

In Memoriam



**Gloria Emerson
(1929-2004)**

Photo courtesy of W.D. Ehrhart

A corporal in the marines who fought on hill 547 in Laos on the night of March 22 said that many of his friends had killed themselves because they were wounded. No American helicopters could extract them because of heavy antiaircraft fire.

“The papers and the radio in Saigon kept on saying there was a Laos victory, I have learned now, but what a joke,” Corporal Ti said. “We ran out like wounded dogs.”

“The most heartbreaking thing,” he continued, “was that we left behind our wounded friends. They lay there, crying, knowing the B-52 bombs would fall on them. They asked buddies to shoot them but none of us could bring himself to do that. So the wounded cried out for grenades, first one man, then another, then more.”

—from “Laos: March 1971,” *The New York Times*, March 28, 1971

Remembrances

W. D. Ehrhart



Gloria Emerson once described herself to a reporter as “Bossy. Ill-tempered. Ferocious. Put all of that down. Do you have it?” And it was all true. Her telephone calls were famous. The phone would ring, you’d answer it, Gloria would launch into a monologue, after awhile you’d give up trying to get a word in edgewise, just hanging on for dear life. And then, with the abruptness of a meat cleaver slamming through a side of beef all the way to the cutting board, she’d say, “I have to go now. Bye!” And you’d be left, breathless and dazed, with the telephone receiver buzzing in your ear, feeling as if you’d just gone fifteen rounds with Joe Frazier.

She could be just as abrupt in writing and in person. Of the second edition of *Carrying the Darkness: The Poetry of the Vietnam War*, she wrote: “I didn’t expect you in a new foreword to denounce the war because the poems do that. But I thought what you did write leaden and tedious, and I thought the dedication to your daughter was unnecessary. The world knows how much love you have for her.” When I showed up for lunch one day wearing a small Purple Heart lapel pin on my jacket, she barked, “Why are you wearing that? What’s the point?”

But she was also soft-hearted, generous, loyal, and courageous. She had nothing but contempt for generals and presidents, but spent her life giving voice to the voiceless: the privates and corporals and hapless civilians crushed by the powerful. Watching her speak without notes to a spellbound audience on the folly of American policy in Vietnam was well worth the quirky late-night calls telling me to put my infant daughter on top of the washing machine and turn it on, I don’t have to do any laundry, just turn on the machine and the vibrations will put Leela right to sleep. Bye!

She was one of a kind, and I was often thankful I only had one of her to cope with. But it was impossible not to love someone who could write, “I don’t know even now, twenty years after I left [Vietnam], how to harden my heart so it won’t be punctured yet again by the war.” Someone who could say to a discouraged writer, “Don’t keep track of where the other writers are, either behind or ahead. We are all doing what we can, no more no less. It isn’t a race, is it?”

I don't remember when or how I first met Gloria. She had already become a part of my life long before that. I have a vague recollection of Jan Barry and Larry Rottmann talking about her support of their efforts to publish what became the landmark 1972 anthology *Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans*. She contributed money to the publication of Jan's and my 1976 anthology *Demilitarized Zones: Veterans After Vietnam*. We corresponded when I was working on *Carrying the Darkness* in 1984-85. She sent a little blue dress with little white chickens all over it when my daughter Leela was born in 1986. And when the Five College Program in Peace and World Security Studies invited her to participate in a scholarly conference called "Tet Plus Twenty: The Legacy of the Vietnam War," she said she'd do it only if the organizers also invited some Vietnam veteran-poets.

Which is how I ended up with Gloria in Amherst, Massachusetts, in February 1988. And she was spectacular that weekend. Riveting. Unforgettable. That was the time she spoke extemporaneously for over an hour on the folly of American policy in Vietnam. Not a single note, yet her presentation was seamless and compelling, the audience rapt.

The next day, when the redoubtable Colonel Harry Summers, Jr. (Ret.) told another audience that the US government had played no part at all in the 1963 overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem, Gloria bluntly asked Summers to explain, then, why Lucien Conein, the veteran CIA operative, had told her that he had said to the Saigon generals who subsequently deposed and executed Diem, "If you don't get rid of Diem, we'll do it ourselves." Taken aback, Summers ponderously launched into a long-winded and convoluted obfuscation, but Gloria cut him off sharply. "How can you lie to all these people?" she asked, gesturing around the auditorium. The moderator intervened at that point, and Summers must have thought he had dodged a bullet, but later Gloria collared him in a corridor and repeated her question, shaking her finger in his face, Summers looking very much like a deer caught in the headlights before scurrying away with Gloria in hot pursuit.

How could you not love her? How could you not forgive her the quirks and foibles and idiosyncrasies, the irascibility and the bluntness? It was all, I think, perhaps just her way of hiding the tenderness of her heart, the weight of the pain she carried for the suffering of others, the innocent and the helpless. Way back in 1972, she had written, "One American was picked up with a head wound and lay on the floor, not dead and not alive. The medic could not stop the bleeding. It all becomes normal, the other correspondents, men, would say. In time, you'll see. They lied."

Nearly two decades later, in her stunning book *Gaza: A Year in the Intifada*, she wrote, “The Israeli Defense Forces maintained the position that consideration was always given” to Palestinian women, “but the witness knows better. A group of middle-aged women, their bodies shaped like old pillows, another choir of grief,” are charged by soldiers whose faces reflect “high glee, as if now they were playing a favorite game and certain to win.”

In contrast to her first book, *Winners and Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses, and Ruins from the Vietnam War*, which earned her a National Book Award, *Gaza* earned her mostly grief. Writing sympathetically about Palestine and the Palestinians has never been a popular choice in the United States, and Gloria became the target of harassment at readings, the recipient of voluminous hate mail. Yet all she ever said to me about the firestorm her honesty and clear-sightedness had created was, “The whole year has been taken up either defending *Gaza* or trying to sell it. You know the struggle.”

I never could figure out what was the point of her second book, *Some American Men*, which just never resonated with me. But her other three books are masterpieces made all the more remarkable by the fact that each is completely different from the others: *Winners and Losers* a sweeping account of the consequences and aftermath of the Vietnam War, *Gaza* a short hard punch in the solar plexus, *Loving Graham Greene* a work of fiction.

Loving Graham Greene, published late in her life, may be the most disturbing of all of her books, for me at least. I fear the novel’s protagonist, Molly Benson, is Gloria herself as she saw herself in the last years of her life, a foolish idealist who accomplished nothing for all her good intentions. That Gloria chose to end her own life a few years later, though I will never know what led her to that decision, does nothing to dispel my fear.

And that makes me very sad because I hate to think of Gloria feeling so alone and useless and empty. She meant so much to so many people for so many years. Within days of her death, I got e-mails or phone calls from a host of friends—Wayne Karlin, John Balaban, Jan Barry, John McAuliff, Jack Laurence, John Ketwig, John Prados and Ellen Pinzur, Marc Leepson, John Baky, Martin Novelli, Bill Crandell, Dave Connolly: poets, writers, veterans, old VVAW guys, journalists, activists, teachers—most of whom had known and loved Gloria, and all of whom noted her passing with profound sorrow.

How often these days do I wish that my phone might ring and there would be Gloria on the other end, launching into another one of her lopsided conversations, telling me not to be so *petit bourgeois* or promising not to nag me anymore “because it doesn’t do any good” or urging me to “overcome the bitterness, a form of poison.” And then the famous, “I have to go now. Bye!”

Wayne Karlin

She had seen what you had seen, all the wasted bodies shredded because of lies, indifference, hatred or greed, and she had seen them broken again in order to fit into comfortable and comforting myths, and she had seen more of it than you, and she was broken by it as well, but she never let that wound erode the clarity with which she saw and told the world. What she understood and valued more than anything is contained in W.H. Auden's dictate, that the first job of the writer is to preserve the integrity of the language. She did. Fiercely and well and all else followed.

I wrote the paragraph above for Gloria Emerson's memorial service, last September. That summer, when I'd been informed of her death, I'd had the usual flash of anger people experience when someone they love has taken her own life. How, we are saying, could you do this to us? But I also had one of the few timely grace moments in my life when, after hearing how her Parkinson's had and would have eroded Gloria's ferocious independence, I thought, yes, this was the only possibility for her, this death was as brave as her life. My anger, I understood, had been selfish.

The memorial also was a selfish, but necessary, occasion for those of us who loved her—selfish because she had stipulated that there be no commemoration. But, as people do, we maintained that we were doing it for ourselves, not her. We were right. She would have hated the idea of an event “celebrating” her life, despised it as deeply as she despised the word “closure.” She abhorred—a Gloria word—the narcissism of the culture, and to be celebrated—in all the meanings of that word; distinguished, feted, bestowed with fame—for chronicling the kind of pain she wrote about was, she felt, to become a kind of vulture. Ward Just, a dear friend of Gloria, wrote a short story called “Journalism,” which captures perfectly her pained awareness of the hypocrisy and seductiveness of war celebrity. The

story's main character is a foreign correspondent named Paige, who is given an award by a women's group for articles she wrote about the destruction of a West African village.

The citation... concluded that through her courage and compassion she had advanced the cause of women in journalism. She was unaware of the nature of the citation until it was read to her at the banquet. She said that she would be happy to accept the award on behalf of the dead and dying and the homeless. Then she turned to the president of the women's group and agreed she had been fortunate to witness the particular war that had resulted in the destruction of the village... surely a small price for those thousands of dead and homeless to pay. Thank God they'd been present, willing, and accessible and available for interviews. She said that she hoped that before too long there'd be another war for perhaps another woman to write about, in order that the cause of women in journalism be advanced yet another notch. Thank, you, thank you. God bless. The audience of women received these comments in shocked silence. She'd been so unfair, so savage and perverse...

Paige's icy sarcasm is recognizable to anyone who knew Gloria. Yet what Just also captures is Gloria's bruised heart. Paige is afraid, as Gloria was afraid, that if she did not shed the praise she was to receive, she would be eating the dead.

"You didn't have to do that, Paige," the president said later.

"Yes, I did," Paige replied.

"You took it and twisted it—"

"Not as hard as I could have," Paige said.

Jim Harrison, commenting on Shelley's line "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!" writes that it makes one think: "Of course you do, dummy." Gloria bled, but she never had the choice not to, a statement some might protest, but not if they knew her. She was the antithesis of those she wrote about, in her great opus *Winner and Losers*, who "found [the war in] Vietnam bearable; it did not rub them each day like a giant slab of sandpaper going deeper all the time." She had seen too much and knew that because she could make others see through her words, she had to write them. And not only to write. In her novel *Loving Graham Greene*, Gloria reflected Greene's theme, in *The Quiet American*, of the terrible price other

people may end up paying for the perceived but ultimately self-serving idealism of the privileged. Yet Gloria could never only be the detached observer herself. There was nothing selfish about it. In the year before her death, debilitated from a broken hip and the series of botched operations which made her condition worse, she'd read of people in Sierra Leone who'd had their arms amputated as object lessons. She reacted with the same horror we all felt but then arranged to have two of the victims brought to this country to receive prosthetic arms and rehab, and, nearly crippled herself, barely able to walk, shepherded them around Manhattan. It is an entirely typical example of her adamant compassion. She supported, emotionally and sometimes financially, a host of broken men and women stricken by disease, by war, by the indifference of the world; she affected great cynicism and helplessness at the evil ways of that world, yet she never surrendered her compassion or her will to act. I received a letter from her a few days before I learned of her suicide. I'd put it aside, meaning to open it later, and then after the news of her death, I misplaced it, perhaps deliberately. Serendipitously, I came across it today, before I wrote this piece, and finally opened the envelope. Inside was a yellow Post-it with a scrawled note: "Wayne, I meant to send this to you four years ago. Et voila! XX G." The note was attached to a poem by Adam Zagajewski: "Try to Praise the Mutilated World." A last message.

She was a tuning fork to the pain of the world, and her writing was the reverberation of that metal inside her. It drove her somewhat insane, as it would any truly sane person. We all saw her as eccentric, sometimes charmingly so ("she's an original," we said admiringly. "Oh, that's Gloria," we said, and grinned at each other.) But she bled because she needed to make us bleed. Because she took to heart the advice a National Liberation Front fighter had once told her: "Love your country as we love ours. If you do not, you cannot change it." She knew how easily her country can and does forget, change, shape to degrees of comfort; how deadly its amnesiac and isolate self-satisfaction can be. "It is important," she wrote in *Winners and Losers*, "to remember, to spell the names correctly. To know the provinces before we are persuaded that none of it happened, that none of us were in such places." But she knew too many had already persuaded themselves. It killed her.

John Balaban



On August 3, 2004, Gloria Emerson, 75, who won The National Book Award for nonfiction with her extraordinary *Winners and Losers*, took an overdose of pills after leaving various notes about her New York apartment: one informed the police of what she had done; others were attached to things that she wanted particular friends to have. She also wrote her own obituary and sent it to her friend and former colleague Craig Whitney at *The New York Times*.

Her writing about war was precise and vivid in its regard for little people, both those who fight wars and those who suffer them. She had a Swiftian rage for those who direct the battlefields from great distances, and she had an Ernest Hemingway's respect for proper names and what they represent: a human life, with its hopes and aspirations, a family, a community, a village, a living culture, the "collateral damage" of warfare. She wanted to shove your nose in it and her fine prose could do just that. Her obituary in *The Washington Post* quoted her as saying, "I didn't write to be famous; I wrote to keep a record."

For her friends, she was a moral conscience, whether or not we wanted it. She was always trying to get us to shape up, do better. Sometimes her hectoring was savage in its indignation and urgency. American politics and politicians sickened her. Though a moralist, she could be wickedly funny. A New England aristocrat who was the daughter of an Emerson and a Shaw, she preferred the company of veterans. Her good friend, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, once said "If I hadn't married, I might have had a life very much like Gloria Emerson's."

I met her in Saigon in 1971, upon entering an elevator at the Caravel Hotel with John Steinbeck, the son of the Nobel Laureate. Gloria was already inside and at the sight of us, she scowled. Steinbeck had been quoted recently promoting his "lysergic Buddhist" enclave on the Coconut Monk's famous island near My Tho. Emerson had been out in the war zone interviewing the grunts who fought the war. "Gloria," Steinbeck said, "I'd like you to meet John Balaban." Without looking at either of us, she replied, "I *know* your Mr. Balaban." Nothing else was said on the ride up.

Years later, we became friends after she saw my translations of Vietnamese poetry. Whenever, I went to New York, we had dinner together. About a month

before she died, I sent her a poem that I had dedicated to her, taking its title from that of her recent novel:

Loving Graham Greene (for Gloria Emerson)

But in Indo-China I drained a magic potion, a loving-cup which I
have shared since with many retired colon and officers of the Foreign
Legion who eyes light up at the mention of Saigon and Hanoi.

—Graham Greene, Introduction, *The Quiet American*.

So there he was, decades after the war,
rattled and adrift, waiting in the waiting room
of a shrink in New Mexico, of all places,

an office in a garden by an adobe house
its tin roof aflame with sunlight
as the sun humped across blue sky

and hummingbirds raced to plunder heads
of purple cosmos and bee balm while sunflowers
looked up like a congregation seeking benediction.

Beyond the garden, the river surged over
canyon rocks and piñon snags where big trout
lurked in the cold shadows of dark pools.

He was on vacation; he hadn't planned this visit.
The wife and kids were taking the trail ride.
He had found the name in the phone book.

After a lot of babble and blubbering, the guy
asked him if he knew what was wrong,
what was hurting him so, why he was crying,

why he was here. He shook
his head “no.” No,
he didn’t know.

“Still a reporter?” Yes.
“Successful?” *Yes, pretty much.*
“Happily married?” *Well, yeah.*

“But your eyes,” he said, “are dead,
except when you mention Vietnam
and then a little spurt of epinephrine

zings your system and your eyes light up.”
The therapist charged sixty bucks,
suggested he take up skydiving.

Driving back to the riddled heap of villagers
from which someone had pulled out a live 3-year old,
past the berm wire where they were still yanking off

the bodies, he was flying in a chopper when it dove down
to open up on a lone elephant in a field of sugar cane.
After a gin fizz on the veranda of the Continental Palace,

he was back at the motel where everyone was by the pool,
the kids all lit up after their trail ride high on the canyon rim,
where the air was sweet with pine and bear grass, the sky clear.

She didn’t like the poem much. I asked her if I should remove the dedication and she said she didn’t see how I could with that title. She never said a word about recently discovering she had Parkinson’s or that an end of any kind was near.

On September 29, 2004, a memorial that she had not wanted was held at the Quaker Meeting House off Stuyvesant Square. The very size of the crowd was moving, as well as the testimonies of the many distinguished journalists, friends, and former soldiers. Karen Brudney, Gloria’s physician-friend, could hardly speak for her tears. But as each speaker came to the lectern in that white simple room, the audience gradually found itself erupting in laughter as a theme of Gloria’s outrageous, dear, personal, and presumptuous scoldings began to emerge from

each of the presenters, along with remembrances of the many kind gestures that connected us to her.

The next day, getting back to my office in Raleigh, I was shocked to find a package in brown paper wrapping, with Gloria's handwriting and return address. Sometime before her death, she had taken a framed pen-and-ink drawing from her apartment and mailed it. A "Tree of Life," one huge-spreading tree, its fruit unfolding into human shapes.



Photo: John Harnett, courtesy Gloria Emerson