

How do you find your own control in a world where nothing but change is truly certain?

Going Home

Summer 2001.

Standing on the second floor balcony, I breathed in the fresh morning air. It was a mixture of scents: the sweet and peculiar fragrance of ripe guava fruits from the neighbor's trees, the faint smell of smoke from a coal stove, the smell of city life awaking. Somehow it all seemed strange, yet familiar like a dream that I knew well, a dream in which tucked-away memories of childhood often came back.

I had just returned home after three years in the United States.

My home was in Ngoc Ha, a traditional flower-growing village in Hanoi. When I was in elementary school, most of the village was flower fields, with five or six houses grouped together here and there. Year round, the fields were covered with roses, chrysanthemums, lilies, larkspurs, etc., each with own scent and color. It was among these flowers that my sister and I played with the village children and trekked to school, taking in the delicious shapes, scents, and colors as we went along. On long summer days, we would walk all the way across the field to the canal, where we lay under the breeze, sucking on the very tender

ends of rose branches—they tasted refreshing and sweet. Little did I know that I would soon go away.

And here I was, three years later. On the way home from the airport, I was overwhelmed with excitement and anxiety by the sight of so many Vietnamese people rushing to work, street vendors setting up shop for the day, and by the sound of motor scooters, and of Vietnamese being spoken everywhere. This was what I had been missing in Washington, DC, without knowing it. I felt like a thirsty person rediscovering fresh water. My heart raced as the taxi rounded a familiar corner. I could not wait to see my flowers. Three years of waiting no longer seemed so hard compared to the last ten minutes. I half expected to see the old dirt road that lead to my Ngoc Ha Village.

But instead, we turned into a paved road. My flower field had almost completely disappeared, replaced by three-story houses stacked up neatly in rows. I was shocked and sad.

In the few years that I was gone, Hanoi had expanded fast. My village, which before had felt far away from the city center, was now very much a part of it. Real estate prices skyrocketed. The villagers, who for many generations had made only enough to live on from the flower trade, could not resist the huge sums of money offered for their land. Before, my family was one of the few who did not grow flowers. Now, the new residents far outnumbered the original ones. In the entire village, only one garden remains. The old man who owns it insists on not selling it, no matter how much money he is offered. But he can no longer do the work that flowers require, so the garden is mostly an orchard.

By selling land, the villagers became rich over night. They were not used to having so much money. Some were contented to live on savings without finding another job, even taking to gambling. But others invested in small businesses and put aside money for the children's education.

That morning, a few days after returning from abroad, I stood on the balcony, trying to visualize my flower field. In the air, I could not smell the flowers, but there was still the smell of smoke coming from a rare kitchen that had not changed. It reminded me of the mornings of long ago when the village stirred at sunrise, cutting flowers for the market, while a fire dances in the kitchen stove preparing meals for the day. My sister said that home is that cozy place that memories take us, no matter where we are, no matter how hard life is. I used to miss the flower village, but now I know that it will always be in my heart. I will carry home with me wherever I go.