Moebius

Volume 8
Issue 1 *Campus Controversy*

Article 33

1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation
Bodemer, Brett (2010) "Back and There," *Moebius*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 33.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius/vol8/iss1/33

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Back and There

Brett Bodemer

Nearly all these brief pieces were written shortly after returning from a year in Vietnam. I have assembled them under a title which may strike the reader as an odd reversal of the more expected title—There and Back—but anyone who reads even a few pages will discover that although I was Back I was clearly still There.

Revisiting these squibs a year or so after writing them, and re-reading my journal entries from the first few months in Vietnam, I rather remind myself of a phenomenon noted by the naturalist E. O. Wilson, who observed that herpetologists sometimes come from the ranks of those who initially have a strong revulsion to snakes. For me, it is not snakes, but place. In a few months, I learned to unlearn my fear and incomprehension of new streets, buildings and people. But the effect, alas, was non-transferable, and six months later yet, upon my return, the fear and incomprehension applied to my home.

Shoes. Socks. Muffled toes and soles shifting through the dark evening along an alien terrain. Walking to meet our friends, moving tentatively in those shoes like small houses, in those balmy, cotton socks. Feet have a knowledge of their own that allows them to function well. These shoes, these socks, were like falconers' hoods. Our feet were estranged from the sidewalk. And not only our feet. What, after all, was this meaningless strip of grass between us and the wide expanse of empty asphalt? Our feet did not want to stay on the too-narrow sidewalk, but the too-narrow strip of grass (muddied because it had recently been raining) was equally untenable. Our feet wanted to go out into the street where there was an abundance of room. The street, so desolate, so empty, except for a plethora of lines and arrows—empty, that is, until the delayed effect of a traffic light having changed somewhere in the distance: and then descends the menacing whirr of

gigantic vehicles, the triple threat of velocity, mass and momentum hurtling along in cars the size of small houses. To step into such a street seems death writ large—legs, arms, face, and torso would stand no chance against such egregious projectiles. The quantum packet of cars bursting past, the street again subsides into forlorn silence: for somewhere farther along, a signal has gone red, reducing drivers to sitters, until the light releases all that energy yet once again, making the street an impossible place to walk. What a waste of space! And signals! Half our time, supposedly walking to meet our friends, we spent standing on corners, in those shoes, in those socks, waiting for signals to cycle through—leading left, lagging left, now these lanes, now those, now this direction, now that one—who creates such dyspeptic systems and dares to call it transportation? Good traffic systems reduce stopping to a minimum, and privilege creative movement over right angles and direct queuing. And while we stood on those corners, speechless, in those shoes, in those socks, we wondered: how did we live like this before?

Dinner itself was no less alien. Never mind that we'd had a farewell dinner in the same restaurant with the same friends at about the same time of the evening, the same time of the year, just one year before. The friends were the same, but our experience of the place was not. Why, for instance, was the waitress kneeling down to meet us at eye level, then going on at length about what *she* liked on the menu? Was this any different than a nubile girl in a tight Carlsberg dress enticing you to buy that brand in some Hanoi restaurant? The intimacy was about as genuine, and quite honestly, less honest. When speech is conducted primarily by body language, it's easy to know the score; but the appeal by personality is slyer, more slippery, and insidious. It reminds me of what Henry Ford once said to the effect that "You must treat people as people so they don't recognize that you actually view them as commodities." Yet our friends seemed perfectly at ease with the procedure and did not hesitate to solicit further information from our new-found friend, the waitress.

No less strange to me was the way we each ordered, and drank, our own beer. Rather than order several bottles at once and assist each other in keeping the glasses full from the most recently opened bottle, we followed a more proprietary protocol. We all toasted our return once at the outset, and then, alas, no more. Whenever I raised my glass to my lips to sip, automatically casting my eyes around for someone else who might wish to do so, I was perplexed that no one was similarly trolling, but instead saw people who, though gathered in a group and talking together, seemed to be eating and drinking alone.

Another disorienting feature was the emergence of semantic coherence from conversations taking place beyond the confines of our table. Though the background chatter seemed bizarrely muted, as though q-tip swabs had been stuffed in my ears (America is on the whole far quieter than Vietnam), whole sentences now intruded themselves on my

attention, in part because of the relative quiet, but mostly because the people around me were speaking my native language, in intonations, syntax, and idioms I knew—and which, the instant I heard them, seemed all—too familiar. It was sinking in on me that I had returned to a land of clichés, adenoidal elocutions, and grim predictability. I had grown to love conversations I barely understood and which were full of surprises if explained to me in the abridged version. I had grown to love the ambient pitch and intonation of conversations that did not concern me (even if perhaps they included comments about me) because I had no idea what was being said: I could enjoy the language as music and sheer conviviality. But here, in this restaurant, it was not an inherently indecipherable and hence enjoyable music: here, the easily understood meanings and transparent intentions overshadowed the auditory joy and removed the mystery. Regrettably, I understood what people were saying.

Even the bill and the manner of paying seemed unsociable and clumsy. It was not simply a question of the prices, which were horrifying even if one adjusted for income. Early on, while scanning the menu, the prices had taken my breath away—like jumping into an ice-cold lake—but when, after dessert, and after more conversation with our new-found friend the waitress, the arrival of the final bill and our handling of it proved nothing less than depressing. Though someone had invited, no one paid for all—no, we each sorted out who had what—and pitched in. A year ago this would have seemed perfectly normal. But now this seemed improper, anti-social, and simply wrong. Moreover, in my gut it felt indecent to spend this much on a meal when some of our friends we'd just left didn't make that much money in a month.

It was nice to see our friends. It was horrifying to be back.

It seems like such a little thing—eating an orange—how you cut it and how you swallow it...and yet...

You start with a small orange—which is really misnamed because it is more green than orange. It has a delicate peel that you pull easily away from the flesh, sometimes in a single, long, spiral strip. And then you or one of your friends separates the orange into segments—placing the crescent-shaped cells on the peel—and as you talk or work or do some of both, you offer or accept sections of the orange—a sweet, slow comestible.

As opposed to taking a knife and hacking many times straight through a thick-skinned orange whose color lives up to its name. And then, while hovering over the sink, or hunched over a plate, tearing the flesh away from the wedges of peel with your teeth, letting the emptied, triangular shells drop into the sink or onto the plate, or even directly into the open and beckoning maw of the kitchen garbage can. So fast, efficient, and oh so lonely.

How you eat an orange says a lot about how you live.

The airport taxi arrived too soon, breakfast was hurried, we'd barely finished at the hotel desk, our bags, carriers of our portable life, were being wrested out of our hands and into the taxi. For two weeks now we'd been saying goodbye to all our friends, saying farewell to the closest of all just the night before when they had come to visit us at the hotel, and now we were being delivered once more into the hands of strangers. To passively occupy a cab—just the two of us—with someone else driving, was a regression, having divested ourselves of the Honda Alpha Wave motorbike less than twelve hours before. The driver knew a savvy route, one we'd not expected, and so we did not lay eyes once more on the sights of our neighborhood, not on Giảng Võ street, Cát Linh street, or Vườn Mỉu, but instead we wound through the even tighter streets of the old quarter. Even before we reached the Dike Road it was all too fast, as, just beyond the blur of motorbikes, the intricate quilt of narrow buildings and alleys rushed by. I say rushed by, and yet we were still late on account of the morning traffic. In my case, the blur of the buildings and roads was worsened by tears. I found myself *not* wanting to leave a place to which I had not wished to come. I was like Proust light.

The bum's rush out of Hanoi only got worse at the airport. The ticketing line was all messed up. (I'd like to use a more elegant phrase, but none describes the scene quite so well.) A middle-aged Italian man who seemed to be taking several middle-aged Vietnamese women on a labor junket, was alternating by making ugly noises at one of his companions and then at the ticket-agent. A male ticket agent arrived, but the tension did not decrease. When our turn at the counter came, the agent, still off-balance, forgot to tell us to pay the exit fee before going through customs. We passed through customs and reached our turn at the security check. Unfortunately, the two young men there were engaged in eyeing a pair of legs one line over, and were not to be disrupted by something like their job. Maggie made a remark in Vietnamese, and I coughed. Rare mistakes on our part, I might add, but fatal. So they riffled and scrutinized our tickets, then scrutinized and riffled some more, and concluded after much smirking deliberation that we still needed a ticket. Never mind that we had a ticket. But they did not care to specify which ticket we needed exactly, and pointed to another counter. We went, and were told there that yes, we did need a ticket, that we had to go back to the ticket counter. Said ticket counter, of course, was on the other side of customs. As we tried to walk back our passports were taken from us by an obliging customs agent who said he would hold them for us while we went to the ticketing counter—where the Italian, too, had returned and was now ranting about wanting his luggage back. Our turn came again, and we were told quite simply that we had to pay the exit fee, available at a window placed just our side of customs. Fee paid, and passports reclaimed, back at security, we chose to stand in the other line, but were sent back to our lusty and surly young fellows, who smiled, and

let us through. Aside from a checking in at a neighborhood police station the day we arrived, this was the only repugnant official treatment we had received in an entire year. Sadly, it was the finishing push of the bum's rush. We barely had time before boarding to text message and talk to our friends on our phones—phones that we were pretty sure would no longer work once we touched down an hour and a half later in Bangkok. We were right about this. And so six minutes in the boarding lounge and a few last minute messages were all we had left of an entire year.

The next morning, ungodly early, at the Bangkok airport, our eyes barely ajar, after checking in at the ticket counter, we queued up for a flight on an American carrier. It was a series of lines, in fact, and unlike Hanoi, the security staff did not pore too much over our paperwork. Nonetheless, we might have sped things up if we'd just handed them some surgical gloves and KY jelly. Too bad neither of these was among my toiletries, for they started by seizing half of these. And what matter to me? I already felt like shit, I might as well look and smell that way too. Yes, to return to the so-called land of the free, our proof of good citizenship was to strip ourselves half-naked—ditching the shoes, the belt, the watch, the spare change—and then, after passing through the electronic arbor, letting people in uniforms grope our legs and torsos. We then had to open our carry-on luggage and watch other uniformed personnel poke and prod the contents. My designated inspector even lifted my camera out of its case for visual inspection. But tell me—if you were a dedicated terrorist—wouldn't you know how to hide a bomb *inside* a camera without changing its weight or appearance? Wouldn't you be clever enough to make your piece of Armageddon look as innocuous and as user-friendly as any Kodak or Canon?

For the first time in twelve hours, I suddenly found myself staring at my real future rather than the imagined present of my immediate Hanoi past. I suddenly realized that we were returning to the land of paranoia—the land, actually, of litigation, for all these measures did not so much minimize terrorism as minimize the potential for recriminate lawsuits in the event of a terrorist act. My belt back on, my watch still one notch too loose, my carry-on luggage re-fastened but still bearing the shame of violation, I sought out the remotest seat of the boarding gate, a dark space under the stairs, closed my eyes, and wished to God that I was flying in another direction.

Bathing will never be the same. The truth is this: a bathtub/shower combination is extremely confining, though you may never have thought so if that's what you've been accustomed to for most of your life. It seems natural enough, to be sure. But only because we are used to stepping way up over the edge of the tub, turning tightly in a small, smooth space to slide the semi-transparent door or curtain (whichever you may happen

to have) across the length of the tub so that the water destined to splash off your body will know its place and be safely contained. Of course you most often perform this nimble maneuver shortly after rising out of bed, possibly the least nimble hour of the day. It's no wonder people often hurt their necks and backs in the shower—whether leaping back from a jet of icy water, stooping forward to adjust the pressure, or pursuing an errant bar of soap. The space is like a small length of jetliner aisle, with motion reduced to almost nothing. The water, too, comes from a fixed point on the wall, requiring you to contort so as to oblige its trajectory—again, all this in the early hours of the morning when the speech center grunts and the muscles groan. Can you manage a true squat to wash your feet in one of these porcelain maidens? Perhaps with the greatest of effort, like a giraffe tethered to a milking machine.

My guess is that, given this place of confinement, the cracks between your toes are rarely visited directly by your fingers or soap.

Now let me describe a viable alternative, one found commonly in Hanoi: this is what you might call the bathroom without borders. Here, the shower is not sequestered from the rest of the room like a deranged relative. The whole room, in effect, is a shower, with the convenient inclusion of a toilet and a sink. A drain is set in the tile floor, the floor being slightly inclined so water will flow to it, then down it, from all sides. One of the beauties of this arrangement is that if any of these three bathroom appliances overflows, the water has somewhere more logical to go than into the rooms directly below. What's more, the shower head is not merely mounted on the wall, but sports a long flexible hose that can be aimed where and as one likes. There is more than ample room for moving about—you can not only sing in this shower, but dance as well. Of course is it just as slippery as the bathtub/shower combination, but that is why you wear *dep*—plastic sandals—whenever you step in and out of the room. This bathroom stays clean not only because you in effect wash the floor every time you shower, but because you are not dragging the dregs of the street in on your shoes! And because the entire room is designed to get wet, you are not required to towel yourself dry right after showering (yet another recipe for hurting oneself during early morning rigor mortis.) Instead, you can drip dry as you shave, groom, and brush your teeth. There is a learning curve to all this, of course for instance, aiming the water-jet *away* from the toilet-seat—but the ergonomic gain is clearly a boon if one wants to actually enjoy the morning ablutions. Give the body more room, more leash, and it will learn to make use of it. Mine certainly did, for within weeks of showering in such a room, I found myself squatting like a frog to wash my toes with my fingers, rearing back like an elephant to enjoy the water-jet, stretching my arms freely wide like an albatross, and strutting happily like a peacock just to greet the day.

I have tried several times now to write about Hanoi—about walking, driving, eating, sleeping, and living there—and each time afterwards, when I read what I've written I am struck by how my descriptions might easily be taken as knocks *against* the place. This is the reverse of my aim. And I confess it puzzled me until I thought about it at greater length. Then it struck me: if you are presenting a reversal of values but are addressing an audience still inhabiting a pre-reversed order, what you present is bound to seem occasionally odd, messed up much of the time, and repulsive or dismal at worst. Having arrived in Hanoi from that pre-reversed universe myself, for months I found many things odd, messed up, and repulsive. But, having experienced a reversal of values, I can now think about identical situations and details and consider them regular, ordained, and pleasing. As the playwright Plautus said: give me some lines and I can turn them from tragedy to comedy without changing a word. Similarly, things that might have appalled me before (though undergoing no substantive change) can now make me break out in a wide smile. So it is important for me to keep in mind that the few people who read my descriptions are likely to have responses running the gamut from incomprehension to queasiness.

Take oddness, for example. I had two students, originally from Haiphong, Hip and Hing, who visited three mornings a week for two hours of English tutoring. Maggie was often at the museum when we finished the lesson at eleven, and they always asked who I was going to eat lunch with. I usually answered that I would be eating lunch alone, and smiled. I could tell by the pout of Hing's lower lip and the sudden uni-brow on Hip's forehead that my response was either sad or weird or both, and that my smile was mystifying. I then explained that I liked eating lunch alone, which brought some relief to their stricken features. I doubt if they believed me, but I wasn't lying—for just as in Honolulu and Seattle—I did like eating lunch alone. But soon they began to sporadically tote items along for lunch, providing each dish as we ate it with a running commentary on its origins, ingredients, and health benefits. On occasion, they invited me to go to lunch, we'd go, and then I'd reciprocate by inviting them to lunch. The truth of it is, by May, when they asked if I was eating alone, I gave them exactly the same answer as before—but the smile was no longer genuine. Where once I had once relished eating alone, without interruption, or chatter, it had become…well, sad. To me it had seemed odd that people would always want to eat with others, but now, well, now it seemed odd that I would want to eat alone. Here, a small reversal of values: personal space and solitude yielding place to community and conviviality.

For messed up, no shortage of examples. Our house was on an alley feeding into a very broad and congested street named Cát Linh. The house stood precisely at the spot where the alley diverged into a network of even smaller alleys, called *ngáchs*, where even nimble Hanoians had to dismount and walk their motorbikes. The houses on our alley,

like nearly all Hanoi houses, were tall and narrow—like square lighthouses—with most walls abutting directly on other houses. Because we had a *ngách* on one side and an alley on the front, we had the luxury of two open walls. House-fronts on the alley side were about fifteen feet away, and close as this might seem, it was still spacious compared to the distance on the *ngách* side: any NBA player could have done push-ups with his feet on the ledge of our kitchen window and his hands on the ledge of our neighbor's. Things were so tight that if you were so inclined you could have easily spit from any window and hit the house opposite. What it all boils down to is this: you and your neighbors live on top of each other. From dawn to eleven at night you hear each other talking, shouting, laughing, coughing, hocking phlegm—there was one woman whose horrible cough always forced me (not without some difficulty) to repress a laugh, for it always expired in a waning moan as though she were breathing her last. The noises of the neighbors were augmented by itinerant vendors, who often squatted and arranged their fruit on our front doorstep, and whose cries circulated continually through the narrow lanes, wafting up on cold winter mornings like the laments of lost ghosts. Messed up? I certainly thought so at first, wondering: how can people live with this onslaught of racket?—motorbikes, TVs, kids playing, grandparents yelling at the kids, the constant hammering and clanking of the motorcycle repair shop in the "level 4" housing next door? Once, when Maggie was on her mobi-phone on the ground floor, the person on the other end asked her if she was at the swimming pool. "No," she answered, "just in the living room." But now I wonder: what is so perfect and privileged about a place where all living human presence has been sucked out as if by a vacuum? How can you not love this ambient hum, this cradling caress of human life? Though densely populated and intensely noisy, our alley and its *ngáchs*, in our district, in our neighborhood, did *not* constitute a ghetto or a slum. Though not as pristine as some suburban American boulevard with an esplanade, it was in no way derelict. People gently swept outside their doors at least twice a day, often sprinkled the dust down with water, and a community work detail gathered diligently every Saturday at the banging of a pan just outside our door at 6:45 am. The noise at the juncture of our alley and several *ngáchs* was a symphony in which everyone played an instrument and added a part.

As for the shift from repulsive to delightful—where to start? With dog? Pig-brain soup? Or fertilized baby duck-eggs? Let me dispose of these latter two by reporting that I have repeatedly woken up since my return dreaming of eating each of these, and am sorely disappointed each time when I awaken. Let's leave these two succulencies aside, then, and for what you are most likely to find repulsive, let us speak instead about dog. Starting with the morning when, pausing on my motorbike during rush hour, I glanced to my left, and saw on the nearest motorbike an array of shriveled canine snouts in stacked alternation with hollow canine rectums. Balanced and strapped securely, the dogs looked

like clones—alike in size, with bronzed and nearly hairless skins gleaming in the pale winter sun. For many months after I could not think of eating dog without a visceral intestinal twinge, but as time wore on I began to wonder if I might not someday have the strength to try it. And as the pleasant weather of T-t gave way to the warming, mildewey Spring and then to the suffocating summer, it did not strike me as so horrid. And so in July, I cheerfully accepted the invitation of one of my classes to go and try it. Between the invitation and the event, I had two days to think about it, and as we planned to go immediately after the Saturday morning class, I admit that I found myself feeling queasy while teaching that morning. Class over, though, we formed a motorbike caravan in the parking lot and headed over to Nui Trúc street. Quite close to our house on Cát Linh, this is known for its many establishments serving Fido. And I would be lying if I told you that it didn't taste good. It was prepared many ways: boiled (still with the skin—well, this wasn't so much to my liking—I don't like fried pork rinds much either); roasted, tasty if dipped in shrimp paste; then bowls of liver and sundry other organs; but the best was saved for last—dog stew. The meat was so tender that it fell apart without chewing. And though I assure you that it tasted good, I cannot say what it tasted *like*. It tasted like meat. Like dog meat, in fact. Not like chicken or goat or beef—it was like itself. And anyway, if it tasted like chicken or goat or beef—or even tofu—why not just eat those things instead? Must everything always exist in comparison?

In any case, as the six or seven of us ate dog in various guises and drank beer together I also received a wealth of information about it—it is especially good for men's strength and health, couples do not go to eat dog together, there are certain periods of the lunar calendar when it should be avoided or sought out, and, as I learned later, it is a good meal if one wants to curtail the continuation of a suspected string of bad luck.

I am not saying that everyone should run out and eat the nearest firehouse Dalmatian or covet Fluffy for dinner. I only want to say that aside from the flavor it's really no different than eating a cow or a pig, and greatly to be enjoyed if you are in good company.

But again, I have to consider that you may be coming to this from the universe of pre-reversed values. I might be able to make you see what I saw, while failing, however, to make you feel what I felt. It is the risk I run. I may be preaching Matthew or John to a confirmed Satanist. I just ask you to keep in mind that through it all my intent is not to demean, but to praise.

❀

It was nearly T-t. The car moved forward on the levee that seemed too narrow for it. A man dismounted his bicycle and approached from the other direction. It was late afternoon and the haze behind him was mildly illuminated by the sun. Behind him, too, you could make out the lines of trees and cluster of buildings that defined the town we'd just left. In all other directions, the haze hovered over endless fields here and there

enlivened by a motorbike, a cow, or men and women shouldering their tools homeward. Our friend Tham chirped excitedly in the front passenger seat, and the driver stopped. We stepped quickly out of the car (but carefully, too, on that narrow levee) and in only a few seconds she had introduced us to her father, the man with the bike. Both she and her father had smiles that were as warming as sunlight. His bicycle basket was overflowing with bundles of incense. He had been heading out to honor the ancestral graves, but had turned back when he had heard the car, hoping it was his daughter. They had planned to burn the incense together. But it was late now, and she needed to show the driver the way to their house. A brief discussion resulted in her father asking us if *we* could help him with the ancestral offerings. It seemed impertinent for us to accept—as we did not know either him or the ancestors—but it seemed even more impertinent to refuse. And though hesitant at first, we cheerfully agreed. Our friend climbed back into the car. The car retraced its path along the levee in reverse gear, and we accompanied her father, who, still walking the bike, had resumed his original course.

Occupying a patch of ground as high as the levee, the tombs clustered in the village graveyard proved to be closer in the gently lit haze than they had seemed when he had first pointed them out. The head, and then the rest of a cow, greeted us from around the corner of the nearest tomb. She then nonchalantly passed us by. These were reburial tombs, raised alcoves on large bases, with names, dates and pictures at eye level. Within, unseen, grouped by family, were cleaned and consolidated remains. Tham's father gave explanations to Maggie in Vietnamese about the lineages as he led us to each tomb on his route. At the first tomb, he demonstrated how to light the incense wrappers and use them as a punk for igniting the incense. He handed us several lit sticks, then placed the ones he still held in the ash-filled stand and bowed three times. He invited us to do the same. I wasn't quite sure what I should think about as I did so, but as I followed the physical formula, I tried to interiorize the moment: the fields, the haze, the wisp of a man with twinkling eyes, and the array of ancestors from the village of Duyen Phuc. As we made the round of tombs, he invited us to take a turn at lighting the incense. The afternoon breeze was picking up, and we tried as best we could to use our bodies as windbreaks. He was much more adept than either of us, that was for sure. All three of us laughed when I reached out to snag an incense wrapper that was escaping on the wind and threatened to become litter. There were wrappers and scrap-papers everywhere, some of them firmly planted in the abundant cow-pies. My concern for one piece of litter was clearly alien, and more than somewhat absurd. In the slanting sun, in the breeze and haze, we burned incense at numerous tombs. The basket finally empty, the three of us walked back together along the levee. Eventually, we entered the stone walls and paths of the village proper and before long entered their two-room house, where members of this family had lived continuously for a hundred and fifty years, and where we had been invited to have dinner and spend the night nestled in the bosom of the family.

❀

My cell phone beeped at me once from the bedside table. Christmas Eve had just turned into Christmas Day—that is, it was a few minutes after midnight. A smile came to my face as I identified the sound that was waking me up. Someone had sent me a text message. One of my favorite parts of living in Hanoi had been the joy of text messaging—the forced brevity, the creative use of phonetic abbreviations—and the ease and warmth of sending and receiving electronic impulses whose greatest message was not even textual but simply to communicate to people who were not present that you knew they were alive. I had made it a habit to silence my Hanoi mobile phone when going to bed at night, since my friends messaged me often and late. But I no longer bothered doing so with my new Honolulu phone, since nobody indulged me in text messaging.

So when the Honolulu cell phone beeped at me from the bedside table, I smiled as I would have in Hanoi, and continued smiling because it brought back such good memories. But I was also smiling out of curiosity. I had received several messages on the new phone, none of them intended for me. The first had come on the third Thursday of November, wishing me a Happy Thanksgiving. The second, later that day, announced to me: "Bobby just died—check the forums." After that second message I was tempted to send a return message, letting the sender know that these messages were probably not finding their intended recipient. But my bemusement and curiosity got the better of me, and I did not respond. A few other messages came, with some cryptic alliterative coding, but these were just spam, and did not show the same sending number with the local 808 prefix. Ten days before Christmas, a crude and not even remotely funny joke about inbreeding came from the now-familiar 808 number. My amusement at the continuing one-sided exchange still surpassed my dislike of the joke: why text message someone who doesn't message back? And why, if that's the case, text a joke like that? The joke itself now made me identify the sender as a male, although you never really know. And as for the gender of the intended recipient? Who could tell? Who was I supposed to be? In this exchange, who was I? Was I young? Old? Male? Female? A friend or a sibling? I had suggestive clues, but no definite markers. My status was appealingly fluid.

So, as I reached out a few minutes after midnight, I smiled, partly because I knew that somebody, somewhere, was sending a message. That it was *not* being sent to *me* was really beside the point. I flipped the phone open, and read the message:

Merry Christmas! :)

"And Merry Xmas 2 u 2, whoever u r! :)" I thought, smiling widely, and wanting to return the wish by text. But if I had done that, I would also have felt obliged to tell this stranger (in my mind clearly male now) that he was texting the wrong number.

It also struck me, on the downside, that by not responding, by spurning the sender with silence, I might actually be making his Christmas less joyous.

Yet I was too selfish to respond and put this to an end—these messages reminded me of such good things. And I was curious as well, not wanting to deprive myself of further glimpses into this invisible relationship that to me was so puzzling and amusing to parse.

Maybe if he texts me at New Year's I will let him know—not about my vicarious voyeurism—but simply that he's got the wrong number.

But then again, maybe I won't, as even letting go of silly things can be so hard.

❁

The following notes are cribbed from a journal entry, which, even that evening I had given the title: Ông Tây Goes Fishing. Ông Tây in this case would be me. During a fishing excursion at a small recreational lake a few kilometers from Hanoi, children, surprised to see me at this wholly non-tourist venue, heralded my sighting by repeatedly shouting "Ông Tây! Ông Tây!" which means, more or less, "Mister West!" or "Uncle West!"

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This is a tale of two rodents, one rat and one mouse, one in November, and the other ten months later in September. What they have in common is that they both met their destiny at the hands of women, and both in the presence of Maggie and myself. What the two rodents do not have in common is that we were spectators in the death of the first, but participants in the death of the latter. In ten months, we had travelled far in Hanoi.

First was the rat. Maggie and I were sitting on a bench on the shore of lake Hoàn Ki-m, as near as one might get to the postcard-worthy Turtle Pavilion. Not that we had chosen our locale for that reason. In fact, we were lamenting our inability to successfully buy, on the nearby street, a mobile phone that worked. We had come to the lake to gather our wits and sulk a bit about being bilked for a useless SIM card. As we sat there in the warm gray haze, on the lake surrounded with Canon billboards posted for the upcoming APEC conference, two older women, chatting away, came to the water's edge just beside us. They were carrying a rat in a cage. The cage itself was strung on a chain. They squatted side by side on the shore, still talking, and one woman lowered the cage into the water. As it sank a stream of air bubbles perforated the thin scum on the surface. The women kept chatting away, not paying much attention to the cage. About five minutes later, they hoisted the cage up, and took a curious look in at the very wet, black and still rat. They nodded approvingly, and when one opened the cage door and the rat corpse dropped into the water with a plop. The women strolled off together, their conversation uninterrupted. Maggie and I were both appalled and astounded. When we told a friend of ours, he simply laughed because he thought it was ridiculous that anyone would take so much trouble to dispose of a single rat in Hanoi.

Ten or eleven months later, again in the late afternoon, we were spending time with our friends Lê Anh and H-ng, two women in their late twenties. As we sat together around

a low round table, we heard rustling in the cabinets beside us. Lê Anh and H-ng took a quick look at each other, then sprang into action. They began removing all the drawers from the cabinet, starting at the top and working their way down. Maggie and I rose to aid them, helping them move the drawers further away, while they continued to lower the perimeter on the mouse. They were removing the next-to-last row of drawers, when the mouse leapt out and dove down to the last and lowest bastion of safety. H-ng armed herself with a broom, and I emptied a wastebasket, thinking to trap the mouse under it if it should come my way. Maggie pulled out her camera. The two intrepid women closed in on the mouse, pulling out the last drawers. The mouse leapt out and I slammed the wastebasket over it. H-ng was now poised over the wastebasket. I cautiously lifted one edge, but no mouse. I raised it a little higher—then it scurried out and away. H-ng gave a quick strike with the handle of the broom and landed a stunning blow. She then calmly pinned the mouse under the end of the broom-handle. "They act dead," she informed us. Poised there like Saint George over the dragon, she waited a moment, and when it gave itself away with a little breath, she calmly and calculatedly crushed its body with her full weight on the broomstick. It was awe-inspiring. Maggie did not get any pictures of the death-crush, but only of the pursuit. I do not remember how or where the corpse was cast away, or if we helped put the cabinets back together, but I do know we all conspired to rid Hanoi of one mouse, with teamwork, agility, and unperturbed poise.

I feel compelled to write an epilogue by way of conclusion. There are thousands of things I might have included: learning to ride a motorbike, locusts, termites, borer-bugs, geckos, crossing streets, clothes flying off the roof, translating Bonnefoy and Molière, teaching six-year olds while sitting on the floor and playing with our toes, being excused because I was a foreigner, pantomiming my needs—the list is virtually endless. And yet as Voltaire said, the best way to be boring is to leave nothing out.

What I Can Say About the American War in Vietnam—A lot of Americans have written about what they call the Vietnam War. Even though Americans fought against Vietnam on Vietnamese soil and not in America, it was still a traumatic event for many Americans. For some people it was terrible because their sons never came back or came back minus a leg or an arm or their sanity. For a greater number it was terrible because many people strongly supported the U.S. Government's involvement while many others just as strongly opposed it: where feelings ran so high it seemed there was no room for neutrality. Even though I was a child during the conflict, it was inescapable: the protests, the arguments, the gruesome footage, and the unwavering fact that everyone seemed to think only they could be right.

My father, who fought in the Pacific in World War II, was no fan of any war. I remember him making me and my older siblings watch coverage of the war on the evening news, telling us, "Hopefully you'll remember this so when people talk about it years from now you'll know if they're lying to you or not." Some people might argue that pictures of bombs and napalm and bodies are not suited to children under ten, but in retrospect, I think he was right to insist on it. I also remember my parents sending telegrams to their Congressmen on the day they learned that the U.S. was bombing Cambodia.

But there is a single personal episode I'd like to share here, one that puzzled me for decades, and which, just this year, has taken on yet another nuance. I was in the second grade. I was seven, and the school-year was 1966-67. Picture second-graders anywhere: bright clothes, bright eyes, and smiles with many missing teeth. But in this classroom there are only a handful of white students, the rest are black with clean-shaven heads. A man named Steve, the adopted brother of one of my best friends, had been asked to come talk to the class about Vietnam, where he was serving in the military. He brought photos, and lots of them, and talked about his Vietnamese friends and about how wonderful the Vietnamese people were. He may have talked about food and festivals as well, but I don't remember anything about combat or war or pain. What stood out in my mind—for years and years afterwards, in fact—were the photos of smiling people and how much he talked about his friends. The reason this stood out for me is that I could not put these pictures together with the ones I'd seen on TV. It seemed that they were two separate things, and in my rigid mind, they could not both be right.

Even as a teenager, after the war was over, I sometimes wondered about Steve's presentation to the second-grade class. Since I was older and now knew much more about the human cost of the war, I judged him and felt that he had deliberately lied. I felt that what he had done was wrong. Since he had moved far away from his adopted family, I never had the chance to ask him about it. Until, that is, sometime in the early 1980s, when I was in my twenties. I met him by coincidence at their house, and oddly, we were the only people present. Since we were alone I felt comfortable enough to ask him about it. Of course, many years had passed, and it was always possible that I had not remembered correctly: perhaps he had never come to talk. When I asked him, he looked both puzzled and surprised, and said that he had nearly forgotten about it. He wondered how I could have remembered since I was only seven or eight at the time. And then I told him why. I told him what I remembered, about the pictures and friends, and told him that I had never been able to reconcile that with what else I knew about the war. I asked him why he had chosen to talk about it the way he did. We were standing in the kitchen. He cast his gaze up to where the walls meet the ceiling, then looked back down and told me. He said that most of the students in the room were black and reminded me that a lot of the soldiers fighting in Vietnam were black, because they did not have the education or

other resources to dodge the draft. He realized it was a clear possibility that many of the second-graders might have brothers serving in Vietnam right then and there, and simply put, he did not want to scare them. He did not want to make them afraid by telling them about the really bad aspects of the war. In fact, the only reason he agreed to come speak was to try to assure anyone who might have had a brother serving there.

My sense of righteousness had never allowed this possibility to occur to me. I had always assumed he had just lied in order to toe the line, and inevitably, to keep the war going. I felt stunned when he told me this and then I felt incredibly stupid, realizing that a less judgmental person than myself might have thought of it on his or her own. Now, though, it made sense to me, and instead of disdain, I gained respect for what he had done. It was the only adult conversation I ever had with Steve, but it was a happy event for me, resolving one of several disturbing puzzles that have followed me through my life.

That was in the 1980s. Now, over twenty years after the conversation with him, and more than forty years from the date of his presentation, I again have to revise my appraisal. For nearly one year I have lived in Hanoi. I have seen T-t and have eaten many great meals. More important than the celebrations or the food are the friends I have made. Friends who have taught me a lot about being cheerful, resourceful, and vibrant. I, too, want to take pictures of them with their great smiles and record the sound of their golden laughter, to take home and show and play to everyone I know. For years, I had thought Steve had deliberately lied for all the wrong reasons. Then, after our conversation, I thought he had lied for all the right reasons. But at no point had it ever occurred to me that he had not lied when it came to how he felt about the people he met and the friends he had made. I just thought he was trying to put the best light on a bad situation. Now, once again, I've learned better. And I am happy to say that it is one of the most pleasant lessons that I've ever learned.