

LOVE BENEATH THE NAPALM

The *Notre Dame Review* Book Prize

LOVE
beneath the
NAPALM

Stories

JAMES D. REDWOOD

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This book is dedicated to the memory of the following:

DENNIS A. TROUTE
(1946–2012)

NBC (and later ABC) news reporter, Brodard and Givral's friend, who kindly gave me a place to stay after curfew on the night of December 2, 1973, when the North Vietnamese blew up the Nha Be oil storage depot and shattered the windows of his Saigon apartment thirteen miles away; and

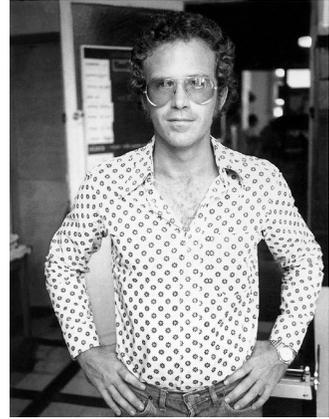


Photo by Neal Ulevich

THE UNKNOWN GIRL WITH THE GUITAR
(195?–1970)



Photo by Le Minh Truong

whose death compelled the story “The Photograph,” and who, it is the hope of this author, has long since ceased to be a Wandering Soul and has found a lasting measure of peace.

*“No matter what happens, keep on living, Mamselle.
A living human being is, after all, Nature’s most
beautiful creation.”*

—Leonid Leonov, *The Thief*

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LOVE BENEATH THE NAPALM

one

THE PHOTOGRAPH

Nguyen Van Manh crept along the border of the Lake of the Restored Sword, where the magic tortoise dwelt. Ever since he'd arrived in Hanoi the night before, a city swept up in rejoicing over the end of the war, Manh had run across thousands of people, his fellow veterans mostly, dressed like him in drab olive uniforms and sweat-stained pith helmets with a red star in the middle, and all of them happy, celebrating, ecstatic as newborn stars in the unfamiliar firmament of peace. In 1428, at the completion of another war, Emperor Le Loi had returned the symbolic sword with which he'd defeated the Chinese to the huge tortoise and walked away from the lake in triumph, a hero beloved of his people for all time. First Class Private Manh, barely noticeable in his shabby fatigues, halted in front of a soup vendor dispensing steaming bowls of *pho* under a *sau* tree outside the Hoa Phong Tower.

“Excuse me,” he said, his voice straining to make itself heard above the din of early morning trams and Moskwa automobiles

carrying people to work. “Can you tell me where Comrade Photographer Ngo Khai Duong lives?”

Just as the words were out of his mouth, Manh noticed the customer into whose bowl the old merchant was ladling soup. The young woman, who was turned away from him, was also dressed in fatigues. A floppy field hat clung to her forehead, under which her straight black hair drooped down her back. Manh felt a strange tightening in his chest, as though he’d been dragged under the surface of Restored Sword Lake by the renowned turtle itself and could no longer breathe. From behind, the woman might have been mistaken for Mei-linh.

“What did you ask, young man?” the soup seller said, his ladle suspended above the girl’s bowl. He glared suspiciously at the threadbare veteran in front of him. Vermicelli noodles wiggled like worms in the middle of the ladle.

Manh was terrified the young woman might turn around. *The dead do not return to earth to eat soup*, he told himself. But still he could not speak.

“Young man?” the vendor asked again, impatiently. He finished serving the girl, who wheeled at last.

“I was wondering where Ngo Khai Duong lives,” Manh said, easily now, relieved at the woman’s homeliness. Her face was squat and brown, like a potato, her nose flatter than most, her eyes set so far apart they looked as though they were trying to escape from each other. Smallpox scars pitted her face as well.

“Duong, the famous photographer,” Manh repeated.

The vendor gazed at him through a wreath of mist which rose from the aluminum pot in which his *pho* brewed. The old man stirred the soup to keep it off the boil.

“What do you want with a man like *him*?” he asked. “Comrade Duong is being made a Councillor of State today, even while we speak. Our whole neighborhood is proud of it.”

He sniffed in reflected glory at these last words and cast another disparaging look at the tattered PAVN private. The heroes who had saved the country in April 1975 were now the outcasts of May.

“For his photographs, you know,” the old man went on. A customer called from the other side of the soup stand, and the seller pointedly turned his back on Manh and strode away.

“Indeed, they *are* marvelous, don’t you think, Comrade?” the young woman slurping her soup whispered. “The photographs, I mean,” she added nervously.

She spoke up too soon, too eagerly, and Manh ruthlessly turned his back on her the way the soup vendor had on him. *What right did she have to talk about these photographs?* He was suddenly resentful of her. *What right did she have to be sitting there at all?* He was about to tramp away when the old man turned back.

“Return after dark,” he said. “Number 17, Liberation Court. Right over there.”

He jerked his head toward a building across the street, then flitted once more to the far side of the soup cart. Manh spun on his heels and stalked off without a word to the young cadre who still sat patiently above her bowl, gazing at him. How *dare* she remind him of Mei-linh!

“Here, girl, let me show you.”

Ngo Khai Duong cocked his squat black Hasselblad up onto his shoulder like a soldier hoisting his rifle to attention and strutted over to Mei-linh. His stringy salt-and-pepper hair was combed straight back over his temples in a rakish manner that reminded Manh of the playboy Emperor Bao Dai, and a Cambodian cigarette from which a long trail of ash hung down dangled from his mouth. He smacked his lips together as he came up to her, and his yellow, nicotine-stained teeth looked like a dog’s preparing to bite. Manh winced with displeasure as he looked on. With his free hand the great photographer tugged Mei-linh by the shirt sleeve, first to the left, and then, when that was not satisfactory, he cupped his fingers around the ball of her shoulder and nudged her gently back to the right. Manh’s

eyes narrowed as he noticed how long Duong's hand lingered on Mei-linh's shoulder. Until, in fact, the girl blushed.

"There, that is good," the photographer said, his face melting into a smile as he stepped backward. He flicked the ash from his cigarette and then slipped it between his lips again. He gazed at Mei-linh appreciatively.

"You *are* a pretty bird, you know," he said. "Now sit on that rock and pretend to play that guitar of yours. But don't block the others," he chided. "They'll look good in the background. Out of focus, of course."

He chuckled, and with a toss of his hand indicated two rather plain-looking female soldiers seated on another rock directly behind Mei-linh, swiftly shoveling rice into their mouths from a couple of earthenware bowls. The lunch time for Detonation Squad Number 2 had been reduced to ten minutes after the American bombing picked up. Having caught the eye of Ngo Khai Duong, however, Mei-linh could eat later, and take as long as she liked.

"No, no, you don't actually have to *do* it," Duong said impatiently, when Mei-linh suddenly began to play her guitar, delicately, beautifully. Manh watched her, enchanted. Mei-linh played on and on, strumming her heart out, ignoring the black looks of the photographer and the protesting whirr of his camera. . . .

Manh wandered the streets with time to kill rather than an enemy. A force as irresistible as love impelled him in the direction of the Old Quarter, where he knew he would only be sad. He shuffled past laughing crowds of shoppers, eager to capitalize on the changes wrought by the Great Spring Victory, who shoved and jostled one another in high good spirits to get at the wonderful wares displayed in the hundreds of trade shops which had replaced the guilds of Le Loi's time. Watches, belts, hairpins, foreign cosmetics, lacquer boxes, silver and gold

jewelry, reed mats, bamboo furniture. He stopped at a votive objects shop on Ma May and bought a sheaf of ghost paper, which he carried to a nondescript tube house on Hang Dao Street. His eyes welled up as he gazed at the tiny, glass-enclosed foyer where, before the war, Mei-linh and her mother had sold their red-dyed silk goods. The light glanced off the glass, and Manh saw a fleeting figure inside. His heart leaped so violently he felt it pounding in his throat, and he bounded forward and let out a muffled cry. A fat Indian moneylender glared back at him from the other side of the window, a mistrustful glint in his eye. Manh's hands trembled with disappointment as he took the votive paper from his pocket. The moneylender scowled at him as he lit it with a match, cupped his hands in a swift prayer, and then dropped the flaming fragments onto the sidewalk in front of the house. *Nor do the dead come back to sell the things of this world*, he thought mournfully, as he watched the paper burn.

"Get along with you, vagrant!" the Indian yelled, sticking his head through the door.

Manh turned away, his shoulders slumped as though he carried the entire sorrow of the war just ended all by himself. . . .

Late in the afternoon he became hungry and stopped for a plate of *cha xuong song* at an outdoor restaurant across from the central rail station. Three years earlier, he and Mei-linh had caught a troop train together from the same station, and his chest clamped up as he remembered it. The train was crowded with hundreds of ardent Youth Volunteers like themselves, their eyes glittering with revolutionary zeal, their hearts pounding a steady drumbeat to victory in the south.

Over the loudspeakers hanging from the station portico, Premier Pham Van Dong exhorted the country to forget the horrors of the war and move forward. Manh thought of Mei-linh again, and his jaw tightened. *Were those who'd lost so much to be forgotten, too?* His face muscles rippled with anger. *Who had the right to sacrifice her again?*

“My fellow citizens,” the premier droned, “the day has finally arrived when our great country has thrown off the shackles of colonialism. Peace has come at last, and now we must focus on reform.”

The blast of a train whistle drowned out the premier’s next words, and Manh looked up from the restaurant as another troop load of veterans arrived from the south. Now that the stern work of the war was over, the commanders had allowed the men and women to mingle freely, and several of the male cadres laughed heartily, their arms around the women, and waved bottles of Chinese and Russian beer. Manh saw a young man wheel suddenly to the woman next to him and give her a long kiss. The girl burst into a giggle and slapped him playfully, but then stuck her cheek up to be kissed again. Manh turned his eyes away and stared sullenly at the last bit of pork on his plate. How different it had been when he and Mei-linh were prodded like cattle into separate cars the day they left, only to be reunited in the jungle two weeks later. There was no time then for kisses, for laughter. . . .

“It is time to move on, Comrades,” Premier Dong intoned, his voice crackling with enthusiasm. “The war is over! Let us move forward with reform!”

Manh felt a sudden ache deep inside his stomach. He thrust his plate away and scowled at the repeated mantra of reform. The picture of Mei-linh lay before him in his mind, as sharp and clear as on the day Ngo Khai Duong had photographed her. Without her he felt like a man from whom the vital organs had been removed, a victim of the same explosion. What good was it to talk of reform?

“March with me!” Premier Dong concluded, his voice nearly hysterical now. “I command you! Forward!”

Manh scraped his chair back so vehemently it tipped over and clattered to the ground. The restaurant owner and several patrons stared at him, but he left the chair where it lay and stormed off. No one, not even the premier, had the right to order him to move on.

After taking his pictures Ngo Khai Duong reluctantly agreed to watch that day's performance, a rehashing of Le Loi's victory over the Chinese, meant to inspire the troops and give them the necessary will to go out and defuse the unexploded American bombs left behind after every air strike. The great photographer fidgeted in his field chair, however, muttering to Manh how anxious he was to develop his films and return to Hanoi.

"Recently the audience has been captivated more by the music than the acting," Manh said, hoping to spark his interest. How proud he was to say it, too! His soul stirred with admiration for Mei-linh.

"Really?" Duong said, yawning. He shrugged and glanced down at his Rolex, then stared off into space. Manh was miffed at the man's indifference and pulled back from him. His temples were throbbing wildly now, as they did every time right before the musicians stepped onstage. Eagerly he craned his neck as they filed in at last, in strict order of precedence. Bung, the bamboo flautist, Vu with his violin, Huynh the *dan tranh* zither player, and finally Mei-linh with her guitar slung over her shoulder. Manh caught his breath when for some reason the others suddenly stepped aside, like abashed moons retreating at dawn, and allowed Mei-linh to seat herself at the very front of the stage. His heart warmed with gratitude at this unexpected acknowledgment of her superiority. He glanced joyfully at the man beside him. Ngo Khai Duong was yawning again. Manh's fingers twitched with annoyance. How he longed to throttle him!

Just then Mei-linh set her jaw with determination and began to play, and the chords of a melody divine enough to enslave the Emperor of Jade himself floated out over the enraptured audience. The great photographer looked at the stage for the first time. Suddenly he sat bolt upright, and his eyes sparkled with interest.

"Beautiful," he murmured fervently. "Simply beautiful!"

Manh peeked at him, pleased.

“Yes,” he said proudly. “Isn’t her playing *magnificent*?”

He lingered at the edge of the Lake of the Restored Sword and watched the sun set. The purple blossoms of the *loc vung* trees glittered gaily in the fading light, but their loveliness failed to cheer him. The soup vendor outside the Hoa Phong Tower had already closed up his shop and departed for the night. In the distance Manh heard the jubilant sounds of party bands at the Museum of the Revolution, loudly playing the carefree songs of liberation, most of them French or American. Their upbeat tones filled him with deep sadness.

It grew dark, and young couples started to converge on the lake, some of them boldly holding hands just like westerners, proudly showing off their eagerness to move on. The slow strumming of a guitar came from across the water, which was the color of black silk in the brief hour of the unrisen moon. Nguyen Van Manh flinched at the sound, then sighed.

“Why are you not celebrating the victory, Comrade?”

In the darkness the young woman reminded him of Meilin from the front now, and he tensed as she approached. She had a thick book in her hand, the place marked with her forefinger, and Manh suspected she’d spent the day at the Temple of Literature. He itched to drag her into the lighted street where her ugliness would console him. The feeling troubled him.

“Have you been waiting for me . . . , Comrade?” he asked.

She laughed lightly, like a spoon clinking against a glass rim, and Manh found himself wishing the laugh had been coarser, more appropriate for a woman with a face like hers.

“Hardly. Like yourself, I am waiting for the return of Councillor Duong.” She nodded in the direction of the photographer’s apartment. At that moment an explosion shattered the relative stillness of the night, and a brilliant flash of color lit up the sky. Manh knew there’d be fireworks, but nevertheless he shrank into a defensive posture as though they might obliterate him.

More explosions came, more flashes of light. Had Premier Dong gone back on his word? The girl laughed merrily again.

“Relax, Comrade. The festivities are ending. Photographer Duong will be coming back soon.”

Manh gathered heart from the increasing light. Fireworks erupted all around them now. Then the moon rose, and a pale orange disc smiled on the waters of the Lake of the Restored Sword. Suddenly he was hit with a sharp pang, however.

“I’m sorry I was so . . . rude to you this morning,” he said. In the light of a particularly large explosion he noticed an unoccupied bench on the edge of the lake. He indicated it with his hand. “Would you like to sit down?”

She nodded, and they moved slowly toward it. On the bench next to them nuzzled a couple of lovers, the girl’s head cocked against the man’s shoulder. They whispered to each other, their voices as sweet as the murmur of wind through grass. As he looked at them, Manh felt his loss more intensely than at any other time since he’d arrived in the capital, and it pained him like the probing of a knife which had found his heart at last. The young veteran girl sat down beside him, and he felt a sudden yearning for her, as though she might be able to remove the knife without hurting him. The yearning was accompanied by a strange, sad tenderness.

She turned to watch the couple snuggling on their bench, and the sight of her floppy field hat and her long black hair glistening in the moonlight reminded him of how he’d first come to notice her that morning. He felt like a man caught on the brink of infidelity, and he drew his breath in sharply to cleanse himself of guilt. His resentment for her returned. What a temptress she was, coming on to him like that! And yet how slatternly she was! Just then she turned back to him, and the smile on her face faded instantly at the frown on Manh’s. She trembled, the lines etched into her potato face indicating her distress, and Manh’s annoyance at her instantly evaporated.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, making his tone as gentle as he could.

She laughed a third time, but the lightness was gone now.

“Oh, it’s all right,” she said, hesitantly. “I sensed you had an important reason for seeing Photographer Duong. You were very serious.”

Manh gazed toward the Lake of the Restored Sword while the happy couple continued to warble next to them. His eye caught the tall granite statue of Le Loi, meant to last the ages, astride his pedestal, the magic sword clutched triumphantly in his hand. Some cheerful young tourists, too young to be drafted, stared up at it in admiration. Manh clenched his jaws. Did any of them have any idea just how many bones it took to build a monument to a great war hero? Or whose they were? He tore his glance away from the adoring little group, afraid of what he might do if he didn’t.

“Am I correct?” his companion asked timidly.

He bit his lip and swallowed hard, then looked away again, this time toward Writing Brush Tower and the Sunbeam Bridge on the other side of the lake. The nagging ache knotted up his stomach again. Of course he had an important reason for seeing such a man! Yet how could he explain it to *her*?

He’d begged Mei-linh not to join the patrol sent out to defuse the remaining bombs after Ngo Khai Duong’s driver accidentally stepped on one lurking in the Lao grass like a krait. She was still shaking from her meeting with the great photographer, just after the performance, in the darkened tent where he did his developing work. Duong’s high-handedness must have offended her greatly, for she’d left the photograph behind her in the tent. But she didn’t want to talk about it and instead stalked off on the heels of the detonation squad. Manh followed her with his eyes, hoping she might relent, but then he turned sadly away when she did not. . . .

“And you?” he asked. “Why do *you* wish to see Photographer Duong?”

The young woman squirmed in her seat.

“My mother sent me,” she said softly. “She wishes me to get a photograph from him, if I can.”

Manh leaned instinctively toward her, then suddenly backed off.