



CONTEMPLATION: A pink haze at dawn shades a calm quiet over Qui Nhon waters at Hoang Anh, above, and reflection in the writer as he thinks about the diarist and her turbulent history at Quang Ngai.



A daily scene of Hoang Anh's all-wood breakfast room is pictured.



NIGHT LIGHTS: A view of the shimmering Qui Nhon beach at dusk.

A Trip Back in Time

By Nguyen Khoa Thai Anh

Summer is not quite over — at least not officially — and already I long for those lazy, hazy days, lounging in the sun, seemingly without a trace of worry or pressing concern. At least, that is what appeared on the surface this past July when we were at Sa Huỳnh beach near Đức Phổ, in Quảng Ngãi province.

Looking at the reeds in the tidal pool, a few hundred yards from the coming and going of the waves that wash ashore, I thought life could not be simpler. The rising and falling of the tides a short distance away did not seem to disturb the blades of these reeds, growing in clumps at the edge of the tidal pool, swaying imperceptibly in the afternoon breeze. We followed the rainbow over Phố Cường village for several miles and it led us to Sa Huỳnh. The beach was deserted except for the few of us, who decided at my insistence to stop for a rest in our travel. We ordered some fresh coconuts and blue crabs.

We took a northward drive from Sài Gòn to Huế and our last sojourn before Đức Phổ was in Qui Nhon, where we stayed at the Hoàng Anh hotel, a most extravagant resort on the beach there, built with a thousand square meters of teak wood, giving new meaning to the terms communist-cum-capitalist deforestation, bourgeois decadence notwithstanding. Be that as it may, in my mind, it could not be further away from the very diametrically opposed idea of bourgeois sentiment, for I was reading Nhật Ký Đặng Thùy Trâm (the Diaries of Dang Thuy Tram), a young Hanoi doctor who'd given up her relatively less-complicated, less-tumultuous life in Hà Nội to volunteer for the front in the South, in the battle-torn Quảng Ngãi, whose villagers and combatants' lives alike were constantly threatened by the very war that purportedly was to liberate them.

Today the very existence of her diaries must be owed to Frederick Whitehurst, who jealously guarded them for more than 35 years. Whitehurst, ironically, is none other than the author's mortal enemy who, after the battle, was sorting enemy non-military documents from military ones to burn, but on the advice of his interpreter, the ARVN (Army of the Republic of South Việt Nam) soldier attached to Whitehurst's unit — Master Sgt. Nguyễn Trung Hiếu — decided not to burn it. While Whitehurst was destroying enemy materials in the fire, Hiếu brought the diary over and said: "Don't burn this. It contains fire in it." Later with the help of Hiếu, they both tried to read it.

A few months later, Hiếu brought to Whitehurst the second diary. Then after years of looking and chasing down every leads, Frederick, his brother Robert Whitehurst, Ted Engelmann and others finally got the copies of Dang's work to her families in Hà Nội on the eve of April 30, 2005, the 30th anniversary of the end of the war.

As I was drinking coconut juice on the beach of Sa Huỳnh that afternoon, I wasn't sure that the salty taste in my throat was the flavor of the fruit or my own tears that I was trying to swallow. Reading her text, one can get a glimpse into her soul, crying out for the human touch, longing for some familial and familiar affection. Yet her deepest yearning was for M., the love of her life, a catalyst that pushed at the edges of her communist sensibility and propelled her forward toward a life that is fraught with dangers, while M.— although present at the same front in the South — was not returning her love. In fact, it was M's presence in the South that led Đặng to volunteer for the South.

This unrequited love tugged at her heartstring, and she became bitter and melancholic. Many times her sentimentality was transformed into a humanist feel for her fellow villagers and comrades in-arms. The irony — saved for her love, which orthodox communists may consider bourgeois sentiment — is that while Đặng's sacrifice and emotions for them cannot be denied, her petty bourgeois feelings and family background caused conflict with her communist leaning as well as great consternation in her psyche.

Thùy's (a name that her family and she called herself) sisterly love masked a torrent of feelings that perhaps could only be expressed in a freer, less Spartan and altruistic society than the communist world that she was involved in. Many times in socialist communal living, every act is watched and judged by the leader and gatekeeper of that commune. Thùy's action and sentiments cannot escape that customary restriction, thus she was evaluated at various levels, various times before being admitted as a party member. Personal love is frowned upon and the party hierarchy frequently decides whom its members can be involved with or married to.

In this case, it's not so much those dictates that determined her direction, for contrary to her true communist avocation, it was the bourgeois sentiment that provided her with some sense of bearing for life's meaning, albeit a severely fragmented and incomplete life at that. A life that was constantly interrupted by war, in trenches and mobile makeshift clinics, a life uprooted by midnight evacuations and on-the-run searches for safety. And mostly because her love for M. was substituted for lesser peripheral and incidental episodes with her countrymen who come in and out of her sad existence.

After immersing myself in the text on the beach, I believe its author was born at the wrong time, and while we, may commiserate in her honor, noting her heroics, we must realize that the Diary of Đặng Thùy Trâm, after all is a voice wailing out for love and acceptance.

Reprinted with permission of Nguoi Viet Daily Newspaper.