



John Schafer
DaNang, South Vietnam
April 14, 1969

Battle Lines

Now you've learned not to let your eyes
Rest too long on a yellow face,
Or allow them to reveal yourself
Too much, too soon, with too much joy
Or gentle interest, or hope laid bare
For a friendly word or things to share.

Now you've grown painfully aware
That the long unhurried look,
Rich in promises of a world to share,
Was a luxury of another place
And time, and now you know how rare
That way of looking always was.

Now you know a look can seem a stare;
No matter how quick or kind the glance,
Or even if your eyes should meet by chance
The face sets and the awful sneer is there;
The lips like battle lines are drawn,
And it's too late to talk of things to share.

And all the while you force yourself to see
That the hatred and quiet disdain,
Are for what you represent, and the pain
From other times when he like you began
His looks with hope, felt the pain,
And learned not to make that mistake again.

The surprise is not the people's hate
But that those lines etched in armored plate
Do ever break, can ever soften
Into something like a smile;
And hands still reach across the breach
For things more warm than charity.

IVS/CORDS
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Huế

Air horn on an army truck,
Who said you could squawk like that
And shatter the quiet of this place?
Barbed wire, who said you could sprawl
Along the bank of every stream,
And lie in wait
For girls who came to wash their feet at dawn?
Who said you could lurk in the shadows
Along every tree-lined lane,
Where lovers used to walk as the sun went down?

Loud jet, who gave you the right to roar and screech
And pour your hot monoxide air
Over the River of Perfumes?

Noisy chopper with your whirling blades,
Who said you could disturb the air
Over Tụ Đức's tomb?
Who said it wasn't a sin
To violate the lotus blossoms in his pond
With your wild wind?

You, War, I know, for Huế was too serene,
Spurned your crude advances,
Insulted your virility,
And so you stepped in and ravished her with hate,
Claimed the right to desecrate
And hid your hurt pride behind a wall of fire.

Huế, September, 1969

Đà Lạt

An aging Citroen or two
And Pedalo boats on the lake
Remnants of the old resort
Scattered through the town
But the French are gone
And Vietnamese children play
In the yards of houses they deserted
And chop sticks clatter now
In rooms where once French laughter ringed secure
Above the land they took for France
Now Eastern youths sit drinking
“Café filt” and dreaming
In repainted old cafes
Wedged in between the ghosts that came before
And the Americans who’ve come to fight another war
Smoking Salems carefully
Working on their own style
But every puff’s affected
Spells that won’t be broke
Though the streets are named for Eastern kings
And French names are painted over
With Oriental hope

Đà Lạt, August, 1969

Servant Girl

All day long I see her from my window
In the yard across the way,
Cutting bamboo shoots for the pigs to eat,
Cooking rice for the people to eat,
Washing their dishes,
Washing their clothes,
And when I pass by
And say good morning,
Her hands stop cutting, scrubbing,
Poised, idle for a moment,
And I wait for what has become
A precious happening in my day;
And then she smiles
A smile so beautiful
It lights up the dingy yard
And drives the winter rain away,
And then it's gone
And the hands all motion,
The face all blank again,
But if she could catch that smile
Reflected in some pure spring
She would never be sad again.

Huế, December, 1969



John C. Schafer
Hue, Vietnam
December 1969

Out Where the Winds of War Don't Blow

Vietnamese girl with golden skin,
Black hair, shy smile,
Respectable, too good to be seen
Talking with an American;
But there was real warmth
Behind the shyness of that smile;
But all the while I must,
Lest others impute a sin
And windy rumor add the rest,
Be careful to hold my interest in
And guard your reputation even if you won't
Keep the warmth out of your smile
I must not put too much in mine.

But if we could meet on some isle becalmed
Where Song My and double agents were not known,
Out where the winds had never blown
The stench of others' sins,
In some fine news-less fairy land
Where boundaries had not yet been set
Between Montague and Capulet-
Just you and I in Camelot;
Then I'd make it clear to you
That I appreciate that smile
And we'd start from there,
And let love grow-
Out where the winds of war don't blow.

John C. Schafer
Hue, December, 1969

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It's so Easy

Sometimes I go and sit in the park,
A little park in the old Citadel
Across the river,
With a stonewall around it,
And stone benches
Only a little chipped by the bombs and bullets
From when the war came two years ago.

It's quiet now, though
Except for the birds singing,
And it's shady under the coconut palms
And cool in the evening.
I sit there and lean my head back
And look at the sun
Through the branches
Until everything blurs
Into a bright spot back somewhere
On the retina of my eyes,
And it hurts a little so I close them,
It's so easy,
But the bright spot stays,
A kind of pleasant afterglow,
And then it goes too and it's dark,
And suddenly I can see the Vietminh
And the French running and screaming through the park,
Then the Japanese, followed by the Americans
Chasing the Viet Cong

And it hurts a little
So I open my eyes.
It's so easy,
And the birds are still singing,
And along the road around the park
Children are riding bicycles
Too big for them,
Stretching for the pedals.

Huế, March, 1970.