

“a riveting memoir on wheels — spinning wheels, twisted wheels and occasionally broken wheels... Blomer takes the reader on a strenuous journey that challenges both body and spirit.”

—PATRICIA YOUNG, author of *Short Takes on the Apocalypse*

YVONNE BLOMER

SUGAR RIDE

Cycling from Hanoi to Kuala Lumpur



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for Rupert



*Hanoi, Vietnam, September 9, 1999 –
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, November 28, 1999*

If one is to try to record one's life truthfully, one must aim at getting into the record of it something of the disorderly discontinuity which makes it so absurd, unpredictable, bearable.

—LEONARD WOOLF

It is by riding a bicycle that you learn the contours of a country best, since you have to sweat up the hills and coast down them. Thus you remember them as they actually are, while in a motor car only a high hill impresses you, and you have no such accurate remembrance of country you have driven through as you gain by riding a bicycle.

—ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Happy Halloween, Thailand, October 31



Will I ever catch up to him?

In his yellow shirt, he has pedaled so far ahead that he's almost out of sight. I want to stop for a rest. My hands, ass, legs, shoulders hurt. He is racing the wind or rain, has set a pace and is sticking to it, some overplayed Madonna song driving him.

"Rupert" I yell, knowing the futility of it.

Dropped in the middle of nowhere, I've forgotten the point of this exercise. I'm dizzy and light-headed. I need to eat. I stop, pull a PowerBar out of my bag and tear into it. It turns to paste in my mouth as I anxiously watch him become a spot on my glasses, a fleck of pollen in the air. *He who?* I drink water and quickly get going. *Where am I?* The little voice in my head becomes less and less comforting. *Who? Who?* I whisper to myself. *Apparition*, I think. *Ghost-husband*. He can just go straight to hell. Ride right off the edge of the world for all I care. Then a car full of guys revs alongside me.

"Hey," the driver says through his open window. "Where you go?"

I don't smile. Look ahead. *Keep pedaling*. Rupert has disappeared completely. *Who?* I ask myself again. *Who Rupert*.

"Hey. You speak English?"

I involuntarily nod, turn my head slowly, look the driver straight in the eyes.

"Where you going?" His friends leer, hang out the window. There are four of them. I point ahead and they laugh.

Rupert, Rupert, Rupert, Rupert, Rupert, I chant in my head. *Stop. Come back. Stop come back stop come back stop*. I look around. No small side roads, no small shops, nothing. I look at the driver again. Stupidly smile.

Sweat drips between my breasts, down my neck, down my back. My tongue is numb. I realize my blood sugars are very low. I can feel myself going under. I keep pedaling.

When I was ten years old, I learned that the reason I'd been getting up every hour in the night to pee, and the reason I was hungry all the time but also tired and thirsty and skinny and weedy looking was because I had diabetes. For two weeks I left my regular life of school and friends and silliness and stayed in the Edmonton General Hospital and learned how to be diabetic. The doctors and nurses taught me about calories and urine testing (later replaced by the more publicly acceptable blood testing) and I practiced giving injections to oranges while letting the nurses or my dad practice on me. I began to feel better once those first shots of pork-based insulin were jabbed into me. I learned how to measure and weigh food, eat regular meals, do injections and test urine so that by the time I returned home my parents and I were fully trained in how to live with diabetes.

In the hospital, a tall buxom nurse with upswept blond curls and bright red lips said two things to me. She said, KISS (Keep it Simple Sweetheart) and she told me never to use my diabetes as an excuse. As a child these two morsels entered my veins and filled the tissue around my organs and brain. They created a filter through which I looked at the world and through which I looked at myself.

“You should come with us,” says the driver. “You stop.”

I shake my head and keep pedaling. My vision is blurred. I feel drunk.

“Yeah, we need company,” one in the back says, leaning out the window, wagging his hand at me.

I see a bus shelter, a yellow shirt inside. *Yellowshirtyellowshirtyellowshirt.*

A truck comes up behind the car, which now has to either pull over or speed up. The driver pulls behind me. I pedal as fast as I can, using the last few ounces of sugar in my body. Rupert sits in the bus shelter 500 metres ahead. The guys in the car see him, take a long look at me, all four of them, then pull back into traffic after the truck passes.

I wave to the truck driver, fly off my bike, yelling. Rupert stands up to catch me.



“Wait a minute sir/ you kind of hurt my feelings/ You see me as a sweet back-loaded puppet/ And you've got meal ticket taste” (Alanis Morissette, “Right Through You”).

In two years in Japan I rarely told anyone I was diabetic. I didn't want the people, who were becoming friends, to think less of me. To consider me weak. Diabetes as a form of shame.

This is a condition that can be hidden from view. No one need know. Except... sometimes being both diabetic and a woman feels like double the weakness. Couldn't I just rely on myself for a change? Not fly, like some helpless maiden, into the puzzled arms of a man.

Beginning



At twenty-one a friend gave me her classic Lady's Raleigh. At twenty-one I met Rupert at university. He was always clad in black leggings, army shorts overtop, a red plaid jacket and a faded black backpack with a silver helmet swinging from it. His straight blond-brown hair with long bangs swung over his blue eyes. Over six feet and lanky, he walked with a kind of high-altitude buoyancy. Partners, we measured each other's skulls in Archaeology lab.

Which love came first—Rupert or the bike? I remember beers in the Student Union Building and a ride home on his handlebars. Remember my first long solo ride on that Raleigh, up and down distant streets till my legs throbbed and ached. I rode that Raleigh until the cranks fell off and the bike could go no more. A Giant Hybrid replaced it. I married Rupert, who rode a Schwinn. We packed up our bikes and flew to Japan.

Our new employer, the Japanese Government, flew us First Class on Japan Airlines. We had been hired as Assistant Language Teachers in the JET Program. Newlyweds, we landed in Tokyo suddenly overwhelmed as Japanese words spilled from neon lights and off trains; they slid from menus and out of the mouths of fast-talking waiters.

Cycling to Hagi, bartering for soybeans, seeing Samurai and Noh plays, teaching and running English clubs, sampling fried oyster mushrooms, laughing under cherry blossoms with Japanese friends—we were too busy to notice how or when Japan had become home. After two years our time was coming to an end. We wanted to find a way to honour our lives in

Asia. We decided to embark on a three-month bicycle trip from Hanoi in Vietnam to Laos, Thailand, and finally fly home to Vancouver from Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia.

I'd gained a love of cycling with Rupert and I'd done a short bike tour in Thailand with a friend. It felt natural, exhilarating, daring even to travel the meandering thousands of kilometers from Hanoi west on bicycles. We would take our two perfect machines—give or take a dent, rust spot or creaky chain—on a long ride home.



Always on display, we learned to avoid public displays. Learned to walk through the shopping tunnels of Nōgata with our hands in our pockets. Elbows or shoulders touching. How this could translate as distance. Should we make love right here? Find a ramshackle guest house with a double bed? Better yet, instead of pulling plantains off the tree on the mountain in northern Thailand, pull me into the bushes. I am blind with conjunctivitis. Lay me down in the shade. I am weary with hills.

Hanoi, Vietnam, September 9



Groggy-eyed we enter this new world, our bikes boxed and teetering on an airport trolley. I squint beyond the parking lot to the mountains wrapped in shining emerald trees. Everything is wet with humidity and glowing. The bikes begin to slip.

“Yvonne!” Rupert yells, yanking me back into the hot day.

He slowly stops the trolley and I get my weight under and beside the bikes, hold them in place.

As I walk, my body pushed against the boxes and gear, I look around the small airport with its sprawling concrete parking area. I can hear the low hum of traffic in the distance. We spot shade at the back near the fence line and head there, passing a few cyclos lined up just beyond the airport entrance. The drivers watch us as we make our slow way. Beyond the fencing, I can make out the road, a few crumbling houses, trees and mountains that rise straight up. I take a deep breath, happy to be outside again, happy for the moisture in the air and the subtle scents of distant greenery, with an undertow of dusty dirt. We stop then Rupert and I carefully lift the boxes off the cart, place them on the ground, so the bikes lie on their sides, and open them. My heart leaps at the sight of my bicycle. Rupert and I lean into each other for a moment, then get busy lifting out each bike and lining up all the parts: wheels with flat tires, pedals in plastic bags, and semi-attached handlebars. We scrutinize both bikes for damage but they seem in good shape. The boxes are in ruin, but the bikes don't look bent or battered.

We barely speak as we assemble. Rupert helps me put my handle-bars on and then we flip my bike upside down so I can attach the wheels. He then does the same with his bike. We are sweating in minutes from the exertion and heat. I tie my hair off my face and push up my glasses. I would like to be one of those awesome women who are not shy about using a

wrench or changing a flat tire. I am working on my skills here. Rupert, on the other hand, is a handy man. Not one of those guys to sit back and let other people get their hands dirty, he gets right in there. Sweat drips into my eyes and my glasses fog but I chant *you-can-do-it-you-can-do-it-youcandoit* in my head.

“Let me help,” Rupert says, hovering.

“I can do it,” I say, sweating as I pump tires.

The cyclo cabs, when I look up, are closer. The drivers watch in silence, look at each other every once in a while, then back at us, as if they can't believe we've come to Vietnam with bicycles. This is a country of bicycles. Maybe they think the bikes are some kind of foreign trick to get out of paying for a cab ride.

Hot and sticky, I dig in a pannier for a bandana to hold the stray hairs completely off my forehead and to catch the dripping sweat before bending over my tire with our small pump.

I stand to stretch and one of the cab drivers comes over to help. He takes the pump and begins to inflate the tire while his comrades look on. Another driver approaches to give the tire a squeeze, then shakes his head, lips pushed together teasingly, and gestures to keep pumping.

Rupert packs everything into his panniers and then mock-pouts at me: “Sure they can help.” In his yellow cycling jersey, loose shorts over padded cycling shorts and runners, he is pink-faced and sweating. He towers over the drivers as he rolls past to entertain some kids on the far side of the fence, their faces pressed close, watching. They have bikes too, or so we think, and take up the task of bartering theirs for his.

While Rupert jokes around—all in gestures and nods—my cab driver finishes pumping. I bow a thanks, screw the valve tight, clumsily fit my awkward panniers to my bike, then run inside to change into my cycling shorts and buy water.

We should have thought of buying water first, because the airport, by this time, is shut down. I use the toilet. The tap water is not drinkable so from a small kiosk I buy two 250ml bottles of water with the few American dollars I have in my pocket. The money exchange is closed, so we have

nothing. We have no idea how long it will take to ride to Hanoi or if we'll be able to find more drinkable water. It's about thirty-six degrees Celsius.

Back outside, I see Rupert, in playful gestures challenging one of the kids to follow us. They all laugh then ride off on one bicycle. We'd thought they each had their own, but in fact they all share one: three gangly passengers and one cyclist. Suddenly our loads look comical, a luxury of travel clothes and knick-knacks in a country where the bicycle truly is a vehicle of transport, play and work.

We are about thirty kilometres from Hanoi, in the Red River Valley. We have been living in Japan for the past two years. Adept at bowing our thanks. Adept at catching the attention of those around us. I walk toward Rupert, psyching myself up to ride.

"I should test my blood," I say, preventing Rupert from pushing off toward the highway. "4.2. A little low. Do you want some PowerBar?"

"Not really," he says as he takes a hearty bite. We roll toward the exit, wait, then signal left, enter the bike-buffalo-moped traffic heading for the city.



As we crested the overpass that crossed the Red River, I was split in two. My body on the weighted wobble of my bike. Sweat running down my back, down my shorts and into my socks. My eyes and sense of smell, my ears: the green, the red dirt and ochre water, the swarms of people, scents of buffalo, rotting pig, garlic cooking, diesel fuel, dust in my nose. My head full of the honk and hum of life. I wanted to yell out to Rupert, to nudge him with my elbow and say "Look look look." He focused on the narrow pathway, mosaic of traffic, the climb, his body on bike. I saw how his long limbs, white skin, distracted everyone he passed. I was humming behind him. Humming still. Caught, still, on that overpass in that throng of bodies and beauty.

Hanoi, Vietnam, September 11



In the dark theater, before the puppets enter the stage, it is silent but for the sound of water tickling itself. The stage is a red roofed temple-like building called a *dinh* and the sets float on a shallow pool of water. The scene: a house with an open balcony in the foreground of the temple. A little boy puppet floats across the water to introduce the story. We can't see the puppeteers at all. They stand in the water behind a bamboo screen holding the puppets' long poles. From the boy's introduction, one story drifts into the next as brightly costumed puppets glide on and off stage. Stories of rural life in Vietnam show fishermen with their mini nets dipping and dipping as if into a river, followed by women planting rice hand over hand into wet fields, and water buffalo snorting and plodding their way across a country hemmed in by fuzzy green mountains. We move from daily life to the smoke and rapid-fire of fighting until the puppets tire of reliving the war. The scene ends with a fisherman resting under a banyan tree. The music squeaks and brays in the timbre of wooden flutes and tin drums. I hear the wind, bird song, shuffling feet, whining wheels, the heft of labour, and the rub of worn tires on gravel in the voice of this music. I have a sense of what lies ahead before I've seen the country itself. The road will point the way ahead, to villages, temples, people's house fronts, the graves of men who died in war and their children's children yelling after us. These children are also parents, farmers, shop keepers, labourers and keepers of their country's uncertain future and its difficult past.



I am writing on the threshold. Of place and history. Of dissonance and longing. Between this time and that one. I am in my twenties and newly married. I am in my forties with a ten year old and a long marriage. I am stretching my fingers to touch on multiple perceptions. Composite. Story, like time, is flexible and not always chronological. How our perception of what we experience can change with knowledge. My first instinct, pre-You Tube and Google, was less-informed but still accurate.

On the water-stage everything is mirror: flexible, changeable, fickle before the audience's eye.



After the puppets we walk back to our hotel along Hoan Kiem Lake, through the centre of the city. We pass three cyclo drivers who follow us with their eyes. Then I sense their attention jump to a little girl, approaching.

“Please,” she holds her hand out for money. Seconds later, her grandmother grabs her begging hands and pulls her away, bowing at us as she marches the child off.

One of the cyclo drivers coasts over, “We are too proud, we will not allow our children to beg. You will see begging in the South, but not here, not in the North.”

Rupert and I nod to the driver, and look back to watch the grandmother and child. “Wherever we go, we’ll always stand out,” I say, looking up at him as we continue.

“I wonder if he’s right,” Rupert muses. “I wonder if we won’t see much begging up here, but will once we enter the Demilitarized Zone.”

Rupert's thoughts trail off as we continue along the lake, noting the bridge that crosses over to the Ngoc Son Temple and the few people going home or to work, to hotels or a late night café. Our guest house is in the old quarter where every street is named after the trade and merchants on that street. We pass Woven Basket Street where women hunch over large weaving mats and Tin Street where merchants pound tin pots and bins into the wee hours of the night. In our room, I restlessly toss beside my heavy-sleeping husband and imagine the road ahead.



At the puppet theatre I watched a turtle push a temple up from under the water. Then the turtle had something in its mouth. Then smoke filled the water and the temple sank. What was the turtle holding in its mouth? What were the men doing in their boats rowing toward and away, toward and away from the turtle?

Years later, I read about the rare Yangtze giant softshell turtle. Only four remained in existence until January of 2016 when the Hoan Kiem Lake turtle is believed to have died. It was over one-hundred years old. In Vietnamese folklore that very turtle was thought to be the Golden Turtle God who rescued the country many times. In the stories, a fisherman pulled a sword out of the lake and gave it to a lord who used it to fight for Vietnam's independence from China in the fifteenth-century. The boats in the puppet theatre must have been the fisherman and the lord. The lord became emperor and when he returned to the lake, the Golden Turtle poked his head up and asked for the sword to be returned. The story is ancient, as was the turtle, but carries within it the many battles Vietnam has fought for independence, including the more recent Vietnam War.

Fragments from the road



Hot and restless in a dark room with yellow walls and translucent curtains, my heel hooked on the bottom tube of my Giant. My husband breathing the breath of the sleeping. Hanoi.

Standing half-naked, my hair fizzed with shampoo in an irrigation pond. Thailand.

IV tube in my wrist, fluids and anti-nausea drugs drip into my sleeping body. Rupert in a chair, reading. He could look up to the window, to the rich green slope of the Cameron Highlands' tea bushes. I turn, open my eyes. Malaysia.



Born in Zimbabwe (Rhodesia), I was an infant when my parents immigrated to Canada. From one colony to the other. From Africa and years of colonization to Canada and its horrors of residential schools and missing women. Born to British parents who were drawn to the heat and adventure, drawn to the privilege even if they didn't see it. Even if they are good people. Even if I am colour blind. Even if I want to reach out a hand, the hand is white and it carries all the baggage of colour. Will we ever free ourselves of this colour-trap? Free ourselves of our need to judge and rank?

Riding unpaved highway toward Pho Len, Vietnam, September 13



Today Vietnam will begin to repave its entire national highway. I stand on pedals to coast for a while over loose gravel, dodge the bigger rocks and smile at the men and women moving broken asphalt in baskets on their heads or tied to bikes. I tuck my nose into my shirt to avoid dust and the smell of tar as I pedal hard to stay close to Rupert. He rides standing. I sit and push, stand and coast, though the word “coast” sounds smooth. To bump along, to joint and muscle grind. The bike is heavy, packed to the gills with panniers and we are still negotiating the fine-tuning of balance with all the weight.

That weight is made up of two sets of cycling clothes each, one set of long pants and two t-shirts for regular wear, a sarong which will be blanket, skirt, dress and beach towel, a jar of peanut butter imported into and brought from Japan, and PowerBars my sister brought from Canada. Divided between our bags we have extra pen needles, cartridges of two kinds of insulin, slow-acting which is absorbed over the day and gives a basal dose and fast-acting absorbed with meals to give a bolus, test strips, and alcohol swabs. If one of us loses everything, I’ll still have enough drugs to survive. We also have a medical kit which includes suture tapes and all manner of antiseptics, rehydration salts in case something we eat or the heat wears our bodies down. Each day at six p.m. sharp, we take an anti-malarial drug that makes us feel queasy for hours after. Each day I administer four injections of insulin, one of slow-acting to give a buffer of insulin and one for each meal of fast-acting to cover meals. In my handlebar bag I carry my blood tester and insulin pen kit with needles and test strips for the day, a camera, purse with the our day’s money, sun screen and a photocopied map.

I also pack copy of *Geist* magazine, a novel (*Smilla's Sense of Snow* that I will read and discard, pick up a John Grisham in its place somewhere along the way), a just-begun journal, an atlas of Thailand in Thai, photocopied pages from out of date *Lonely Planet* books from the few English books in a Kitakyushu language school, for Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Malaysia, toiletries that include lip cream, toothbrush and paste, face cream and a brush, a couple of handkerchiefs to tie my hair back, a small bag of Canada pins and tattoos, camera and film, and a letter in Vietnamese from a Vietnamese-American friend in Japan who had her dad translate explaining all the drugs we carry. Rupert has a battered copy of the Bible from the "English Library" I created and housed in our apartment. Not because he's religious, but because he's always wanted to read it cover to cover, for the stories and mythologies that pervade the Western world.

"I need a break." I holler to be heard over the smashing of road and raking of gravel. We pull over, drink water, watch the people around us endlessly dig and fill and carry. Fleeting I wish they were knee-deep in water, like the puppets of a few days ago.

"Man!" Rupert says, shaking his head as he watches the cloud of churned-up road coat us and all the workers.

We have been travelling at a snail's pace today because of the road surface. We are dust-coated and weary already.

"OK, let's keep going," I sigh, while munching on a piece of dried mango. Rupert drains his bottle, pulls the next one off the top of his pannier, just shoved under the rain cover, and away we go.



In Victoria these days the bicycle is a commuter vehicle. It is how parents get kids to school, how musicians carry their cellos and kayakers their boats. There are improbable options in trailers—cargo bikes, bikes with engines. In

Southeast Asia the bike seemed equivalent to the labouring horse, ideal for a labouring people. I felt a kinship to them on that gravel road, spewing dust back at myself. Every mile of the highway an open slash being stitched closed again, bucket by bucket, loaded bike by loaded bike. This too must have changed by now, by now big trucks and the highway repaved again.

Pied Piper, Vietnam, September 12



Late-morning we stop near the entrance to a train station. Rupert walks up to the building to find a toilet and garbage can. I wait with the bikes and watch a row of children follow him: “Hello!” “What’s your name?” “Where you from?” “Where are you going?” These questions are followed by more detailed questions in Vietnamese. He answers as he goes, then asks an adult for a toilet. The man points back to the road and says something sharp, a reprimand perhaps, to the kids.

“He’s pointing to that tree,” I suggest. I can see no other options.

Rupert, the Pied Piper, looks behind him. The kids lean against a wall in the shade to watch, giggles erupting up and down the line of them. He shrugs and heads for the tree.

Two girls, one in pink shorts and matching shirt, the other in soccer shorts and a striped t-shirt, tiptoe quickly after him. They follow him down the drive, stretching their necks to see but not be seen. Then, giggling, run back to their cohort to send the next spy.

Rupert is unfazed by this. I can see from the look on his face that he is contemplating some mischief. I raise my eyebrows at him. He could chase the kids, swoop one up playfully in his arms. Then again, he is a big white guy and what he and I know to be friendly could be mistaken.

As Rupert swings his leg over his bike, I notice that the heat is slowing him down too; even the smallest leg-swing is an effort.