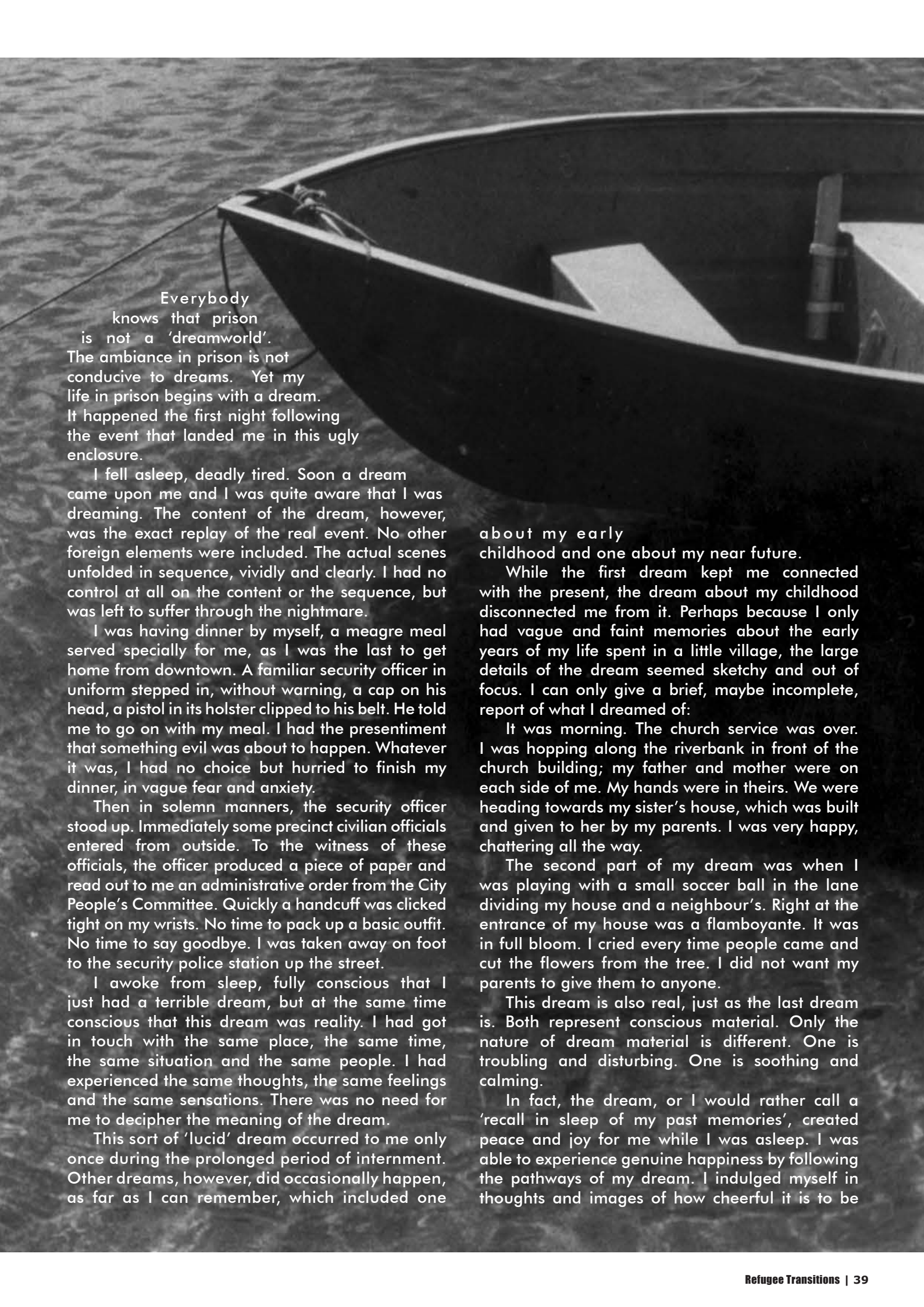


# Dreams of a Prisoner

**For the refugees who  
have spent years in  
incarceration**

By Tiep Nguyen

Photo by Denis Jones



Everybody knows that prison is not a 'dreamworld'. The ambiance in prison is not conducive to dreams. Yet my life in prison begins with a dream. It happened the first night following the event that landed me in this ugly enclosure.

I fell asleep, deadily tired. Soon a dream came upon me and I was quite aware that I was dreaming. The content of the dream, however, was the exact replay of the real event. No other foreign elements were included. The actual scenes unfolded in sequence, vividly and clearly. I had no control at all on the content or the sequence, but was left to suffer through the nightmare.

I was having dinner by myself, a meagre meal served specially for me, as I was the last to get home from downtown. A familiar security officer in uniform stepped in, without warning, a cap on his head, a pistol in its holster clipped to his belt. He told me to go on with my meal. I had the presentiment that something evil was about to happen. Whatever it was, I had no choice but hurried to finish my dinner, in vague fear and anxiety.

Then in solemn manners, the security officer stood up. Immediately some precinct civilian officials entered from outside. To the witness of these officials, the officer produced a piece of paper and read out to me an administrative order from the City People's Committee. Quickly a handcuff was clicked tight on my wrists. No time to pack up a basic outfit. No time to say goodbye. I was taken away on foot to the security police station up the street.

I awoke from sleep, fully conscious that I just had a terrible dream, but at the same time conscious that this dream was reality. I had got in touch with the same place, the same time, the same situation and the same people. I had experienced the same thoughts, the same feelings and the same sensations. There was no need for me to decipher the meaning of the dream.

This sort of 'lucid' dream occurred to me only once during the prolonged period of internment. Other dreams, however, did occasionally happen, as far as I can remember, which included one

about my early childhood and one about my near future.

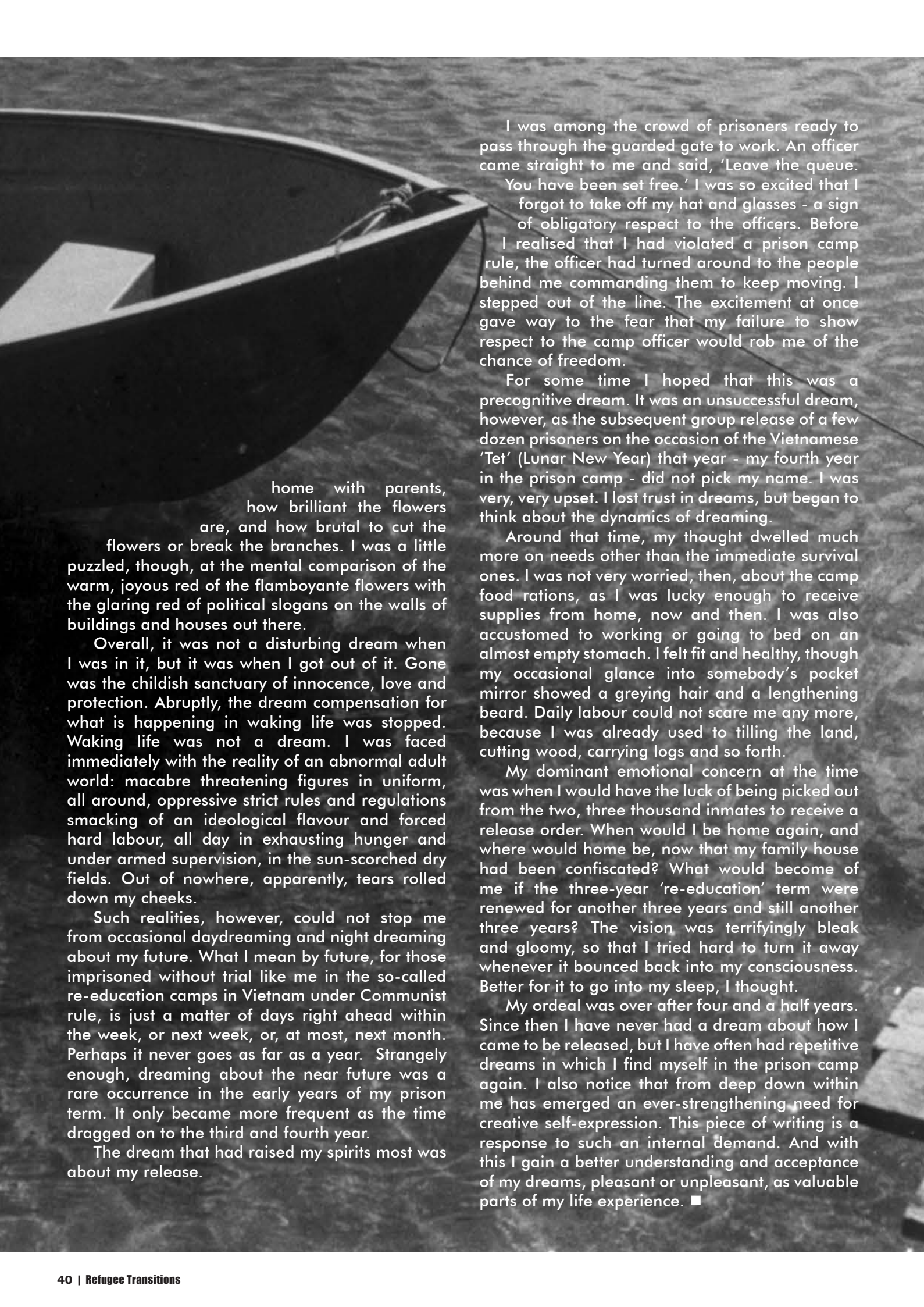
While the first dream kept me connected with the present, the dream about my childhood disconnected me from it. Perhaps because I only had vague and faint memories about the early years of my life spent in a little village, the large details of the dream seemed sketchy and out of focus. I can only give a brief, maybe incomplete, report of what I dreamed of:

It was morning. The church service was over. I was hopping along the riverbank in front of the church building; my father and mother were on each side of me. My hands were in theirs. We were heading towards my sister's house, which was built and given to her by my parents. I was very happy, chattering all the way.

The second part of my dream was when I was playing with a small soccer ball in the lane dividing my house and a neighbour's. Right at the entrance of my house was a flamboyante. It was in full bloom. I cried every time people came and cut the flowers from the tree. I did not want my parents to give them to anyone.

This dream is also real, just as the last dream is. Both represent conscious material. Only the nature of dream material is different. One is troubling and disturbing. One is soothing and calming.

In fact, the dream, or I would rather call a 'recall in sleep of my past memories', created peace and joy for me while I was asleep. I was able to experience genuine happiness by following the pathways of my dream. I indulged myself in thoughts and images of how cheerful it is to be



I was among the crowd of prisoners ready to pass through the guarded gate to work. An officer came straight to me and said, 'Leave the queue. You have been set free.' I was so excited that I forgot to take off my hat and glasses - a sign of obligatory respect to the officers. Before I realised that I had violated a prison camp rule, the officer had turned around to the people behind me commanding them to keep moving. I stepped out of the line. The excitement at once gave way to the fear that my failure to show respect to the camp officer would rob me of the chance of freedom.

For some time I hoped that this was a precognitive dream. It was an unsuccessful dream, however, as the subsequent group release of a few dozen prisoners on the occasion of the Vietnamese 'Tet' (Lunar New Year) that year - my fourth year in the prison camp - did not pick my name. I was very, very upset. I lost trust in dreams, but began to think about the dynamics of dreaming.

Around that time, my thought dwelled much more on needs other than the immediate survival ones. I was not very worried, then, about the camp food rations, as I was lucky enough to receive supplies from home, now and then. I was also accustomed to working or going to bed on an almost empty stomach. I felt fit and healthy, though my occasional glance into somebody's pocket mirror showed a greying hair and a lengthening beard. Daily labour could not scare me any more, because I was already used to tilling the land, cutting wood, carrying logs and so forth.

My dominant emotional concern at the time was when I would have the luck of being picked out from the two, three thousand inmates to receive a release order. When would I be home again, and where would home be, now that my family house had been confiscated? What would become of me if the three-year 're-education' term were renewed for another three years and still another three years? The vision was terrifyingly bleak and gloomy, so that I tried hard to turn it away whenever it bounced back into my consciousness. Better for it to go into my sleep, I thought.

My ordeal was over after four and a half years. Since then I have never had a dream about how I came to be released, but I have often had repetitive dreams in which I find myself in the prison camp again. I also notice that from deep down within me has emerged an ever-strengthening need for creative self-expression. This piece of writing is a response to such an internal demand. And with this I gain a better understanding and acceptance of my dreams, pleasant or unpleasant, as valuable parts of my life experience. ■

home with parents,  
how brilliant the flowers  
are, and how brutal to cut the  
flowers or break the branches. I was a little  
puzzled, though, at the mental comparison of the  
warm, joyous red of the flamboyante flowers with  
the glaring red of political slogans on the walls of  
buildings and houses out there.

Overall, it was not a disturbing dream when I was in it, but it was when I got out of it. Gone was the childish sanctuary of innocence, love and protection. Abruptly, the dream compensation for what is happening in waking life was stopped. Waking life was not a dream. I was faced immediately with the reality of an abnormal adult world: macabre threatening figures in uniform, all around, oppressive strict rules and regulations smacking of an ideological flavour and forced hard labour, all day in exhausting hunger and under armed supervision, in the sun-scorched dry fields. Out of nowhere, apparently, tears rolled down my cheeks.

Such realities, however, could not stop me from occasional daydreaming and night dreaming about my future. What I mean by future, for those imprisoned without trial like me in the so-called re-education camps in Vietnam under Communist rule, is just a matter of days right ahead within the week, or next week, or, at most, next month. Perhaps it never goes as far as a year. Strangely enough, dreaming about the near future was a rare occurrence in the early years of my prison term. It only became more frequent as the time dragged on to the third and fourth year.

The dream that had raised my spirits most was about my release.