

JOHN BUQUOI

on the châu thành road

along a road near châu thành,
 maybe closer to cai lậy
dawn mists clear and lift
 from night bedded paddies now
the new morning drowsy,
 brilliant, technicolor bright
sheeted emerald silk,
 more green than cold stone jewels
and of an unearthly shade
 perhaps of an unseen
jungled butterfly wing
 or an extinct hummingbird
rice shoots soft breeze rippled
 luminous around all the compass
as far and farther still
 than the eye can even see,
late monsoons slow herding dark
 silver edged thunder storms
from the approaching distance
 into the silence here
a cathedral quiet place

where he is left alone
only with his own heartbeat
 echoing now against
unplumbed stillnesses of greens,
 sky blues and snowy white
egret flocks floating low,
 silent soft above the field
the nursery rhyme recalled
 from what seems so long ago
 con cò cò bay lả
 lả lả bay la
 snowy egrets floating
 lazy low across the fields
an ancient watercolor scene
 as from a silken scroll

here the delta war's far gone
 beyond this peaceful time
and from this silent space,
 or so now it seems to him,
almost full forgotten
 its dark memory dimmed, erased
as though a sleeper waked
 shaken from some chill nightmare
dreamt long, night sweated,
 now forgotten, unremembered
and in this unhurried quiet
 place of perfect peace
a roadside bowl of noodle soup
 and it's maybe beef
or maybe not, no way to tell,
 no matter anyway
with an iced 'biere 33' or two
 or three to wash it down

and soon, around the soup stand,
 laughing villagers alight,

a birdlike curious covey watching
 this strange american
who drives this war shadowed road
 alone, so early in the day, and
who can speak vietnamese
 and even tell a joke or two
in their own native tongue,
 even if it's not so funny,
pressing for a closer look
 but ready to take flight
should he turn angry, hostile
 or threaten them away
or oncoming distant storms
 blow in cold rain and hail
just watching, laughing happy,
 until at once, without a word
as flock flighted birds
 sometimes wheel against the wind
the crowd clusters, turns and veers
 off toward the paddy edge
all suddenly transfixed
 by some movement barely seen
or imagined from that far tree line
 and so he joins them,
a lone stranger in their flock,
 in distracted, idle curiosity
now standing wondering, too,
 between the road and paddy berm,
amid the urgent chattered sibilant hum
 so like flare fluttered whirring
wings of doves, or maybe grouse
 as they first flush to flight
until then and far, so far,
 he sees them there, the three
dark shadow elephant-like hulks
 approaching fast abreast
before fresh cut dark rusted scars

ripped deep black into the green
knifelike, soundless straight across
mud earth and silken paddy
chased by a high bounced spray,
a splayed black rooster tail of mud
onrushing faster now as if to flush
the grounded peasant flock

the muttered hum turns angry then
as villagers spit and curse
and point toward the intruders
as though in disbelief
something there seen or heard
that he doesn't recognize
or understand, much less
suspect at all, although
he now sees the elephants emerge,
as in a dream, transformed,
shape changed into war machines,
amphibious apc's
top heavy with armed and
armored soldier children,
boy soldiers back from another
death staked game of war

time shifts to slow, slow motion,
minutes crawl to hours
or so it seems to him
as they stand and spellbound wait
and watch and wait until
the steel amphibian herd
closes the approach and leaps
across to crest the paddy berm
and a splashing, spinning,
churning, whirling, hurricaned
maneuver frees the cargo net
bouncing dredged behind

a grim delivery of what
the villagers knew
before they saw and he'd not
yet himself imagined
cheering soldiers jump running
to drop their netted catch
and, as in play, set up, laughing,
their grim trophy-like display,
eight bodies neatly laid in rows
along the paddy dike
eight dead boys, so young
eight dead teenage boys,
forever teens, forever dead,
from today until forever

just dead boys in black shorts and less,
not so much as uniforms
eight dead young boys, bled
blue white and some still bleeding,
leaking darkling blood, mud covered,
open brained or chest-holed,
cold tangled in embraces
of war's favored final fashion
life's warmer pinks and browns
faded pale to translucent blue
except for maybe one, no,
there's a second one unmarked,
less marked, un-bloodied,
this morning's more unlucky ones
their final torture drowned alive,
strangled, choked, broken necked
in that ghastly rice field tow
but now, now both just the same
forever ever dead, youth ended,
beyond return, all staring
open transfixed once clear eyes
now clouding, except for one

who lacks an eye, still glaring
 shocked in that last surprise
of their own death's arrival
 and the so sudden unexpected
chilling cold of heavy tropic air
 on such a sun bright tropic
warm blue green white morning
 here along this road
while even now their killers,
 just as young as they once were,
laugh, though saddened eyes betray
 an age far past their years,
these who're just some other boys,
 mount up and roaring, speed away
jeering, laughing, cheering as though
 this brother's war, this blood game
were now done and finally won,
 as though it ever was a game, and not
just another day of a wasting war
 that's never won or done
...as though their own still last tomorrows
 might not ever come

now stacked thunderheads blow
 in bleak umbral ominous ranks
but without rain, just winds
 and dark airs dressed in mourning
to shroud the scene while distant
 shimmered sun still paints the fields
to glow in emerald contrast
 to the grays around the berm
the village flock now stirs
 itself uneasy, angry and
moves slowly, solemnly,
 a grim greek chorus circling
the dead guerrilla boys

(if that's what indeed they were)
seeking remembrance of their faces,
traces of familiar names,
wondering if in some where,
some time they might have known them
or whether they in past other times
might have visited or moved
or maybe once had lived among them,
somewhere near here before today
when they still might have been
just some neighbor kids at play
in these green shimmered paddies
maybe tending water buffalo
before this rice field's edge became
so hallowed, sanctified
by the too soon youthful deaths
that brought them finally here
uniformed now in their own blood
and mud and, more obscene,
the shit of their last meals,
death's final desecration

yet, and yet
here beside the road
is only a tender,
unexpected reverence
for these eight dead
these so young boys,
eight so dead young men,
eight dead teens
once children boys,
now eight so dead forever teens
of families not even known
and this hatred, an execration
for killers who'd so quickly run away
in the shame of their profane gift
to these un-guilty peasant ones

he imagines now he hears
 a sharp metallic click,
like the closing of a bolt
 in chambering a round
it's somewhere inside his head
 but as sharp as in real life
and in the moment he knows
 exactly how it ends
or perhaps, at least, the how
 of it not going on
he finally fully comprehends
 but only now and here,
through freshly opened eyes,
 or in those glazed before him dead
mao's own legendary 'sea'
 as metaphor no more, and
those cold dead along the berm,
 as the 'fish' that called it home

at last in his epiphany
on this near châu thành road
he, too, now understands
that the final victors in this
now all american war
would be not 'assisted friends'
but comrades, sisters
and blood's brothers
of these eight dead,
these eight so dead
teen guerrilla boys
at rest on the altar berm

understanding now and knowing, too,
that he did not, could not belong,
he stepped away to continue on

to mỹ tho and sàigòn on beyond
where fantasies of progress
still sustained the war machine
and surreal normalcy for those
who had never seen the sea

two girls called kiêu

her name is lệ, meaning 'teardrop'
but for her work, a nom du guerre,
miss kiêu she now calls herself
after the tragic heroine
of việt nam's most famous tale,
the verse poem, kim vân kiêu,
the fable girl who's so admired

in this dimly lit sàigòn bar
she snacks on a rich jackfruit heart
and day dreams of her childhood days
thinking she can smell the green rice
and blooms of the frangipani,
mangoes and sweet jasmine flowers
in her village no longer there

days in the fields with her brothers
tending the water buffalo
or swimming in the cool canals
nights listening to the soft rain
by the light of yellow candles
near to comforting kitchen fires
safe from the thunderstorms of war

all dead now except her mother
she works here just to care for her
in this old taxi dancing club
a hostess to americans
who come to drink and maybe talk
or in search of earthy pleasures
she's never going to provide

her heart breaks from the loneliness
she doesn't understand quite why
her own people would shun her for
hustling thimbles of sàigòn tea
and accepting conversation
with lonesome american men,
cursing that she should be ashamed

she doesn't understand their hate
knowing all those same people know
that their beloved heroine,
famed thùy kiêu in their poem,
had also done what she had to
in sacrifice for family,
twice even as a brothel girl

still, she hopes, when her mother's gone
she'll return to her ghost village
to tend to the family graves
once more to taste fresh, greener air
not blown on bitter winds of war
and maybe there rebuild her heart
on ashes of her childhood dreams

JOHN BUQUOI was trained as a Vietnamese linguist at the Army Language School and served eighteen months with the 3rd RRU, an Army Security Agency unit in Saigon and Phu Bai. After separation, he returned to Vietnam to work for various civilian defense contractors for another five years. He is retired and lives in Richardson, Texas with his wife Kim. He is the author of *'snapshots from the edge of a war'* and recently co-edited *'Letters To The Wall'* for Veterans For Peace.