dan Fahey, *The 2 to 7 Watch* – 94
- Jim Fauss, *How Can a Human Being Learn to Love a People Then Kill Them?* – 101; *The Red Fox* – 104
- Dennis Fritzynger, *Brown Bread* – 106; *Cool Dad* – 108; *Charlie Don't Surf* – 108
- Gary Gach, *Haiku* – 111; *Fathers and Sons* – 111
- Robert Golling, Jr., *The Body Escort* – 122

Ron Greenberg, *Two Husbands in Vietnam* – 130  
Sara Haines, *Dream Catcher* – 135; *The Wall* – 135  
Donald L. Handley, *Booby Trap* – 137; *Light Casualties* – 138  
Edie Heinemann, *War in the House* – 139  
Larry Heinemann, *The Geese* – 145  
Martin Higgins, *Remanded to The Nam* – 148  
Ho Anh Thai, from *The Women on the Island* – 157  
Hanh Hoang, *Field of Heads* – 163  
Doug Howerton, *Firing Blanks at Moving Targets* – 166  
John Patrick Ignatius, *The Prayer of Saint Francis* – 176  
Elijah Imlay, *A Child of God* – 180; *Bird Grieves for the Man They Killed* – 181  
Chanpidor Janko, *My Father's Photograph* – 183; *Stealing Fish* – 186  
James Janko, *Buffalo Boy* – 189  
Phil Johnson, *Magenta Alert* – 200  
Robert Jost, *A Rosary* – 202; *On Point* – 203; *Platoon Sgt. Francisco Royas* – 204; *We Need* – 205  
Wayne Karlin, *The American Reader* – 206  
Miki Kashtan, *Esh* – 215  
Sharon Kufeldt, *The Silent Scream* – 221; *Holiday Madness* – 223  
Joe Lamb, *Reuniting Gondwanaland* – 225; *Perdition* – 226;  
*Little Fool* – 228; *The Measure of the Man* – 229; *One Small Exception* – 230  
Robert Landman, *The True Geography of Meeting* – 239; *In the Silence* – 243  
William Larsen, *The “New Vietnam”* – 248  
Pauline Laurent, *Shattered Dream* – 257  
Le Minh Khue, *Fragile as a Sunray* – 260  
Jade Lee, *Movie Song* – 264; *Movie Song II* – 265; *Beating* – 266  
Michael Litle, *Gatesville* – 273  
Morgan Jane Lott, *A Place Called Home* – 293  
Fred Marchant, *C. O.* – 299; *Elephants Walking* – 301; *Hue, in Darkness* – 303; *Occasional Verses at Con Son, after the War* – 304  
Roman A. “Hopper” Martinez, *Hopper's Last BBQ* – 305

- Keith Mather, *The Hunt* – 309
- Phyllis Meshulam, *Hope, the Thing with Feathers* – 313; *Weaving Peace* – 314; *Recipes for Independence Day, Labor Day, Harvest, Interdependence Day* – 315
- Clare Morris, *Regulations* – 317; *Slightly Damaged Buddhas—20% Off* – 318; *From Strength to Strength* – 318
- Don Edward Morris, *Shipping Away* – 324; *Letters From Lindsey to her Dad on Active Duty Somewhere in the Middle East* – 326
- Scott Morrison, *Draft Night* – 330
- B. Cole Morton, *August 10, 2005* – 348; *Sitting in my Yard by the Salt Marsh Yesterday Untangling String* – 349; *PFC Porter Cleveland Bumpus USMC* – 350
- Charlie Sherdyl Motz, *Dragon River* – 354; *My First PBR Patrol* – 356; *The VC Palm Tree* – 358; *The Zen Junk—Soirap River Day Patrol* – 360; *The Floater—Soirap River Night Patrol* – 362
- John Mulligan, from *Shopping Cart Soldiers* – 365
- Maureen E. Nerli, *Sister Ambrose, the Flying Nun* – 385
- Nguyen Qui Duc, *Grief* – 393; *War* – 393; *Peace* – 393; *Words* – 394; *Love* – 394; *April* – 394; *Language* – 394
- Paul Ocampo, *Butterfly* – 401
- Grace Paley, *Connections: Vermont Vietnam* – 410; *The Sad Story about the Six Boys about to Be Drafted in Brooklyn* – 410
- Michael Parmeley, *Meditation on Being a Baby Killer* – 413; *The Art of Window Washing* – 416
- Tom Patchell, *Graves Reg* – 427; *Fragments of Bacon* – 429
- Redline, *The Ride* – 440
- Monica Rosenthal, *Close Call* – 443
- Gregory Ross, *I Look at Him and Smile, He Looks at Me with Concern* – 449; *Dear George* – 450
- Sandy Scull, *Skewed* – 452; *Sea Salt* – 453; *Mrs. Martinez* – 454; *War's Confession* – 455
- Ted Sexauer, *The Well by the Trail to Mỳ An* – 457; *Poem for Tẻt* – 458; *Two Squads* – 458; *Inside the Wire* – 461; *Fort Benning Return: 2000* – 463; *Progress Report* – 468
- Michael Shuval, *And Her Chicks* – 470; *February on the Jordan Rift* – 472; *Flowers* – 474



Barbara Sonneborn, *Last Time* – 476  
Richard Sterling, *Death's Journeyman* – 480  
Richard L. Stevens, *Meeting with the Goddess: True Story of the Vietnamese Annie Oakley* – 484  
Lee Swenson, *Composting America* – 504; *Salt* – 506  
John Swensson, *The Chicopee Flash* – 511  
Claude AnShin Thomas, 10) – 514; 12) – 516;  
*A Soldier's Prayer* – 517  
Daniel Moen Thompson, *Marble Mountain* – 528  
Gary Thompson, from *To Touch: A Vietnam War Medic's Diary* – 542  
Buzz Tiffany, *Saigon Passional* – 550  
Julie Thi Underhill, *war dream i* – 569; *war dream ii* – 569  
Christopher Upham, *Nothing to Crow About* – 570  
Michael L. Wong, *Honor's Death* – 580; *To Take a Street* – 589  
Paul Woodruff, *Sanctuary* – 592; *Walking across a Burnt Field, I Feel a Puff of Ashes up My Jeans* – 593  
Chun Yu, *The Petition* – 595; *Lullaby* – 597  
Doug Zachary, *Christmas at Grandma's* – 599; *Last Call on the Farm* – 602  
  
*About the Editor* – 607  
Michael L. Wong, *The Veteran Writers Group* – 608  
*Permissions* – 611  
*Photo Credits* – 613  
*Koa Books* – 614

MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

## Introduction

### *Tell the Truth, and So Make Peace*

All my life, I have wanted to keep soldiers safe from war. During World War II, my cousins in uniform stayed at our house on their way to and from military bases in California, the Pacific, and Europe. I heard veterans—including my mother, a refugee, a medic—talk story about the war that was killing and maiming right now as they spoke. Listening to people who had lived to tell the tale, I believed that it was the telling that kept them alive. They had survived hell and come back to warn us at home.

As Odysseus, the archetypal warrior, made his way home, he narrated his journey—setting off to war, waging the long war, coming home—to listener after listener. The story grew until, finally home, he could tell the whole tale and become whole. We tell stories and we listen to stories in order to live. To stay conscious. To connect one with another. To understand consequences. To keep history. To rebuild civilization.

About twenty years after our war in Vietnam—the Fall of Saigon, the Vietnam War, the American War—the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh gathered war veterans and their family members in retreats for making peace. In Noble Silence, they meditated: eating mindfully, walking mindfully, hugging mindfully, and hearing the Bell of Mindfulness. Walking meditation is the specific antidote to the march that soldiers learn in basic training. On hugging, Thich Nhat Hanh said, “When you hug one Vietnamese person, you hug all Vietnamese people.” I thought, When you hug one American, you hug all of us. In the circle of the community, someone would sing or speak or dance; the entire sangha bowed to him or her.

Singing, hugging, dancing, we were a community. But it is in words that each individual reveals a unique mind. The veterans needed to write. They would write the unspeakable. Writing, they keep track of their thinking; they leave a permanent record. Processing chaos through

story and poem, the writer shapes and forms experience, and thereby, I believe, changes the past and remakes the existing world. The writer becomes a new person after every story, every poem; and if the art is very good, perhaps the reader is changed, too. Miraculous transformations! So, I added writing meditation to Thich Nhat Hanh's program for veterans.

We practiced writing in community. We would not have to write alone. We had one another to write with, and to write for. If you felt like quitting, you'd look across the table or garden or terrace or grove, and see the others bowed over their notebooks and laptops, and you kept going.

People who care what we have to say surround us. They draw the stories out of us by their wanting to know. Toward the end of the day, I evoke Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassionate listening: "We aspire to learn your way of listening in order to help relieve the suffering in the world." And each one reads aloud a new story, a new poem.

The veterans did their most dramatic writing when I presented the First Precept, which is a vow against killing: "I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life." A moral ethic helps shape and form thoughts about the war chaos. The drama is not just in the battle scenes but in the moral conflict.

Worried that the veterans would not take instruction from me, a non-veteran, I invited writers who had had war experience to help me teach. Larry Heinemann. George Evans. Wayne Karlin. Ho Anh Thai. Le Minh Khue. Fred Marchant. Grace Paley. Every one of these good-hearted artists affirmed that the written word gives life.

As the writers became skilled in knowing others' points of view, they enlarged the definition of *veteran*. A veteran could be a woman; a veteran could be a deserter; a veteran could be a civilian who had served in war; a veteran could have been a member of a street gang; a veteran could be a survivor of domestic violence; a veteran could be a peace activist. All manner of persons identified themselves as veterans and came to join the regulars, who argued for a while, then let every one belong. Wars affect all of our lives.

Our workshop/community/sangha has been meeting for a dozen years. There have been about 500 participants, counting people who

met in the retreats on the East Coast and in Southern California. Nowadays, about thirty of us (never quite the same thirty) will gather in Sebastopol, California, once each season. A veteran from the other end of the country will set his clock to Pacific Time and meditate when we meditate, write when we write. This book is a harvest of conversations among multitudes. Most of these writers have met one another face-to-face. Nearby or at a distance, we inspire and influence one another, reading one another, editing, translating, giving feedback. We even appear in one another's tales.

If there is one thing the writers in this book have in common, it is that they are rebels. They had been assigned to war; they had volunteered and almost lost their lives. No more volunteering. No more following assignments. Suspicious of institutions, they have no name for our group. So, in this book, various writers call us: The Veteran Writers Group, the Veteran Writers' Workshop, the Veterans Writing Sangha. I have not edited for uniformity. Let stand *Viet Nam* or *Vietnam* or *Việt Nam*, *Tet* or *Tết*, *Danang* or *Da Nang*, *Ha Noi* or *Hanoi*, *Communist* or *communist*, *terrorist* or *Terrorist*, *Hell* or *hell*, *God* or *god*.

This community of writers began its work during Gulf War I and has continued meeting and writing to the present day—as the war against Iraq continues. All these years, these faithful writers have paid attention to wars past and to wars ongoing. Their stories and poems are immense in scope, and in heart, and—amazingly—full of life and laughter. They carried out our motto: Tell the truth.

And so make peace.

## WILLIAM LARSEN

The road to hell, they say, is paved with good intentions. So was the path most of us took to Vietnam. In my case, this involved my father, Earnie Larsen, a warm, rough sports-obsessed man of Viking heritage who valued physical prowess to an extreme degree. Unfortunately, I took after my maternal grandfather, a small artistic fellow whose only obsession was his clarinet. Never doubting my father's love, I was nonetheless unable to excel on the athletic fields that so captivated his attention.

But I did find a way, and that was the war in Southeast Asia.

Much later, I discovered that healing combat trauma often demands resolving the initial motivation that led to the battlefield, as well as what happened on it. Men go to war for many reasons. The most common, I believe, is blind obedience and the surrender of our moral authority. My father loved me dearly, but carried into adulthood wounds of violence and self-doubt that compromised his ability to parent wisely.

In the way of fathers and sons, his doubt became my doubt.

On the day I was wounded, I realized I had crawled into battle as much to win Dad's approval as to help wounded grunts. If Vietnam taught me any one thing, it is that I alone am responsible for my choices. This is a lesson I have tried to represent in my personal life and psychotherapeutic work with combat vets and others.

### *The "New Vietnam"*

I never planned on going back to Vietnam. Hell, I didn't *plan* to go there in the first place. In my life, Vietnam doesn't seem to work that way, and the decision to return (on Leap Year morning of 1996) was as unexpected as it was necessary.

It had taken a long time to clear out the ghosts that followed me home from the war. Three gunshot wounds cut that trip mercifully short, but a nine-month hospitalization did absolutely nothing to dampen the memories of too many friends exploded into human mush. After I was discharged, my life tumbled into a self-destructive spiral nearly getting me nabbed in a Mexican heroin bust. And *that* was the eye-opener that finally caused me to seek help.

Years of treatment led to graduate school and, eventually, state

licensure as a psychotherapist. Throughout the mid-'70s, I worked at a clinic, saw private clients, and taught part-time at the university where I earned my master's degree. Life was good again, and in 1978 my wife and I moved to a small Northern Californian town in the Sierra foothills to start a family and open a private practice. After wrestling so long with my own demons, treating the combat trauma of others was the last thing I would have expected, but in 1980, the official recognition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder initiated a nationwide flood of veterans seeking treatment. In our mountain community, my history made me the one they usually turned to. Before long, I had a full caseload of traumatized vets, with new calls coming in each week. I hired another therapist, then another. But the calls kept coming, and little by little, year after year, I found myself struggling just to keep up.

The therapy group met in the basement of the county veterans' building, a long narrow dining hall topped by an eight-foot ceiling, giving it a claustrophobic, bunker-like effect that tended to stimulate the vets' anxiety, mine included. Our little band—dressed mainly in baseball caps and T-shirts, Levis, or baggy shorts—formed a tiny circle in one corner, near the only door leading outside (an “exit strategy” insisted on by the vets at the first meeting). After each man checked in that night, I reminded the guys I'd be in Southeast Asia for the next three weeks, so another therapist would be subbing. Then, as always, I asked if anyone had unfinished business from last group.

Big Harold immediately started in, rekindling an unresolved issue that clearly had the interest of the ten men suddenly leaning in around the circle. “I still don't get it,” he drawled, shifting his bulbous torso so slowly it seemed to move in waves, the hairy eye of his navel peering out beneath a ragged black T-shirt. Pausing, Harold regarded me dubiously as his ham-hock fingers thoughtfully stroked the wispy blond hairs decorating a triple-fleshed chin. He seemed to be considering his words carefully.

“*We* supposed to be the crazy ones, Doc,” he finally said, motioning to the haggard middle-aged faces around the circle. “And here, *you* the fruitcake, nutty enough to be going back to Vietnam.” The last word lingered in the air like spent smoke, releasing vapor trails of memory linking all the vets present. Harold leaned forward, staring at me through puffy, squinted eyes. “Why is that, I wonder?”

He hadn't been south of the Mason-Dixon Line in twenty years,

yet Harold still spoke in a fluid, lilting cadence soft as a Georgia peach. But his tone was challenging.

It was a difficult question to answer because I wasn't sure myself. I tried telling him I had never really met the Vietnamese. My combat tour had been spent fighting the North Vietnamese Army in the vast Tay Ninh jungle, far from any settlements. For that reason, something always seemed missing from my war experience. Vietnam had turned my life inside out, I said, and after so many years of processing the combat trauma of American vets, I needed to meet the people of that country to feel complete.

The skeptical look in his eyes told me he wasn't buying. Harold had logged two tours slogging through the hamlets of the Mekong Delta. Sporting scars on both his body and mind, he *had* met the Vietnamese, and he considered himself no richer for the privilege.

Hemming and hawing, I tried another approach. I told the group I wanted to test all the years of therapy and verify the emotional healing I needed to believe was real and not just a smoke screen masking hidden fault lines that had disrupted my life in the past. This sounded good, I thought, perhaps even inspirational. But the incredulous stares of the group made it clear that *nobody* was buying this one.

"Hell, go to LA," called out Roger, a commercial logger, who always dressed in razor-crisp khakis and was the only Republican in the group. "It's just as weird and you save the expense."

I then did something that's not always the wisest move for a shrink. I told the truth. "What can I say, guys?" I asked them. "My shit's weaker than a dead puppy, and I really don't know what to do about it. Call it a midlife crisis, but the fact is I'm losing the battle with my chronic pain, and the VA just gave me a 30 percent disability rating for vision loss. I'm scared, guys, and to be honest, I'm fucking pissed. And if you want me to be *really* honest, I'm blowing it at home and have created a goddamn crisis in my marriage." The faces looking back at me were stunned, and I felt a stab of guilt for having obliterated even the appearance of a professional boundary.

"Hey, not to worry," I assured them. "All I'm telling you is that I need a change of scenery to get away and work things out in my head."

The group remained perfectly quiet after I spoke. Such silence was a rare, usually uncomfortable experience for this group of traumatized men, and I thought that maybe I had reached them at a deep level. But

then I saw Big Harold jerking in disbelief, his meaty whiskered lips slapping against themselves as he tried to voice a realization so horrible it was screaming through his eyes. “I . . . do . . . not . . . fuckin’ . . . believe . . . this,” he finally whispered through gritted teeth. “People!” Harold cried out, flinging a fleshy arm toward his fellow vets, “Don’t ya see? Doc’s goin’ to Nam for ‘R & R.’”

My decision to return had been made abruptly. Nine years into combat therapy work, I was sick to death of the daily war stories recounting atrocities of every sort imaginable; stories describing unbearable afflictions perpetrated on—and by—the vets I was treating. Stories all too like my own. I thought I had resolved my Vietnam issues, but the continuous inrush of combat vets made the war—and the land in which it was fought—as much a part of my life as it had ever been. A medic in Nam, I obviously still had a need to save wounded grunts, and within a year the intensity of this effort began eclipsing everything else in my life. My own PTSD issues had clearly gotten triggered, and this fact, along with the ongoing stress of running the therapy program, gradually turned me into a snarling recluse at home. Several years of this had done as much damage to our family as an enemy incursion. And I was too caught up in my mission to see any way out.

Then, in the mid-’90s, after President Clinton lifted the trade embargo against our old enemy, the news media began crackling with reports of a “New Vietnam.” Our former nemesis, they said, had become a land of civil reform and rising economic opportunity, whose people had overcome the shackles of the past to embrace a future based not on armed conflict, but prosperity and peace. Caught up in the multifaceted crisis of my life, this message of hope was just what I needed to hear. Like many vets before and since, I decided to see for myself.

Ten days into the trip, I was duly impressed. I spent a few days floundering around the overcrowded commercialism of Ho Chi Minh City. Negotiating the teeming crowds of this former capital quickly became overwhelming, however, so I caught a flight north to Danang, and then rode a bus south to the ancient—and, by Vietnamese standards, wealthy—port city of Hoi An, in coastal Quang Nam Province.

Here I found the Vietnam I had been seeking. It was a dream come true, for, Big Harold’s skepticism notwithstanding, I really did need to meet the people the war had estranged me from twenty-seven years



earlier. And Hoi An was the perfect venue for this long overdue introduction. For a week, I wandered along rustic, clean-swept streets talking to friendly shop owners and admiring fine regional artwork; exploring the architectural wonders left centuries earlier by Portuguese, Dutch, and Japanese traders; relaxing for hours at the pristine beach before enjoying sumptuous two-dollar dinners at the cafés nestled along the Thu Bon River. It was an idyllic setting, one that represented the “New Vietnam” very well, I thought. Clearly, the news reports had been correct.

One day, however, while resting at a roadside Buddhist shrine, I met a saffron-robed monk who inquired about my impressions of his country. We had taken tea and been stumbling contentedly through our language barrier for nearly a half hour, but on hearing my effusive praise of Vietnam’s unfettered progress, this previously sedate monk’s English became so broken I could not ascertain the cause of his agitation. I finally understood that he wanted me to visit Peace Village, a rural medical clinic just south of Danang. His intention seemed to be helpful, so I quickly agreed.

To arrange transportation, I sought out my Vietnamese friend and guide, Sergeant Loc, and we agreed to meet me after lunch the following day. Loc is a former South Vietnamese soldier who spent four years in a jungle “reeducation camp” for aiding the Americans during the war. We met on my first afternoon in Hoi An, as I left the mock-colonial grounds of the state-run Hoi An Hotel, where Loc was trolling for tourists. As I strolled onto the sidewalk, a chubby little Buddha guy rose from where he squatted beside his motorcycle. He smiled and greeted me, explaining that he had worked with the Americans and spoke “much good English,” so would I please hire him to show me the city? We got on immediately, and from that moment on, he became my daily companion and interpreter, steering me through the crowded blur of Vietnam on his motorcycle, explaining Vietnamese customs and mediating my frequent interchanges with the local community.

On the day after I met the monk, Loc and I set out in the mid-afternoon. Even in Hoi An, crowds are ubiquitous, rolling in and out of the countryside like the tide of a great sea; and on that hot afternoon the bustling two-lane roadway was busy with travelers—some in cars, many on foot, but most on motorcycles like ours. Soon we were whizzing through an interwoven scene of shops and small family

homes interspersed with rice paddies, ponds, the rare industrial unit, and many side roads leading to rural hamlets. Leaning back, I took it all in, noting how congested the road grew as we approached Danang.

The bike's engine noise had lulled me into a dreamy stupor, so I gasped in surprise when we suddenly veered right through twin iron gates and were greeted by a spacious green hillside, topped by a modest white building. The contrast with the crowded highway could not have been more dramatic. Loc downshifted, and we cruised up the long winding driveway.

Peace Village turned out to be a small, single-story building the size of an American ranch house. On a plaque beside the front door, we read that the clinic had been founded by Le Ly Hayslip, the Vietnamese peasant whose story was told by Oliver Stone in the movie *Heaven and Earth*. Le Ly's rural village had been decimated in the fighting that enveloped the countryside around Danang, and she eventually married an American engineer and came to the U.S. before the war ended. Recognizing her good fortune, she returned a few years later to bring healing to her battered land.

Entering the building, we found ourselves in a small foyer with an open doorway off to one side. I peeked in, and an elderly gentleman leaped up from behind a small wooden desk, knocking over his chair. He had obviously been dozing. Rushing out to greet us, he swooped in on me as if meeting an old friend. Gripping my hand in both of his, he spoke through Loc, explaining to me in rapid-fire Vietnamese that he was director of the clinic. An English-speaking doctor would be back soon, he said. After several more handshakes and bows, the director went back to his desk, and I was invited to explore on my own while Loc visited relatives in Danang.

It had been a relaxing day, and my mood was as light as the sunshine filtering into the empty halls. Despite its impressive architecture and museums, the smoggy overcrowdedness of Ho Chi Minh City had repelled me. Hoi An's rural tranquility provided an oasis of relief, and the discovery of a "Peace Village" now warmed my heart beyond measure. I marveled again at the "New Vietnam" as I strolled past a room full of sewing machines used to train women for gainful employment; turned one corner and discovered a locked medicine cabinet crammed with western pharmaceuticals; turned another and found a second cabinet filled with indigenous herbs and native remedies.

Reaching a back hall, I wandered past a washroom and kitchen area, then came to the only closed door I had found. The director had said I could look anywhere, and since every other door in the clinic was open, my curiosity was aroused. Turning the knob, I peered in. The room was clouded in late afternoon shadow. One small rectangular window cast a frail light over the cluttered contents: two large metal fans, scattered boxes of medical supplies, a dusty wooden desk. As my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I also noticed an irregularly shaped pile of . . . something . . . at the rear of the room.

Sliding my hand along the wall, I switched on the overhead light and was startled to discover a large pile of artificial legs stacked like firewood along the back wall.

Breathlessly, I entered the room. The pile of legs was about three-foot high, toes stretched outward, each limb milky white and made of a thin plastic that marked it as decidedly inferior to the sturdy high-tech prostheses used by some of my vets back home. I did a quick tally, and counted nearly a hundred legs. All had Vietnamese lettering scribbled along the shin. My eyes tore into the foreign scrawl, trying, irrationally, to unlock the mystery, but the writing, like the legs themselves, was inexplicable. For some time, I simply stood there, numb and perplexed, fondling the bizarre artifacts and wondering why they were there.

I finally backed out of the room in search of someone to explain. At the front office, I encountered the English-speaking doctor the director had mentioned. He was a young Vietnamese with a shy demeanor. Dressed in a blue smock and wearing black-rimmed eyeglasses, the young man was thin, tight-lipped, and clearly embarrassed by the abrupt intensity of my question. Grasping my right elbow, he quickly ushered me into a small conference room, closed the door, and hurried to the far side of the rectangular table set beneath the room's one small window. He took a seat and, with an elaborate hand gesture, motioned for me to sit across from him.

"Mines," he stated flatly, answering the question I had put to him in the hall. The legs were going to villagers who had lost legs to land mines.

"What?" I exclaimed, somehow not grasping the implication. "Where? How?"

A flicker of annoyance twisted the doctor's face. His eyes darted

away, dropping to watch his fingers pick a speck of lint from the blue smock. “Mines left from war,” he said casually. “All over countryside. Farmers grow food, children run play—boom. Lose leg.”

“My God,” I whispered, staggered at the thought of this continued maiming twenty-one years after the war ended. “How many people has this happened to?”

Slowly, his eyes rose to mine. “So many,” he whispered, the corners of his sharp young face collapsing to betray its underlying fatigue. “U-nited Na-tions come look,” he continued, “find so many people lose legs.”

His scribbled in the air with his left index finger, trying to compute the problem I had given him. But here the young man’s English failed him. For several moments he struggled to convert his reality to the appropriate English numeral. “No, wait.” Reaching down the table, he slid back a pen and sheaf of paper, and wrote very deliberately. “Here, this many.”

The paper was a sheet of Vietnamese stationery, thin, roughly textured, and colorless. On it he printed the figure, 25,000.

“Twenty-five thousand?” I asked incredulously. “Twenty-five thousand people have lost legs since the war?”

“No, no,” he barked, shaking his head emphatically. “Not since war. Now! This many lose legs *now*.” Snatching back the note, he hunched his entire body over it, laboriously spelling the word, *y-e-a-r*. He read over the note, nodded once, then dropped the pen back on the table, jabbing the paper so forcefully it flew in my direction.

“Each year? Twenty-five thousand lose legs to land mines each year?”

“Yes!” Satisfied he had been understood, the young doctor’s face softened, and his hands came to rest on the table between us. The afternoon light coming in through the screened window had faded, leaving a web of flickering shadows on the wall behind him.

I was stunned, and what came out of my mouth next was a question I have come to regret. “But what, I mean who . . . ?”

He scowled again, but this time his eyes stayed fixed on mine. Slowly, his hands rose to form a loose-fingered bridge below the tightly drawn lips, and he regarded me somberly for several moments. Then he leaned into the space separating us, spreading his palms outward as if releasing the only relevant answer to what I had asked.

“Child not care who. Farmer not care who.”

The late afternoon shadows deepened as we lapsed into a meditative silence. But the quietness only intensified the question in my eyes. Finally the doctor spoke again, in a tone devoid of the slightest inflection. “Soldiers put mines,” he said. “Soldiers all sides.” Gesturing toward the window, “All over countryside.”

“Does anyone know how many?”

“Yes, yes.” Head bobbing, he reached again for the paper and pen, furiously scratching out his first attempt before completing the figure he held up for me to see: 3,500,000.

“Three and a half million?” I gasped. “There are still three and a half million land mines buried in the countryside?”

“Yes!”

Oddly, the serious young man beamed, then flicked the end of his pen toward me as if rewarding a plodding student. Enunciating very carefully, he dotted the air between us with the pen, “U-nited Na-tions say.”

A wave of dank realization suddenly swept over me, and I found myself struggling to grasp the implication of what I had just heard. “But then . . . the war. It . . . it isn’t over,” I stammered. “The war is still going on.”

“Of course,” he sighed, shrugging his shoulders in the resigned manner I had come to recognize as being very Vietnamese. The doctor reached again for the paper, shaking his head as he studied the numbers. Crumpling the note, he tossed it into a waste can near the door. “War always go on.” Then the young doctor pushed back his chair, rose, and met my eyes one last time. “So many more to lose.”