

What Were They Like?

By Denise Levertov

Did the people of Viet Nam
use lanterns of stone?
Did they hold ceremonies
to reverence the opening of buds?
Were they inclined to quiet laughter?
Did they use bone and ivory,
jade and silver, for ornament?
Had they an epic poem?
Did they distinguish between speech and singing?

Sir, their light hearts turned to stone.
It is not remembered whether in gardens
stone lanterns illumined pleasant ways.
Perhaps they gathered once to delight in blossom,
but after their children were killed
there were no more buds.
Sir, laughter is bitter to the burned mouth.
A dream ago, perhaps. Ornament is for joy.
All the bones were charred.
It is not remembered. Remember,
most were peasants; their life
was in rice and bamboo.
When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies
and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces,
maybe fathers told their sons old tales.
When bombs smashed those mirrors
there was time only to scream.
There is an echo yet
of their speech which was like a song.
It was reported that their singing resembled
the flight of moths in moonlight.
Who can say? It is silent now.

