

## Rewriting Khe Sahn

by Marann Mincey

### *Draft*

My father stands in the dust of Khe Sahn surveying the chemically torched jungle that still manages to produce camouflaged enemies. He takes a long pull, and though I know the drink is life sustaining, I also know his canteen only offers warm water sterilized with a chlorine tablet that leaves a residue on his teeth. This is the story I want to write, but can't, because I want more to reach into it and hand my dad a glass of fresh water. Instead he wipes his forehead with the back of his hand, leaving a smear of sweat and red, then plots coordinates for the next round of artillery which will shred other thirsty human beings.

### *Revise*

Our DMZ tour guide is Mr. Nguyen. He points out the military museum that stands at the end of what was once a metal-surfaced airstrip. My father suspects that thirty years ago Mr. Nguyen fought for the North Vietnamese Army, was Việt Cộng, but it seems to matter little now. We read the placards that tell how the “puppet soldiers of American imperialism” had been forced to “run,” abandon South Vietnam. We look at rusted M-16s and my father explains the ways the U.S. standard-issued rifle was inferior to the Soviet manufactured AK-47 supplied to NVA soldiers. I know my father has never run, but in my rewrite, I want him to. What words shall I use to place a machine gun in the hands of this man who removes the hook before making you throw fish back into his pond?

My father exists for me in fertile Ohio farmscapes created by a series of glaciers that finished their work thirteen thousand years ago; not in jungle-dense mountains pushed out of scraping tectonic plates. He sits in plastic gym bleachers of no-name towns cheering for me; not in rain-filled foxholes waiting to die. But walking with him along rows of berried coffee plants on a barren strip of land, his pointed finger etches concertina wire and ammunition dumps into my imagination. I catch the reaction in his eyes when we come upon a pile of 8” Howitzer shell casings, large as torpedoes—I never imagined they would be. His memory supplants the present and I realize spending a thousand days with him wouldn't give me even a glimpse of the lifetime he lived here.

I can research everything—have so far for this essay fact-found water sterilization techniques, slang used by US soldiers, the history of Ohio's terrain, the anatomy of the coffee bean, combat base maps, the spelling of concertina, ammunition specifications, and the pronunciation of Nguyen—but I can't locate my father in this war. I can't study who he had to be and how that informed who he became. I can't uncover thirty years of hidden pain and haunts. Nor could I have prepared myself for the thing I learned.

Along Highway 9, my father shoots a whole film roll of conical-hatted women, fascinated with their group precision in building a pebble-lined gutter for the road. He spends another on Vietnamese children who flock from their field jobs to see the white

man in this rarely traveled section of the country. He sips coffee with toothless men who call nephews over to translate.

“You GI?”

“You like visit Vietnam?”

But not only questions.

“My brother die in war.”

“My sister one leg after war.”

“I no go home, mines still on my family land.”

Yet, each man who chooses to speak to my father says also, “I thank you for coming to my country. It is my honor.”

Standing in front of the U.S. embassy in Ho Chi Minh City, these conversations swirl with evidence of a rebuilding nation and images of new generations. They pool in my father’s mind and make him weak. When he is able to respond to the forgiveness he finds, I’m shocked it’s not for himself.

“To think I could release the hatred, just as all of these people have done,” he says. And I absorb the thorough intoxication of brainwashing for battle, the power dehumanization has for surviving a war and the wretched deterioration it inflicts on soul.

So, in my story, I write my father able to cry the wet that is stalled in his eyes.