

# Vietnam Generation

---

Volume 3

Number 1 *Swords into Ploughshares: A "Home Front"*  
*Anthology*

Article 4

---

1-1990

## Letters from Home

Karen Joy Fowler

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Fowler, Karen Joy (1990) "Letters from Home," *Vietnam Generation*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol3/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vietnam Generation by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [careyc@lasalle.edu](mailto:careyc@lasalle.edu).

# LETTERS FROM HOME

## KAREN JOY FOWLER

I wish you could see me now. You would laugh. I have a husband. I have children. Yes. I drive a station wagon. I would laugh, too. Our turn to be the big kids, the grown-ups. Our turn to be over thirty. It astonishes me whenever I stop and think about it. It has to be a joke.

I miss you. I've always missed you. I want us to understand each other. I want to tell you what I did after you left. I want to tell you what I did during the war. Most of all, I want to tell you the truth. This is what makes it so difficult. I have learned to distrust words, even my own. Words can be made to say anything. I know this. Do you?

Much of what I will tell you actually happened. You will not be able to identify these parts, or you can ask me. This does not mean, of course, that any of it is true. Even among the people who were there with me are some who remember it differently. Gretchen said something once which echoed my own feelings. "We were happy, weren't we?" she said. "In spite of everything. We made each other happy. Ill-advised, really, this putting your happiness into other people's hands. I've tried it several times since and it's never worked again."

But when I repeated this to Julie she was amazed. "Happy?" she asked. "How can you say that? I was so fat. I was being screwed by that teaching assistant. And 'screwed' is the only word that applies. There was a *war*. Don't you remember?"

Can I tell you what I remember about the war? I remember the words. Vietnam was the language we spoke—secret bombings, the lottery, Vietnamization, self-immolation, Ho-Ho-Ho Chi Minh, peace with honor, peace at any price, peace, peace, peace. Somewhere, I imagine, on the other side of the world, these words meant something. Somewhere they had physical counterparts. Except for the last set, of course. If peace has ever had a physical value anywhere, none of us has been able to find it. But the other words corresponded to something. There was a *real* war going on and in many ways we were untouched by it. This is what I'm trying to say: if the words alone were powerful enough to shape us and our lives as they did, what kind of an impact must the real war have had on *its* people?

I remember sitting on our sofa watching television. Julia is on the floor at my feet. She's the red-haired Jewish one. She's studying set design and is busy gluing together a tiny throne, part of a mock-up for the set of *Saint Joan*. "Women have fought in wars before," she reminds us. "But only when God tells them to."

Lauren is next to me. She's black, rather light-skinned and freckled. Her dog is on her lap, giving the television the same studied attention the rest of us are. Gretchen is standing in the doorway to the kitchen drinking a diet soda. She has short brown hair and heavy bangs, a white Catholic though not a practicing one. She clings to Catholicism because it protects her from being a WASP. This unpleasant designation is applicable only to me. You know me. I'm the plain white one on the end there with my legs drawn up to my chest and my arms around them. And that ten-inch figure on the screen with his hands in motion before him and the map of Cambodia behind him—that's President Nixon. The Quaker. He is busy redrawing the Cambodian border and explaining to us that we are not really invading Cambodia because the border is not where we have always thought it was. Gretchen swallows the last of her soda. "The man may be right. Just now, just out of the corner of my eye, I saw the border jump."

Nixon is impervious to our criticism. He is content; he feels it is enough merely to have found something to say.

I am twenty years old. I believe nothing I hear.

I was not always like that. Here is an earlier memory. We are standing on my parents' front porch and you have your arms around me. You have driven all the way down from San Francisco to tell me you have been drafted. I find this incomprehensible. I know you could have avoided it. Isn't Allen in Manhattan Beach getting braces put on his teeth? Hasn't Greg moved three times in three months, burying his induction notice in the U.S. mails? Hasn't Jim joined VISTA, taking advantage of the unspoken agreement that if you are reluctant to burn villages and bomb children, your country will accept two years of urban volunteerism instead?

You are so thin I feel your bones inside your arms. If you fasted, you could fall below the required weight. Why will you do none of these things? I can't help feeling betrayed.

You try to explain and I try to listen. You tell me that the draft is unfair because you *could* evade it. You say if you don't go, they will just send someone else. (Yes, I say. Yes.) You say that perhaps you can have some impact from within. That an evasion won't realistically affect the war effort at all, but maybe if you were actually there... "Hey." You are holding your arms about me so tightly, helping me to hold myself so tightly inside. "Don't cry. I'm going to subvert every soldier I meet. The war will be over by Christmas." And I don't cry. Remember? I don't cry.

You disappeared into the real war and you never got one word back out to me. I never heard from you or of you again. So that is what I remember about the war. The words over here. The war over there. And increasingly little connection between the two.

## 10 VIETNAM GENERATION

You are put on a bus and sent to basic training. You take the last possible seat, left rear corner. The bus fills with young men, their white necks exposed by new haircuts, their ears open and vulnerable.

It reminds you of going to camp. You suggest a game of telephone. You whisper into the ear closets to you. You whisper, "The Geneva Accords." The man next to you leans across the aisle. The message travels over the backs of the seats and crisscrosses the bus. When it comes out at the front it is, "the domino theory."

You try again. "Buddhist bar-b-cues," you whisper. You think the man next to you has it right, repeats it just the way you said it. You can hear the "b"s and the "s"s even over the bus motor. But the large man at the front of the bus, the one whose pink scalp is so vivid you can't even guess what color the fuzz of his hair might be, claims to have heard "strategic hamlets." Someone is changing the words.

"Body bags!" You have shouted it accidentally. Everyone turns to look at you. Fifty faces. Fifty selected faces. Already these men are different from the men they were yesterday, a difference of appearance, perhaps, and nothing else. It may stay this way. It may be the first hint of the evolution of an entirely new person. You turn to the tinted window, surprised by your own face staring at you.

The other men think you have said, "Operation Rolling Thunder." Even so, nobody smiles.

When you leave the bus, you leave the face in the window. You go and it stays. So it cannot have been *your* face after all.

After you left I went to Berkeley. I lived in the student dorms for a year, where I met Gretchen and Julia. When we moved out, we moved out together, into a fairly typical student apartment. It had a long shag carpet—even the rugs were hairy then—of a particularly putrid green and the appliances were avocado. The furniture had been stapled together. There were four beds and the rent clearly had been selected with four in mind. We advertised for a roommate in the *Daily Cal*. Although taking a stranger into our home entailed a definite risk, it seemed preferable to inviting anyone we actually knew.

I remember that we flipped a coin to see which of us would have to share the bedroom with the newcomer and Julie lost. She had some procedural objection she felt was sufficiently serious to require a second toss, but Gretchen and I refused. The new roommate hadn't even appeared and was already making things sticky.

Lauren was the first respondent to our ad—a beautiful, thin curly-haired girl with an elegant white curly-haired dog. They made a striking pair. Julia showed Lauren the apartment; the conversation was brisk and businesslike. Gretchen and I petted the dog. When Lauren left, Julia had said we would take her.

I was unsettled by the speed of the decision and said so. I had no objections to Lauren, but I'd envisioned interviewing several candidates before making a selection.



"I'm the one who has to room with her. I should get to choose." Julie held out one long strand of her own red hair and began methodically to split the end. Julie was artistic and found the drab apartment painful. Initially, I believe she wanted Lauren mostly for decor. Lauren moved in the next day.

Immediately objectionable characteristics began to surface. If I'd had your address, I would have written long complaints. "She dresses with such taste," I would have said. "Who would have guessed she'd be such a slob?" Lauren's messiness was epic in its proportions. Her bed could hardly be seen under the pile of books, shoes, combs, and dirty dishes she left on it. She had to enter it gingerly at night, finding small empty spaces where she might fit an arm or a leg. She would sleep without moving, an entire night spent in the only position possible.

"She's late wherever she goes," I would have written, "not by minutes or quarter hours, but by afternoons. On her night to cook, we eat in front of Johnny Carson."

Then I would have divulged the worst complaint of all. "She talks baby talk, to the dog, which is tolerable, to her boyfriend, which is not." Lauren's boyfriend was a law student at Boalt. He was older than us, big, and wore his hair slicked back along his head. Of course, *no one* wore their hair like that then. There was a sort of Mafioso cut to his clothes, an intensity in his eyes. I never like being alone with him, but Lauren called him Owlie and he called her his Sugarbear. "It is absolutely sickening the way you two go on," I told her and she was completely unabashed. She suggested that, although we didn't have the guts to be as up front about it as she was, we probably talked baby talk to our boyfriends, an accusation we strenuously denied. We had no boyfriends, so the point was academic. Owlie studied judo as well as the law, and there was always a risk, opening some door, that you might find him demonstrating some hold to Lauren. Sickening, like I said.

I would have finished my letter by telling you, if you could only meet her, you would love her. Well, we all did. She was vivacious, imaginative, courageous. She removed some previously unnoticed tensions from our relationships—somehow with four the balance was better. By the spring of 1970, when the war of the words achieved its most intense pitch ever, this balance had become intricate and effortless.

I had gone out to protest the Cambodian invasion and come home in a cast. The police had removed their badges, donned their gas masks and chased us down, catching me just outside Computer Sciences. They had broken my ankle. Owlie was gone. His birthday had been drawn seventeenth in the lottery and he'd relocated to a small town in Oregon rumored to have a lenient draft board. Gretchen had acquired a boyfriend whose back had been injured in a high school wrestling match, rendering him 4-F with no tricks. He went off to Europe and was, consequently, very little trouble. Julie had switched her major from set design to Chicano studies. We heard that the National Guard was killing people on the campus of Kent State. I heard nothing from you.

## 12 VIETNAM GENERATION

You are in a small room, a cell. It is cold and the walls are damp stone. You sit cross-legged like a monk on the thin mattress and face the wall. There is so much moisture you can imprint your hand in it. By 10 A.M. the prints disappear. The sun has reached the wall, but it still is not warm. If you were sure no one would come to look, you would levitate yourself into the sunshine. You are thinking of me.

How much I expected of you. How stupid I am. I probably believed you could end the war by Christmas. You can imagine me believing that. Even now I am probably working out long chain-letter calculations—if you subvert four soldiers every day and they subvert four soldiers and *they* subvert four soldiers, how many days will the war last? When will you come home?

Do I expect miracles from a prison cell? Why should you provide them? You make a decision. You decide to be warm. You exhale your warmth into the air. It rises to the ceiling, it seems to disappear, but as you repeat this, over and over, the layers eventually drop to where they surround you. When you leave the cell, you will leave it filled with your heat.

It is a small room. Any man can accomplish a small task.

In response to the invasion of Cambodia and the deaths at Kent State (Can I say murders? Will you object? Will you compare those four deaths to the body count in Vietnam on any single day or on May 4 itself and believe you have made some point?) UC Berkeley suspended classes. When they recommenced, they had been reconstituted; they were now supposed to be directly relevant to the single task of ending the war in Southeast Asia. I will not pretend to you that there was no opposition within the university to this. But a large segment of the campus made this commitment together—we would not continue with our lives until the war was over.

At the same time Nixon made his own pledge to the American people. He promised that nothing, *nothing* we could do would affect policy in any way.

The war of the words took on a character which was at once desperate and futile, a soul-dampening combination we never shook free of. We did the work because it seemed right to us. We had no illusions of its potency. It began to feel like a game.

Julie and I had volunteered for a large committee whose purpose was to compile a list of war profiteers so that their products could be boycotted. We researched mergers and parent companies; this list grew like a chain letter. It would have been quicker to list those companies not turning a profit in Vietnam. I remember Lauren perusing our list one day with great dissatisfaction. "The counterculture makes roach clips," she said. "It makes liquid sculptures you can plug in and they change shape."

"Lava lamps," I told her.

"Whatever. It makes hash pipes. I need a raincoat. What am I supposed to do?"

"Get wet," Julie suggested.

"Get stoned," said Gretchen. "And then get wet. You'll hardly notice."

Lauren had volunteered herself for the university's media watchdog committee. Her job was to monitor three news shows daily and report on the coverage they gave to the war and to the student movement. The idea was that we could apply whatever pressure we could on those stations whose coverage seemed slanted in favor of the Administration. The fallacy was that we had any meaningful pressure which could be brought to bear. We wrote letters. We added their sponsors to the boycott. Nobody cared.

I know that Nixon felt undermined and attacked by the media. We did not see it this way. None of the major networks met with our approval. Only the local public station reported the news in Berkeley the way we saw it happening. One of their reporters was a young man who covered those stories felt to be of particular interest to the black community. He was handsome, mustached, broad-shouldered. He had the same dark, melting eyes as Lauren's dog. His name was Poncho Taylor. Lauren fell in love with him.

Well, you didn't expect us to give up love, did you? Just because there was a war on? I never expected you to.

Poncho was politically impeccable. He was passionate, he was committed. He was gorgeous. Any one of us could have fallen in love with him. But Lauren was the first to announce her passion and we were content to provide support. We took turns with her transcribing duties during his airtime so she wouldn't miss a moment of his face. We listened patiently while she droned on about his cheekbones, his hair, the sexy tremor in his voice when a story had an unhappy conclusion, and we agreed. We saw it all. He was wonderful.

I remember a night when we made chocolate chip cookies and ate the dough. Nestlé had just made the boycott list, but the chips were old. "The sooner we eat them, the better," Julie had suggested.

Gretchen had just returned from an organizational meeting with new instructions for us. We had been told to band together into small groups like the revolutionaries in *The Battle of Algiers*. These were to be called affinity groups and we were to select for them people we trusted absolutely. We were to choose those people we would trust with our lives. We smiled at one another over the bowl of dough as it suddenly occurred to us that, for us, this choice had already been made. Just as Gretchen said, when we could find our happiness nowhere else, we were able to put it into each other's hands and hold it there.

"There's more," Gretchen continued. "We're supposed to arm ourselves." Julie took another spoonful of dough, heavy on the chips. I



## 14 VIETNAM GENERATION

used the handle of my spoon to reach inside my cast and scratch myself. Nobody said anything for a long time.

Finally Julie indicated the boycott list. "The pen is mightier than the sword," she suggested. She didn't sound sure.

Gretchen did. "The boycott is liberal bullshit," she said. "It's too easy. What good will it possibly do?"

Lauren cleared her throat and tapped the air with the back of her spoon. "It's a capitalist country. Money matters."

"You can't destroy the system from within the system," Gretchen was very unhappy. "We're too safe."

We sent Nixon a telegram. Gretchen composed it. "End this obscene war at once Stop Pull out the way your father should have Stop." It didn't make us feel better.

We should have done more. I look back on those years and it's clear to me that we should have done more. It's just not clear to me *what* more we should have done.

Perhaps we lacked imagination. Perhaps we lacked physical courage. Perhaps our personal stakes were just not high enough. We were women. We were not going to Vietnam. Our brothers, our lovers were not going to Vietnam. But you do us an injustice if you doubt our sincerity. Remember that we watched the news three times a day. Three times a day we read the body count in the upper right-hand corner of the screen like the score of a football game. This is how many of them we killed today. They killed this many of us. Subtract one figure from the other. Are we winning?

Could anyone be indifferent to this? Always, I added the two numbers together. My God, I would think. Dear God. Look how many people died today! (What if one of them was you?)

You are on a plane, an ordinary plane. You could be en route to Denver from Chicago or going home for Christmas if you just close your eyes and believe only your ears. But you are really between Japan and Vietnam. The plane has a stewardess dressed in a bathing suit like Miss America. This is designed as a consolation for you. If you are very, very frightened, she may agree to wear rabbit ears and a tail when she brings you your drink. But you must not touch her. She is a white woman and looks familiar to you—her height, her build quite ordinary. This will change. When you remember her later she will seem exotic. It will seem odd to you that a woman should be so big. You will remember that she came and tightened your seat belt as if she were your mother. What was she keeping you safe for? Whose body is it anyway? You look at your legs, at your hands, and wonder what your body will be like when it is returned to you. You wonder who will want it then.

The immediate threat of the plane's descent. You make a sudden decision not to descend with it. You spread your arms to hold yourself aloft. You hover near the top of the plane. But it is hopeless. If they have



to shoot you down, they will. Friendly fire. You return to your seat. The plane carries your body down into Vietnam.

You think of me. How I will hate you if you don't live through this. How you must protect me. And during your whole tour, every time you meet someone returning home, you will give him a message for me. You will write your message on the casts of the wounded. You will print it on the foreheads of those who return walking, on the teeth of those who return bagged. *I am here, I am here, I am here.* So many messages. How are you to know that none will get through.

My affinity group was very kind about you. I would tell them frequently how the war would be over by Christmas, how you were responsible for the growing dissatisfaction among servicemen. Vets against the war, I said to them, was probably one of your ideas. They never mentioned how you never wrote. Neither did I. You were my wound. I had my broken ankle and I had you. It was so much more than they had. It made them protective of me.

They didn't want me at any more demonstrations. "When you *could* run," Lauren pointed out, "look what happened to you." But I was there with them when the police cordoned off Sproul Plaza, trapping us inside, and gassed us from the air. You don't want to believe this. Governor Ronald Reagan and all the major networks assured you that we had been asked to disperse, but had refused. Only Poncho Taylor told the truth. We had not been allowed to leave. Anyone who had tried to leave was clubbed. A helicopter flew over the area and dropped teargas on us. The gas went into the hospital and into the neighboring residential areas. When the police asked the city to buy them a second helicopter so that they could enlarge operations, many people not of the radical persuasion objected. A committee was formed to prevent this purchase, a committee headed by an old Bay Area activist. She happened to be Poncho Taylor's grandmother. Lauren took it as a sign from God.

Lauren's passion for Poncho had continued to grow and we had continued to feed it. It's difficult to explain why Poncho had become so important to us. Partly it was just that Lauren loved him and we loved Lauren. Whatever Lauren wanted she should have. But partly it was the futility of our political work. We continued to do it but without energy, without hope. Poncho began to seem attainable when peace was not. Poncho began to represent the *rest* of our lives, outside the words.

Lauren told everyone how she felt. Our friends all knew and soon their friends knew and then the friends of their friends. It was like a message Lauren was sending to Poncho. And if it didn't reach him, then Lauren could combine useful political effort with another conduit. She called Poncho's grandmother and volunteered us all for the Stop the Helicopter campaign.

We went to an evening organizational meeting. (We did more organizing than anything else.) Though now I remember that Julie did

## 16 VIETNAM GENERATION

not come with us, but stayed at home to rendezvous in the empty apartment with her teaching assistant.

The meeting was crowded, but eventually we verified Poncho's absence. After interminable discussion we were told to organize phone trees, circulate petitions, see that the city council meeting, scheduled for the end of the month, was packed with vocal opponents. Lauren couldn't even get close to Poncho's grandmother.

When we returned home, Julie was drunk. Her lover had failed to show, but Mike, a friend of mine, had come by with a bottle of wine. Julie had never known Mike very well or liked him very much, but he had stayed the whole evening and they had gotten along wonderfully. Julie had a large collection of Barbra Streisand records we refused to let her play. Mike had not only put them on but actually cried over them. "He's a lot more sensitive than I thought," Julie told me.

Mike denied it all. He was so drunk he wove from side to side even sitting down. He tried to kiss me and landed on my shoulder. "How did the meeting go?" he asked and snorted when we told him. "Phone trees." He lifted his head to grin at me, red-faced, unshaven, wine-soaked breath. "The old radicals are even less ballsy than the young ones."

I picked up one of his hands. "Do you think it's possible," I asked him, "for a revolution to be entirely personal? Suppose we all concentrated on our own lives, filled them with revolutionary moments, revolutionary relationships. When we had enough of them, it would be a revolution."

"No," Mike removed his hand from mine. "It wouldn't. That's cowardice talking. That's you being liberal. That's you saying, let's make a revolution, but let's be nice about it. People are dying. There's a real war going on. We can't be incremental."

"Exactly," said Gretchen. "Exactly. Time is as much the issue as anything else."

"Then we should all be carrying guns," said Julie. "We should be planning political assassinations."

"We should be robbing banks," said Mike. "Or printing phony bills." Mike had been known to pass a bad check or two. Though he never needed the money. He was an auto mechanic by day, a dope dealer by night. He was the richest person we knew. "Lauren," he called and Lauren appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. "I came here tonight because I have a surprise for you." He was grinning.

"If it's dope, I'm not interested," said Lauren. "Nor am I solvent."

"What would you say," Mike asked, "if I told you that right now, right at this very moment, I have Poncho Taylor's car sitting in my garage waiting for repairs?" Lauren said we would go right over.

Poncho had a white convertible. Lauren loved it. She sat in the driver's seat, because Poncho had sat there. She sat on the passenger side, because that was where she would be sitting herself. I discovered an old Valentine in the glove compartment. Lauren was torn between the despair of thinking he already had a girlfriend and the thrill of finally discovering something personal. She opened it.

“Love and a hundred smooches, Deborah.” Lauren read it aloud disapprovingly. “This Deborah sounds like a real sap.”

Poncho seems more and more to be the perfect match for you,” I added. The Valentine had one feature of incontrovertible value. It had Poncho’s address on it. Lauren began to copy it, then looked at us.

“What the hell,” she said and put the whole thing in her purse.

I had no address for you, you know. I mean, in the beginning I probably did and I probably should have written you first. Since I hardly talked to you when you came to say good-bye. Since I didn’t cry. I *did* miss you. I kept thinking *you would write me*. And then later, when I saw you wouldn’t, it was too late. Then I had no address. I couldn’t believe you would *never* write me. What happened to you?

Even our senators sent me form letters. More than I got from you.

Dear (fill in name),

Well here I am in Vietnam! The people are little and the bugs are big, but the food is Army and that means American. As far as I can see, Saigon has been turned into one large brothel. I go there as often as I can. It beats my other way of interacting with the locals, which is to go up in planes and drop “Willie Peter” on them. Man, those suckers burn forever!

I made my first ground kill yesterday. Little guy in a whole lot of pieces. You have to bring the body for the body count and the arm came off right in my hand. We were able to count him six times, which everyone said was really beautiful. Hey, he’s in so many pieces he’s never going to need any company but his own again. The dope is really heavy-duty here, too. I’ve lost my mind.

Listen, I got to go. We’re due out tonight on a walk-through with ARVN support and you know what they say about the ARVN—with friends like these... Ugly little buggers.

Dust off the women. I’ll be home by Christmas. Love you all.

(Fill in name)

Now you’re angry. I hope. Who am I to condemn you? What do I know about the real war? Absolutely nothing. Gretchen says you’re a running-dog imperialist. She thinks she met you once before you left, before she knew me, at a party at Barbara Mayer’s. In Sausalito? I don’t think it was you. She waited a long time to tell me about it. I was married before she told me. I don’t think it was you. So...

So, it took Lauren two days to formalize her final plan. It was audacious. It was daring. It had Lauren’s stamp all over it. Mike called when Poncho came in and picked up his car.

It was Lauren’s night to cook dinner and she saw no reason to change this. She had bought the ingredients for cannelloni, a spectacular



## 18 VIETNAM GENERATION

treat she made entirely from scratch. It required long intervals, she claimed, when the dough must be allowed to rest. During one of these rest periods, she fixed herself up and Julie drove her to San Francisco, where Poncho lived. Julie returned in forty minutes. She had only stayed long enough to see Lauren safely inside.

Lauren came home perhaps a half an hour later. She changed her clothes again, dropping the discarded ones onto the living room floor, and went into the kitchen to roll out the cannelloni dough. We sat around her at the kitchen table, chopping the onions, mixing the filling, stuffing the rolls as she talked. She was very high, very excited.

"I knocked on the door," she said. "Poncho's roommate let me in. Poncho was lying on the couch, reading. Poncho Taylor! He was there!"

"Can I come in?" Lauren had asked. She made her voice wobble. She showed us how. "A man in a car is following me."

"What was the roommate like?" Julie asked hopefully. "Pretty cute?"

"No. He wears big glasses and his hair is very short. James. His name is James. He asked me why I came to their apartment since they live on the second floor."

"Good question," I admitted. "What did you say?"

"I said I saw their Bobby Seale poster and I thought they might be black."

"Good answer," said Julie. "Lauren thinks on her feet. All right!"

"There's nothing wrong with glasses," Gretchen objected. "Lots of attractive people wear glasses." "She cut into an onion with determined zeal. "Maybe he's gay," she said.

"No," said Lauren. "He's not. And it wasn't the glasses. It was the competition. Poncho is so..." We waited while she searched for the word worthy of Poncho. "Magnetic," she concluded.

Well, who could compete with Poncho? Gretchen let the issue drop.

Lauren had entered the apartment and James and Poncho had gone to the window. "What make was the car?" James had asked. "Green VW bug," said Lauren.

"My car," said Julie. "Great."

"They wanted me to call the police," Lauren said. "But I was too upset. I didn't even get the license."

"Lauren," said Gretchen disapprovingly. Gretchen hated women to look helpless. Lauren looked back at her.

"I was distraught," she said evenly. She began picking up the finished cannelloni and lining the pan with neat rows. Little blankets. Little corpses. (No. I am being honest. Of course I didn't think this.)

Poncho had returned immediately to the couch and his book. "Chick shouldn't wander around the city alone at night," he commented briefly. Lauren loved his protectiveness. Gretchen was silent.

"Then I asked to use the phone," Lauren said. She wiped her forehead with her upper arm since her hands were covered with flour.

She took the pan to the stove and ladled tomato sauce into it. "The phone was in the kitchen. James took me in, then he went back. I put my keys on the floor, very quietly, and I kicked them under the table. Then I pretended to phone you."

"All your keys?" Julie asked in dismay.

Lauren ignored her. "I told them no one was home. I told them I'd been planning to take the bus, but by now, of course, I'd missed it."

"All your keys?" I asked pointedly.

"James drove me home. Damn! If he hadn't been there..." Lauren slammed the oven door on our dinner and came to sit with us.

"What do you think?" she asked. "Is he interested?"

"Sounds like James was interested," said Gretchen.

"You left your name with you keys?" I said.

"Name, address, phone number. Now we wait."

We waited. For two days the phone never rang. Not even our parents wanted to talk to us. In the interests of verisimilitude Lauren had left all her keys on the chain. She couldn't get into the apartment unless one of us had arranged to be home and let her in. She couldn't drive, which was just as well since every gas company had made the boycott list but Shell. Shell was not an American company, but we were still investigating. It seemed likely there was war profiteering there *somewhere*. And, if not, then we'd heard rumors of South African holdings. We were looking into it. But in the meantime we could still drive.

"The counterculture is going to make gas from chicken shit," said Julie.

"Too bad they can't make it from bullshit," Lauren said. "We got plenty of that."

Demonstrators had gone out and stopped the morning commute traffic to protest the war. It had not been appreciated. It drove something of a wedge between us and the working class. Not that the proletariat had ever liked us much. I told our postman that more than two hundred colleges had closed. "BFD," he said, handing me the mail. Nothing for me.

You are on the surface of the moon and the air itself is a poison. Nothing moves, nothing grows, there is nothing, but ash. A helicopter has left you here and the air for its lift-off made the ash fly and then resettle into definite shapes, like waves. You don't move for fear of disturbing these patterns, which make you think of snow, of children lying on their backs in the snow until their arms turn into wings. You can see the shadow of winged people in the ash.

Nothing is alive here, so you are not here, after all, on this man-made moon where nothing can breathe. You are home and have been home for months. Your tour lasted just over a year and you only missed one Christmas. You have a job and a wife and you eat at restaurants,

## 20 VIETNAM GENERATION

go to baseball games, commute on the bus. The war is over and there is nothing behind you but the bodies of angels flying on their backs in the ash.

Poncho never called. We went to the city meeting on the helicopter, all four of us, to help the city make this decision. The helicopter was item seven on the agenda. We never got to it. Child care had been promised, but not provided. Angry parents dumped their children on the stage of the Berkeley Community Theater to sit with the council members. A small girl with a sun painted on her forehead knocked over a microphone. The conservative council members went home. Berkeley.

Lauren found Poncho and James in the dress circle. Poncho was covering the meeting. Lauren introduced us all. "By the way," she said carefully, "you didn't find a set of keys at your house, did you? I lost mine and that night is the last I remember having them."

"Keys?" asked Poncho. "No." Something in his smile told me Lauren must have overplayed herself that evening. He knew exactly what was going on.

"If you do find them, you will call me?"

"Of course."

Julie drove us home and I made Lauren a cup of tea. She held my hand for a moment as she took it from me. Then she smiled. "I thought we were boycotting Lipton's," she said.

"It's a British tea." I stirred some milk into my own cup. "That should be all right, shouldn't it?"

"Have you ever heard of Bernadette Devlin?" Gretchen asked.

We never saw Poncho again except on TV. On June 29 he told us all American forces had been withdrawn from Cambodia. Your birthday, so I remember the date. Not a bad lottery number either. So I always wondered. Were you really drafted? Did you enlist?

Poncho lost his job about the same time Nixon lost his. Some network executive decided blacks didn't need special news so they didn't need special reporters to give it to them. Let them watch the same news as the rest of us. And apparently Poncho's ability to handle generic news was doubtful. The network let him go. Politically we regretted this decision. Privately we thought he had it coming.

God, it was years ago. Years and years ago. I got married. Lauren went to Los Angeles and then to Paris and now she's in Washington writing speeches for some senator. Hey, we emerged from the war of the words with *some* expertise. Gretchen and Julie had a falling-out and hardly speak to each other now. Only when I'm there. They make a special effort for me.

Julie asked me recently why I was so sure there ever had been a real war. What proof did I have, she asked, that it wasn't a TV movie of the decade? A mini-series? A maxi-series?



It outraged Gretchen. "Don't do that," she snapped. "Keep it real." She turned to me. She said she saw you about a month ago at Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. She said you had no legs.

It doesn't alarm me as much as you might think. I see you all the time, too. You're in the park, pushing your kids on the swings and you've got one hand and one hook. Or you're sitting in a wheelchair in the aisle of the movie theater watching *The Deer Hunter*. Or you're weighing vegetables at the supermarket and you're fine, you're just fine, only it's never really you. Not any of them.

So what do you think of my war? At the worst I imagine you're a little angry. "My God," I can imagine you saying. "You managed a clean escape. You had your friends, you had your games. You were quite happy." Well, I promised you the truth. And the truth is that some of us went to jail. (Damn few, I know.) Some of us were killed. (And the numbers are irrelevant.) Some of us went to Canada and to Sweden. And some of us had a great time. But it wasn't a clean escape, really, for any of us.

Look at me. I'm operating all alone here with no affinity group and it seems unnatural to me. It seems to me that I should be surrounded by people I'd trust with my life. Always. It makes me cling to people, even people I don't care for all that much. It makes me panic when people leave. I'm sure they're not coming back. The war did this to me. Or you did. Same thing. What did the war do to you?

Look how much we have in common, after all. We both lost. I lost my war. You lost your war. I look today at Vietnam and Cambodia and Laos and I feel sick inside. Do you ever ask yourself who won? Who the hell won?

Your war. I made it up, of course. It was nothing, *nothing* like that. Write me. Tell me about it. Please. If I have not heard from you by Christmas, I have decided to ask Lauren to go to the monument and look for your name. *I don't want to do this*. Don't make me do this. Just send some word.

I am thirty-five years old. I am ready to believe anything you say.



**Photo by Eric Bush, courtesy of Ohio State University Archives.**



**Photo Courtesy of Miami University Archives.**