



Remembering Heaven's Face

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In 1967, John Balaban was a graduate student at Harvard, happily studying English literature. Though active in the Civil Rights movement in the early sixties, he had become less politically involved while a student. As the war escalated, Balaban's sense that U.S. policy was morally wrong convinced him to trade his student deferment in for that of a conscientious objector. Soon he was on his way to Vietnam to join a unit of the International Voluntary Services.

The IVS volunteers were on contract to the U.S. government to teach English and offer medical, agricultural, and other assistance to the Vietnamese. Balaban was first sent to Cao Linh to learn Vietnamese. Soon after his arrival, though, many of the schools where he was supposed to teach were closed due to increasingly violent demonstrations brought on by the impending presidential elections. When Cao Linh came under mortar attack, Balaban found himself in the middle of an intense firefight.

The shooting made Balaban begin to doubt the wisdom of his decision to come to Vietnam. However, his friendship with a CIA agent led to trips into the countryside and on the Mekong River. These excursions opened Balaban's eyes to a Vietnam, "whose beauty was beyond the reach of the war," where backwater village markets offered an incredible variety and abundance of native foods and peasant wares. He soon became familiar with a Vietnam that most G.I.'s would never know, a Vietnam of beguiling charm and mystery.

He would also come to see the brutality of the war close up. During the Tet offensive the university where he taught was bombed. Wounded in the shoulder, he returned to the states to recuperate. While there Balaban became involved with the Community of Responsibility and returned to Vietnam where he arranged for the evacuation of war-burned and war-injured children. His last year in Vietnam was spent traveling through the countryside, where he collected oral poetry which he later translated and published. Throughout this haunting memoir, the image of a red-tinged sun or "the face of heaven" watches Balaban on his journey down the "bright, perilous road" of Vietnam.

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