

Wayne Karlin

The American Reader

The first time Mai sees Americans they are bathing in a stream about a thousand meters from where she and two of her girl friends lay watching through the foliage. The soldiers' voices don't carry that far, though she can see they are splashing, probably laughing, their skin occasionally flashing like daylight through the leaves. She wishes she can get closer, but if Ninh, the male section leader, knows they have even gotten this close, they will all be in trouble.

She wants to see them in their flesh. The enemy. Yet still held tightly shut, against the very shattering they would bring her, in the tattered Steinbecks and Hemingways and Londons she carries in her rucksack. Her aunt's treasures, given to Mai when she had joined the Volunteers, gone South to keep open the Trail that knit the Nation. Her aunt a teacher and a good revolutionary and the authors approved for good revolutionaries, but sometimes after a bombing or strafing, the other girls would look at Mai with bitter astonishment. The American reader. The adjective in that nickname edging into a noun. Yet there is always a wistfulness in their teasing as well. As if what Mai is holding onto is something they can't name but feel sliding out of themselves as well, day by day.

She strains to see the Americans through the screen of leaves. They are still Tom Joad, moving towards a vision of a perfected, kind world, as she, when she remembers, imagines herself doing, moving through the dust of a space she finds unimaginable in the closeness of the jungle—even though they seem now to be trying to turn that jungle, those trees, into that same bowl of dust and emptiness Joad had fled to a greener land. They are Robert Jordan, laying on his stomach, watching the bridge, as she lays on her stomach, watching Jordan's compatriots now, and she is Marie, waiting in the encompassing warmth of his sleeping bag, for the warmth of flesh and connection against the coldness of death. They are a man trying with his hands to build a fire as the circle of howling wolves closed in on him, as her own hands, her fingers, worked frantically to prevent the fire blossoming from the guts of the bomb that moments before had howled down from them to her; they are the machines that come to kill her and hers; they are the red flashing of tracers through the jungle canopy, the masked, mirroring face hovering above, the sudden light shivering like panic through the branches. They are torn apart in her mind and she needs to knit them together if she is going to knit herself together. They are a weight in her rucksack, the books that

anchor her; they give her paths she can follow along the paths she must follow; they give her the courage to face themselves. They are these naked boys in a jungle pond, though they are too far away to really see anything, her friend complains in a whisper, and the other two girls giggle. They are too far away to see anything, she thinks, because they are ghosts, they are lines in a book, they are too many contradictions to be real, to be flesh, to be naked.

They are flying over Helicopter Valley, with its cupped wreckage, when DeLeon's scream pierces John's ears, a sound so filled with terror and despair that, filtered through earphone static, he hears it as a wail spiraling up from the broken aircraft below them. The helicopter jerks, up and then down. He traverses the ground with the barrel of the machine gun. He sees no tracers, has heard nothing hit the plane. He risks a glance over at the two prisoners they'd picked up at LZ Crow, drags the flashed afterimage of them quickly back to his stare out of the port. The recon marine sitting across from them hadn't moved. His M-14 on his lap, his finger on the trigger. The two in olive-green North Vietnamese Army uniforms tattered, muddy and bloody, but not faded. New guys. Sitting motionless also, the base of a triangle, the recon marine the apex, their eyes dulled, heads leaning towards each other, side by side, as if still fastened together by the wire the Nungs who had captured them had punctured through their cheeks. The marine—he was a staff sergeant—had cursed and pulled it out when they'd been handed over, the two North Vietnamese jerking like fish as he did it. The holes in their cheeks scabbed over now, but still bleeding red slick snail trails down their swollen cheeks. Tears from strange eyes. The staff sergeant's eyes dulled also, head tilted.

The noise from the cockpit—curses, scuffles—hasn't abated. Sam keys his mike: "Sir, what's happening?"

"A fucking snake," the co-pilot, Anderson says, his voice more exasperated than fearful.

A *snake*, he says again, indignantly, and the word, the hot, poisonous *sibilance* of it, opens into Everything. Into the jagged carpet of smashed helicopters below them. Into the impossible, malevolent, steambath of tangled, vine strangled, insect-crawling, breezeless, lightless at midday, hundred foot tall triple-canopy jungle they were over again now. Into the men they'd set down in it and taken out, sucked dry like insects caught in a web. Into clouds of hot, red laterite dust sucked into engines at take-off, the nerve-racking dance of hands and feet on collective and cyclic and pedals, a manic weave on the loom of the very centrifugal force that wants to tear the thousands of pieces of machinery to pieces; into landing too hot and too heavy and downwind on slopes picketed with trees, the heavy wet air pushing down the helicopter loaded with its weight of flesh and equipment; all the deadly specific numbers: thirteen grunts times eighty pounds

each of steel helmets, M-14s, web belts hung with grenades and loaded magazines and full canteens and entrenching tools and machetes and flak jackets and field packs, not to mention the M-60 machine guns or mortars the weapons platoons carried, not to mention the 150 to 200 pound eighteen to twenty year old bodies carrying all of it, not to mention the helicopter's own machine guns and ammunition and flak-jacketed crew and 2200-pounds-of-fuel, all optimal conditions needed to suck the lift right from under blades, to wind down, as if it were the clock of your life, the RPM that kept you in the air; to stop rotor blades like a hand stuck into a fan, to feel yourself a gracefully floating dandelion suddenly puffed on from above by a malevolent hot-breathed giant, to be slammed into the terrain below, into other helicopters, into screaming men and suddenly liberated fifty foot-long blades slicing through air foliage torsos necks heads arms and later you come down and see someone still sitting behind a log as if taking a break and you pick up what turns out to be only the top half of a sergeant, lighter that way, and yes, a clean-cut boy, you think. It's all there, in those words, in the utterly appropriate hissed curse of them: The 12.7mm North Vietnamese anti-aircraft guns and B-40 rockets and quad-fifty machine guns that send orange and green fireballs streaking past the ports, and the ship you'd watched go down yesterday, thick black smoke streaming from the fuel line the incendiary round had hit, smashing into the ridge, rolling on its back, bursting into flames, a random pyre auto-rotating frantically as if to blow out its own flames before twisting over, breaking its rotored back on the ground, the sheet of flame moving through the compartment, the two men jumping out of the back, one too high, to his death; the other too low, the flaming mass falling on top of him, and the rest all gone by then, burning bright in that forest of eternal night. And, if that wasn't enough, there were the prisoners dragged to the rear ramp like fish flopping on a wire, and the grenade your allies from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam Itself had left wedged under a red-webbed seat, and the wounded and dead you'd scooped out of the black meat-grinding, fire-seared night. And if, just in case, by any chance, as Vietnam would have it, to top it all, if that wasn't enough, then you could still have a fucking snake in your cockpit.

She looks at her friends, Suong and Thu Ha, their faces shaded under the floppy green jungle hats, but scratched, smudged, hollow-cheeked with hunger, gums bleeding, teeth loose. If she could see their bodies under the clothes that hung like rags on them, she would see ribs pushing against paper-thin flesh over stomachs bloated with hunger, nets of scars and scratches, insect bites and scabies. They are all like that. She understands what bodies are. She understands the hungers, shares them; they are all young, girls and boys, and they breath and sleep with death as if they are old, and they want their lives, and they all understand a life can be folded like an endless cloth into ten minutes that you can slowly draw

back out and touch and savor all the rest of your life, however long it goes on from that moment. When bodies are laid out on the broken earth they look like part of it. People go South dressed and they come back dead, and that direction itself has come to mean death, and she helps bury them, the dead, though sometimes they are wounded and sometimes she holds them, the way the woman in Steinbeck held the starving man against her breast and gave him suck, and they call her mother, though she's younger than them, and she remembers how, in her village, before she'd gone South, the bombs had struck before the time people knew they needed to build shelters and she'd come back from the school outing to see the bodies huddled under the trees, mothers and fathers with children clutched and melted to their chests. And sometimes they are the other girls or boys from her unit, and often the bombs blast the clothing from their bodies so they go into their deaths as they had come into their births and she had at first, more than death itself, feared that exposure. But she is seventeen now and she knows that death makes everyone sexless. In a line of bodies, what caught your eye was how little difference there was, how easily it could be erased. Her thoughts are scrambled, confused, and mixed now with the dim white figures seen through the screen of leaves, the ghosts that would kill her.

"Where, sir?" John says nervously, keying his mike. He is hearing curses, scrambling noises through the earphones. "Shit," DeLeon says, his voice high-pitched.

"No joy, no joy," Anderson says. No visual contact.

"It went behind the instrument panel!"

"Are you sure?" Anderson's voice. "I think it's a fucking viper."

I'm de vindow viper. Punch line of an old joke. John looks down nervously at his feet. Sweat rolls down his neck, under the collar of his flight suit, crawls down his back; he wants to turn, search, raise his legs, dance like a mad bagpiper. He feels his skin contracting under the leg of his flightsuit, his muscles spasming up to his thighs. Snake crawl. *I'm de bamboo viper.* He thinks of it sliding behind the HAC and co-pilot, through the hatch, under the web seats, or along the wiring over his head. Hears, suddenly, the voice of the flight commander, Colonel Watson in his ICS, asking them what the problem is.

The helicopter had reared out of formation—they are flying in a division, four helicopters—when DeLeon let go of the collective. The pilot had pulled out his survival knife and hacked at the snake, which had dropped heavily to the deck, shot like an arrow between Anderson's rubber foot pedals into the tangle of wires behind the instrument panel. Straightened up and slithered off, John hears DeLeon say, with the near-hysterical hilarity which means, John knows, that the incident has already become a war story, will be told everywhere, was humming through the ether even now.

But the snake is still in the aircraft, had not yet crawled into the safety of

story. For all he knows it is still coiled around wires behind the panels, cunning, camouflaging itself as part of the technology, using the machinery of the enemy against the enemy. Low crawling, naked and slick, a sapper coming through the wire. Touched my elbow like a kiss, slid along the aluminum ledge under the window, he hears DeLeon say to Anderson. *I'm the window viper*. Green brown in complexion, maybe three foot tall, skinny as a pencil, DeLeon says. He talking to them now. Fanged and dangerous. Find the fucker. Take no prisoners.

"A fucking snake," Anderson says, and John can feel it, sense the snake, moving under the deck plates, sneaking through the avionics. Staying just ahead of or just behind them. He glances down, involuntarily. Something to the left of his left foot. Green and brown. He looks at the staff sergeant. He still hasn't moved, and neither have the prisoners. They're each others' stories too, but they don't know the end yet. John slowly picks up the M-1 carbine he'd bought for ten dollars from an ARVN as a back-up weapon. What the hell is he going to do, shoot it through the deck? He slowly leans the carbine against the ammo catcher, slides out his K-bar knife. The thing seems motionless. Playing dead, he thinks. *I'm the window viper and I've come to vipe your window*. He stares. He should be looking out of his port. It is getting rapidly dark. But the enemy is here. It's too still. Too...dull. Inanimate. It can't be a snake. He slowly advances the point of the knife, pushes down swiftly. Like a snake striking. The object is solid. Unsnake-like. He slowly squats, thinking *grenade*. No. A small book. He picks it up, impaled, pulls it off the blade, realizing, too late, it may be a booby-trap anyway. No. It doesn't explode. There's a black and white picture of a girl inside, a young couple in front of an iron gate fashioned into a circle of Chinese ideograms. But the writing on the stained pages, cribbed and lined through, smudged and blurring in the waning light, is Vietnamese writing, regular letters tortured top and bottom with little barbed wire spikes. The written lines broken, as if poetry. Probably belonged to one of the prisoners. He should give it to the sergeant. Snake's diary, he thinks. Viper story. The two prisoners and the sergeant are still staring at each other, motionless as a diorama, as if all three have been wired together. The small book burns his hand, through his flight glove, as if it has dripped venom on him. He straightens up, quickly tosses it out of his port. Follows it with his machine gun barrel, twisting and fluttering in the air, white pages winging against dark sky, the photos flying out like released spirits.

It is growing dark, and is darker yet under the thick-knit branches canopied over the creek where she bathes. It is the same pool, a widening of the creek really, where the Americans had bathed. Mai can't see. Knows she can't be seen. Suddenly the noise of rotors beats down on top of the leaves like fists beating on a door, and she freezes until it fades off, leaving only its echoes and then the memory of its echoes. She thinks, taking herself away from it, how she will make

all this into story, mix has-been with could-be; fold the story over herself like a camouflage shelter as the bombs fall closer. This urgency to immerse herself in the same water, she thinks, to take the mystery of them into her skin, she thinks, and her mind tries to flee the thought, but she has trained herself to clutch at those fugitives of her being; they were in the end the whispers that named her. She has a broken sliver of soap that from a bar that Thu Ha had brought back from Hanoi, a luxury, and she soaps herself, and now she hums the tune to an Italian song all of the girls from Hanoi remember and sing. She has dirt under her nails from the Trail, from the dirt they shoveled back into the craters, smoothing them for the trucks going South, and her fingers stink from the gelignite they'd packed around the bomb she had embraced earlier in day, helped lower into a hole, blown up. She scrubs her hands and her body, unable to even see her flesh now, feeling herself seeping away, borders dissolving into the water, the darkness, the insect hum. Something heavy and cold and reptilian bumps into her lower belly. She stifles a scream. Reaches out tentatively. Her fingers find hair, a head, a nose, a mouth, and the fear suddenly leaves her, bursting like a bubble opening in water; she knows what this is; it isn't the first time a corpse has come floating down this stream to her. She lets her fingers move along the cold skin, feeling the man's flesh, naked to her own nakedness, feeling his wounds open under her fingertips like kisses, this one lover, from all that had gone South, come back to her now in the dark. She knows what this is, but the Americans she has seen that day come to her mind, and the words she feels written on her back, blurred through her rucksack and into her skin by her sweat, and she lets that thought, lets them, float next to her for a moment, and then lets it go; yes, it could be one of them as easily, and perhaps it is, but it doesn't matter, death doesn't only erase sex, and yes, isn't it pretty to think so.

As the book falls, the helicopter formation wheels west, over the mountainous jungle of the cordillera. A place filled with snakes. The darkness is not so much beginning to cover it as it is entering it, like an injected liquid, the top of the jungle canopy configuring into ominous, fluid shapes. Leaf people. Anderson's voice is in his ear again, his words repeated by DeLeon: they want him and Sam to fire into the fleshy mass below. Into the trees. They think something is down there. No shit. It's the snake's home. The place of snakes. The home of the snake and the land of the viper. He fires down into it. As he does, he sees an artillery barrage begin, over to the west of their flight path, aircraft diving down, as if called by his fire. A hot shell casing falls on his neck, stings like a snake bite. He fires more, his shoulders shaking, hands vibrating, fires at the ghosts moving under the trees, fires at a girl who bathes with the dead to dream the resurrection of love, who tries to find his face and her own, behind the wind and the fire and the noise and the fragmented light. His rounds

curve and streak down and the darkling green absorbs them so quickly it is as if they never existed at all.

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Wayne Karlin served in the Marine Corps in Vietnam. He is the author of six novels and a memoir and is the American editor of Curbstone Press *Voices from Viet Nam* series. In 1973, he contributed to and co-edited the first anthology of fiction by Vietnam veterans, *Free Fire Zone*, and in 1995 he co-edited and contributed to *The Other Side of Heaven: Postwar Fiction by Vietnamese and American Writers*, with Le Minh Khue and Truong Vu. With Ho Anh Thai, he also co-edited the anthology *Love After War: Contemporary Fiction from Vietnam* (Curbstone, 2003) and a collection of contemporary American short fiction that was published in Vietnam in 1998. He has received two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the 1999 Paterson Prize in Fiction. He is a professor of language and literature at the College of Southern Maryland,