

An Eternal Harvest

Karen J. Coates

One Saturday afternoon in the brittle clinch of the dry season, my husband, Jerry, and I hike through the Laotian countryside with a guide named Manophet. We spot a boy on a barren hillside, his frame silhouetted against blue sky. He's poised at an angle, aligned with the slope of the hill. He keeps a basket at his side, a shovel in his grip. He's digging for ant eggs, for fishing bait. As he drives the shovel into the ground, I cringe and back away.

The boy knows the earth could explode beneath him. He knows this ground is covered in bombs dropped before he was born by foreigners who live thousands of miles away. He knows many of those bombs never detonated and that now, as he digs, the ground could blow. Jostled, jiggled, heated, tossed or moved in the currents of annual monsoons—it doesn't necessarily take much to revive the life of a dormant bomb. Today many Laotian farm fields remain covered in unexploded ordnance (UXO). Fist-sized "bombies" lie a few inches below the surface. During the war, these little explosives were crammed into cluster-bomb canisters, 670 at a time. The canisters opened mid-air, raining bomblets across the ground.

Contamination and death are the natural course of life across Laos. Bomb canisters abound. They're formed into fence posts and feeding troughs, they're planted with pretty little flowers. They're melted down and shaped into bowls and spoons. Laotians have lived with bombs for so long, their presence is no longer aberrant

but simply ordinary.

And so the young boy on the hill keeps digging, keeps flinging dirt. Manophet goes to him and demonstrates a safer way to dig, slowly and softly with his feet. He instructs the boy to stop if he hits something hard. But the boy eschews the advice. "Ah," he says, "I've done it many times." As we descend the hill I look back at the boy's small figure, swinging the shovel, pounding it into the soil with all the strength he can muster.

Manophet looks weary. He spent many years working for a British bomb disposal unit that searched the fields of his homeland, looking for UXO. Like most Laotians, Manophet has lost friends and neighbors to explosions long after war. He has seen human bodies torn to shreds.



We continue walking through the scrubby hills on the outskirts of Phonsavan, in the central province of Xieng Khouang. Manophet pauses on a small crest, stooping to examine a few scattered bomb fragments and specks of explosive. Someone has dismantled a bomb. Probably looking for the explosive to sell or to keep for personal use in fishing or hunting, he says.

We walk some more.

Manophet points to two distant graveyards, plotted separately on the incline. People who have died natural deaths are buried in the lower cemetery; people killed in accidents are buried in the cemetery above. If death is natural, Manophet says, people believe life has ended. But if death is accidental, life is not over. Only the body is gone. The upper cemetery is filled with victims, many who died in explosions.

At least one person is killed or maimed each week in Laos, in accidents involving UXO. That's what everyone says, but everyone knows that no one really knows an accurate number. Accidents happen far from roads and hospitals. People perish in villages and fields. There is no complete tally, but speculations are growing worse. In three weeks, we've heard of 27 accidents around Xieng Khouang province alone.

The numbers rise as the population grows and expands. Farm-

ers clear more fields for pastures; they find more bombs. The death toll worsens as the scrap-metal trade booms. The Chinese, the Vietnamese, the Thais all need metal amid an international shortage. The Laotians have it in their fields. By farming, Laotians earn about 50 cents a day. By trading in scrap, they reap the most lucrative harvest they've ever known, at 7.2 cents a pound.

Manophet takes us to the old provincial capital, Muang Khun, which numbered 100,000 before the war, then sat like a ghost town for many years. The bombing raids erased the town and it was essentially abandoned in 1975. Today people are slowly returning, erecting homes atop the ashes and rubble of the past. Every day, a few curious tourists meander through the crumbling old temples and homes.

Manophet grew up here. "Seven of my friends were killed in this schoolyard," he points to a dusty field nearby. That was 1978, when he was 12 years old. It was recess and all the children were playing outside when his friend found a bomb on the playground. He tossed the small orb to another boy, and it blew. "Seven boys died immediately," Manophet recalls. "Another five died in hospital." When Manophet's mother heard the news, she frantically ran two miles to the school, to check on her son. "She thought it was me."

Twenty years later, in 1998, the Mines Advisory Group, Manophet's former employer, secured funding to clear the area. The MAG team found 300 bomblets, tiny but potentially deadly, buried in the soil surrounding the school.

That is not unusual in Laos.

Just up the road from the schoolhouse is an ancient Buddhist *stupa* called Tat Foun. According to legend, the original structure was built in the 15th century and 100 years later, another *stupa* was built around it with just enough room between old and new for a body to pass through. It's a magical place, and people come here to leave little treasures, little donations to the higher powers. If you walk through the *stupa*, Manophet says, your ills will fade away and your travels will always be safe.

Of course, we proceed through the narrow corridor. And when we emerge on the other side, we meet a man scrounging in the scrub brush along the path. He's collecting edible herbs, a seemingly innocuous task. But UXO hides everywhere. "My father's friend was killed while looking for herbs," Manophet says. The friend's shovel hit a bomb.

Manophet tells us about a particularly grim day in 1978, when 52 villagers were killed at once. Back in the earlier days of communism, neighbors worked together in the fields, as the government ordered. If one person hit a bomb, everyone died, which was exactly what happened. "They hit a big one," Manophet says. "Two hundred fifty pounds." A bomb that size can spray shrapnel 1,000 meters in every direction.

Manophet was just a little boy during the war, but he remembers and he frequently speaks of that time. "My house was bombed. The kitchen was burning," he recalls. His mother ran out the east door and his father ran out the west, and the two were separated for eight years. Manophet and his mother ended up in a cave with seven other families, hiding from the bombings for six years. His brother was lost, and everyone assumed he had died.

When the war ended, Manophet returned home with his mother, but "nothing was left." They started anew, finding food in the forest, planting vegetables, catching fish. Two years later, a relative arrived with news: He had found Manophet's father at a refugee camp in the capital, Vientiane. After eight years of uncertainty, the couple reunited and the family lived together again for 20 years more.

Then one day a Hmong family came to the door. They had traveled from the United States, as many do, to trace their roots. They had a story to tell. Back in 1968, during the bombing, the family had seen a little boy by the river. He was all alone, so they took him in. The whole family escaped to Vientiane, swam across the Mekong River to Thailand, and lived across the border as refugees for half a year. Aid workers advised them to give the boy a Hmong name and call him their son, so an American charity would sponsor a new life for the entire family—together—in the United States. To-

day, that boy is a prominent doctor in Minnesota. He is Manophet's brother, an ethnic Lao raised as an ethnic Hmong.

This was unbelievable news to Manophet's parents, and they didn't trust the story. They buried it in the backs of their minds, and life went on as usual until 1996. That year, Manophet received a letter from the United States, its envelope stuffed with bills totaling \$200 and instructions to buy plane tickets to Vientiane. It came from his long-lost brother, who said he had written to Manophet's parents many times but received no response. Those letters never made it past the Lao government censors.

Manophet did as he was asked. He flew with his family to Vientiane, and he waited and waited among the crowds in the international terminal, waving a sign with his brother's name. No one came, no one came, and Manophet almost left the airport, dismayed. But a passenger in the lobby told him an American was having trouble passing through Immigration, so Manophet waited a little longer. Then suddenly, a young man dropped his bags and rushed into Manophet's arms. "Are you my brother?" he asked.

"Yes," he replied. Still his brother, after 28 years apart.

Manophet's story comes full circle when he takes us home to meet his mother. Seventy-two-year-old Deung Dee lives in a wooden house with a rusty roof. She cooks over a smoky fire in the center of her floor—beef with lemongrass, pickled greens with chile, boiled cabbage with peas and dried fish. Manophet stirs the pots and the two discuss his childhood.

"Oh it was very difficult," Deung Dee says, describing their years in the cave. Not everyone survived. Several of the families had left the cave one day to search for food. They found banana flowers and herbs growing in the forest, and they ate freely. Hours later, back at the cave, they grew violently ill. They spat up blood and bled from their noses. "At first we thought we were visited by bad spirits," Manophet says, "but later we found out it was from the bombing. Chemical poisoning." Manophet has an American friend in Vientiane who studies the effects of Agent Orange. He has told Manophet that people still suffer in the hills between Laos and Vietnam.

We sit and nibble and talk around the fire when the telephone rings in the next room. It's Manophet's lost-and-found brother, back in Minnesota, just calling to say hi.

We meet again the next morning and Manophet takes us to a coffee shop run by a grizzly old man named Khampouang, a retired teacher who speaks French. His walls are lined with bombies, shells, mortars and mines. No worries, he says. "They've all been checked." He brings us two tiny cups of coffee and insists we share a few shots of *lao lao*, the local elixir, a potent wine made from rice. It's not even 8 a.m., but Laotian hospitality runs 24 hours.

As we sit and visit with Khampouang, customers come and go, one after the other, hauling sacks of scrap metal, most of it from old bombs. Khampouang makes his money as a middleman, paying 1,400 kip per kilogram of metal and re-selling it for 1,650 kip to Vietnamese brokers. That's a 1.14 cent profit on every pound. "Ah, the price has increased again from what I told you yesterday," Manophet says. "I'm not very happy to hear this."

We finish our drinks, then drive east down a dirt road into a landscape of barren bomb craters. Thirty years on, nothing grows in these red depressions. We stand at the rim of a biggie, a massive circular divot most likely formed in the blast of a 2,000-pound bomb. Stand high on the hilltops nearby, and you'll see mile after mile of them, marching down the valleys. Cast your eyes inside one of the massive holes, and you'll find more holes. Tiny little holes, the size of a shovel or spade—the marks of a hunter digging for scrap.

There is much to find.

It took 580,000 bombing sorties to litter the earth with so many bombs. Two tons of bombs for every man, woman and child in Laos at the time. The equivalent of one raid every eight minutes for nine years. At least 350,000 civilians dead.

But it took just a single day to kill nearly 400 refugees living in a cave called Tham Piu. Details differ from one account to another; some say it happened in 1968, some say 1969. Some say it was a U.S. bomber, others say it belonged to the Royal Lao Airforce, a

U.S. proxy. Either way: the training, the planes, the bombs all came from the United States. According to the little flyers printed by the Lao government and distributed to tourists, the attack occurred on Nov. 24, 1968, and 374 people died.

That week, half a world away, Americans gathered for Thanksgiving dinner. U.S. President Lyndon Johnson, in his holiday address, noted the beginning of talks "that will, we pray, lead to peace in Vietnam." He asked Americans to show God "the best that is within us — tolerance, respect for life, faith in the destiny of all men to live in peace." At the time, Americans didn't know they were fighting a war in Laos, too.

Nearly four decades later, Manophet takes us to Tham Piu. It's Easter Sunday. We enter the dark chamber of a vast cave with a high ceiling and an uneven floor. We poke through dusty rubble on the ground, finding little swatches of baby blankets, work shirts, rain ponchos, shredded sticky-rice baskets and bits of bombs. "Nobody survived," Manophet says. It took a week before rescuers could make their way here, and by then everyone was dead.

We step slowly through the wreckage, and Jerry looks down to examine a tiny rib bone. We dig for more — a collarbone, two vertebrae. The bones of a small baby.

When we exit Tham Piu, I move the fragments of that child to an altar at the entrance where others before us have left a skull, several bomb shards and many more bones. Suddenly the altar falls, breaking beneath the weight of all that metal and all those bones. It's startling, and my stomach lurches as I stoop to gather the fragments of people who died beneath bombs that my country dropped on this land before I was born.

As we head back to town, we pass children on hillsides, shovels in fists, baskets beside them, fields burning all around. This season, in late March, is the hottest and driest time of year. In another month, the rains will come. But now, it's the season of fire, when farmers burn weeds and stalks on the thin crust of soil, the top of the earth, before the next planting. The surface turns to soot and the air clots with smoke.

Fire is danger: it can cause buried UXO to explode. In late afternoon, deep booms ricochet off the valley walls. Smoke rises from the horizon. "If the sound is close to the village," Manophet says, "there will be someone." Someone dead.

But the upcoming month brings the best season for trade. "After the first rain, the ash washes down and it's very easy to find scrap metal," Manophet explains. He wants to show us more.

Out on a smoldering hilltop, Manophet speaks with a 9-year-old boy named Xia, who keeps a basket by his feet. It's his job to comb the fields two or three times a week. He isn't scared, he has never found a bomb. "But maybe one day he will," Manophet says. "I don't know what he's going to do with that." Manophet worries, "but I cannot help every kid."

Farther up the road, we find a truck parked at the roadside with a man, his wife and sister napping beneath. They wait by the paths that lead to the fields where the children are. "Every day we wait here," the man says. His name is Than. "I've been doing this two or three months. We have nothing else to do. We're just waiting for the farming season."

Than spent \$800 on the truck, his whole life savings. He figured it was worth it. Trading twice a week, he and his wife can earn \$70. They know the risks, but the lure of needed money supersedes all. For the diggers and drivers, "It's free income," Manophet says.

It's dollars in the dirt.

We meet Manophet once again the following week, and we tell him we'd like to meet a blacksmith who makes things—intelligent things—from UXO. This is how we meet Lee Moua. And this is the evolution of his job:

An American bomb detonates on Laotian soil. Thirty years later, a villager exhumes the pieces. He delivers them to a scrap-metal yard where they rest in a heap until a Hmong man plunks down a little cash for a chunk of that bomb.

Lee Moua takes that metal to his backyard blacksmith shop, in the parched fields surrounding his home amid pineapples and sugarcane. He fires a bed of coals, working beneath a rusty roof

on a bamboo frame. His bellows: an old parachute flare canister. His anvil: an artillery shell driven into a stump. Whoo whoo whoo. In and out, in and out, he fires the coals as a small inferno builds. He shoves the jagged metal into the fire until it reddens with heat, then pries it out with tongs and pounds it with a hammer, breaking its form. Then back again into the fire. Lee Moua toils through the broiling afternoon.

Heat it, heat it; pound it, pound it. Fire makes the metal malleable. White hot, it bends and twists. The sun beats the ground around Lee Moua; the hot breath of fire heats his face.

He has a rhythm as he works, rocking on his right foot. Air equals fire. Fire equals power. He places the glowing metal on his anvil and cuts it with a hatchet. The whacking sprays his skin with sparks of metal.

I wonder what he thinks while he pounds and fires, pounds and fires. I wonder what he thinks of these bombs, the catalyst of his career; of the probable death this metal has wrought. And I wonder what he thinks of the American government, which trained the Hmong to fight against the communist Pathet Lao—then left them alone with an unfinished struggle, in a littered land. When the conflict in Vietnam ended, when the secret war in Laos ceased, American soldiers returned to a landscape free of bombs. They went home, thousands of miles removed from the ecological scars of war. Lee Moua's family remained with thousands of others.

But some Hmong also moved to America and now they order garden tools from Lee Moua. He smiths knives and hoes from scrap, then sends them to his relatives across the Pacific. It costs \$6.80 a pound to ship from Laos. He makes three or four knives a day, some fitted with wooden handles, others with buffalo horn. He slowly mails bombs, reshaped, right back to their roots. I wonder if he wonders about returning this metal, bit by bit, to the land of its origin, where it will be used to make gardens grow.

The banging of mallet on metal rattles our eardrums. The more Lee Moua pounds, the more this slab of metal resembles a hoe. He uses an axe to chisel a clean edge on the blade. He folds the metal around a stick, forming a loop where the handle will go. Perfectly

round and perfectly useful. Then he bends the hoe on a wooden beam, which bursts into flames on contact. He straps down a grinder, cranks the handle and sharpens an edge. The metal shines in the sun.

It's a heavy hunk, a marble of chestnut-colored rust and charcoal black. The metal is etched in spots to a silvery sheen. If I tap it with a fingernail, it chimes like a Christmas bell. Its blade is wicked-sharp, capable of practical things.

I look up from the hoe and tell Lee Moua I was born and raised in Wisconsin, an American state with many Hmong people who moved there as refugees. He is happy to hear this news. "I know Wisconsin!" he says. His brother lives there. He scampers inside his dim little house and rifles through a dresser drawer, then presents us with a manila envelope posted a few weeks before. It was sent from Wisconsin Rapids to Xieng Khouang. We're all a little stunned by the irony.

We ask Lee Moua for a portrait, and he obliges. He squats in the wooden frame of his doorway, bare feet on a dirt floor, two toddlers peeking from behind. He props the envelope plainly for the camera to capture it. Then he stands for another picture outside, where his bamboo grows. Lee Moua grips our hoe, his tiger-colored eyes sparkling as the blade glints in the sun.

Our hoe, forged from fire and metal, bombs and blood. It's a simple human tool, born of an old war that never stops killing.