

Never Say Die

◆ *The determined new world of children from Southeast Asia* ◆

BY ROBERT COLES

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ALEX HARRIS

They are good children", said Margaret McCourt-Dirner, the principal of the Abingdon Elementary School in Arlington, in response to an inquiry about how the Cambodian, the Laotian, the Vietnamese boys and girls were managing in their classes. When pressed for specifics, she speaks with assurance and out of conviction: "They are eager to learn. They are considerate and well behaved. They are good citizens in our community."

The teachers in the school say many of the same things—they emphasize how polite, courteous, obliging, alert these so-called "refugee children" are. In Nancy McCracken's class of students for whom English is a second language, children 7, 8 and 9 years old, most of them originally from Southeast Asia, are learning how to read. The favorable comments come to mind again and again as one watches these children go about their school day, ever eager to master spelling, to learn how to add and subtract and multiply and divide, to write sentences and draw pictures and show a command of English vocabulary. When they salute the American flag, when they pledge allegiance to these United States of America, the boys and girls speak with a telling earnestness that surprises, maybe embarrasses, a jaded visitor fretting over the hot and humid weather.

McCracken is calm and patient. Her North Carolina accent is soft, inviting, persuasive. She knows, however, that she is met more than halfway by many of her Southeast Asian children: "They may have suffered a lot; they don't let the past in the way of the present. They're eager to do the very best they can. I don't have to raise my voice much." Nor do the children make much noise. They are quiet, attentive, awake to every shift in the day's academic rhythm.

They are also impressively neat,

though not in an uptight way. Dene Symathong, 10, explains his reasons for keeping careful track of his school possessions: "If you know where you put things, you save time and you don't worry. Everything goes faster."

He is similarly tidy in his South Frederick Street home in Arlington. As he talks his eyes look right in the visitor's eyes. His hands strive for order. Anything out of place is picked up, put where it belongs. He keeps some pictures of himself, of other family members, in a box, which he opens with great care, and closes gently. The box gets a lingering caress as it is placed in precisely the spot from which it had been removed a few minutes earlier—as if photographs are sacred reminders of an important human reality, even as pens or pencils

in a classroom are important instruments of a future life.

"I remember when we had nothing," Dene says. He is reluctant to go further. "The past is gone."

ACTUALLY, IN McCracken's classroom and on the sidewalks of South Frederick Street, many of the Southeast Asian children, Dene included, are willing to indicate in casual ways how persistent an influence memories can be in their lives. A child draws not only an American flag, but a Laotian one. Another child sketches a rural landscape, and hastens to spell out its location (Cambodia), its one-time beauty, its sudden hellish transformation.

"There, it was farms, lots of them," says the child drawing the flags. "I

remember the trees and the huts. I remember my grandfather planting. Then the soldiers came, and they shot people." He loves to evoke the pleasant side of an earlier life; he shuns the pictorial recall of murder—but in a low voice spells out what he saw: "They came to our house. They ordered my father to go with them. He obeyed. They killed him anyway, right there, while we looked. My mother told us to go inside. She came with us. She told us we can't fight back. She told us we might be next. We waited, but nothing happened. They had others to kill. There aren't enough bullets, sometimes, for murderers to kill everyone they want to kill."

With that observation, offered in a matter-of-fact tone, the boy pauses, then asks for the grown-up visitor's sunglasses—perhaps an effort to see what the visitor is now seeing inside his head, having heard such words from an 8-year-old child. In a second the glasses are returned: "They are too big, but one day I'll wear sunglasses." A pause, then another memory: "I never saw them [sunglasses] until I came here." And in case anyone might forget: "We had lots of sun in Cambodia." Then an afterthought: "I mostly remember the rains, and going through the jungle." Like so many others, he'd walked and walked and walked to escape the murderous Khmer Rouge.

Now he does another kind of walking: "We get tired of waiting for the ice-cream man to come to our street, so we go sometimes to try to find him. My mother gives me money on sunny days for an ice cream. When it's cloudy, she says no. Sometimes she changes her mind, just before she leaves the house. I know she works hard; so I am grateful. She waits on people. If they want ice cream, she goes get them ice cream. Whatever they want!"

WHERE THE BOY LIVES, many families are crammed into small apartments. Not far away there are luxurious condominiums, with a large swimming pool for those who live in them. The children from Southeast Asia peer through a fence,

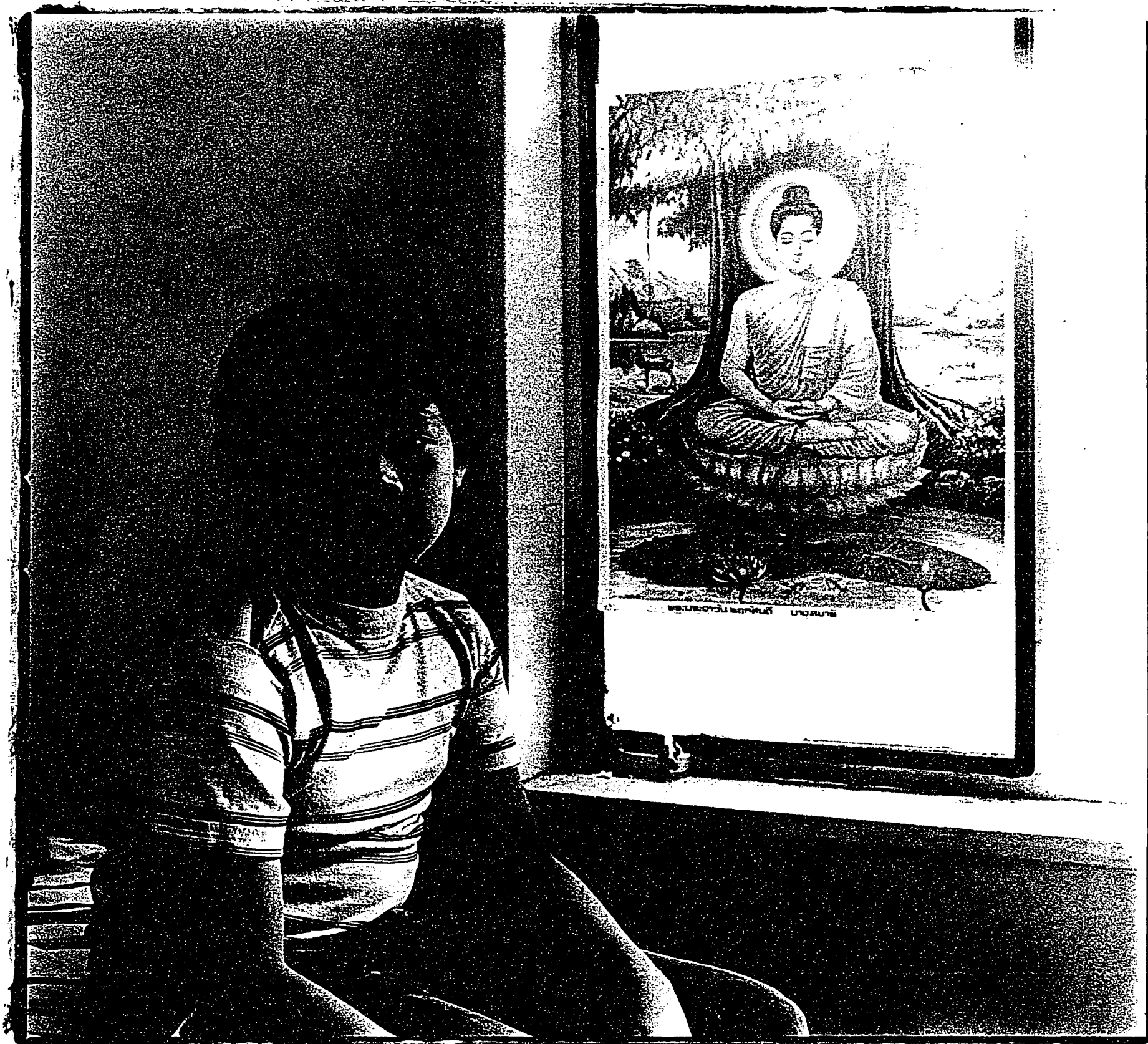
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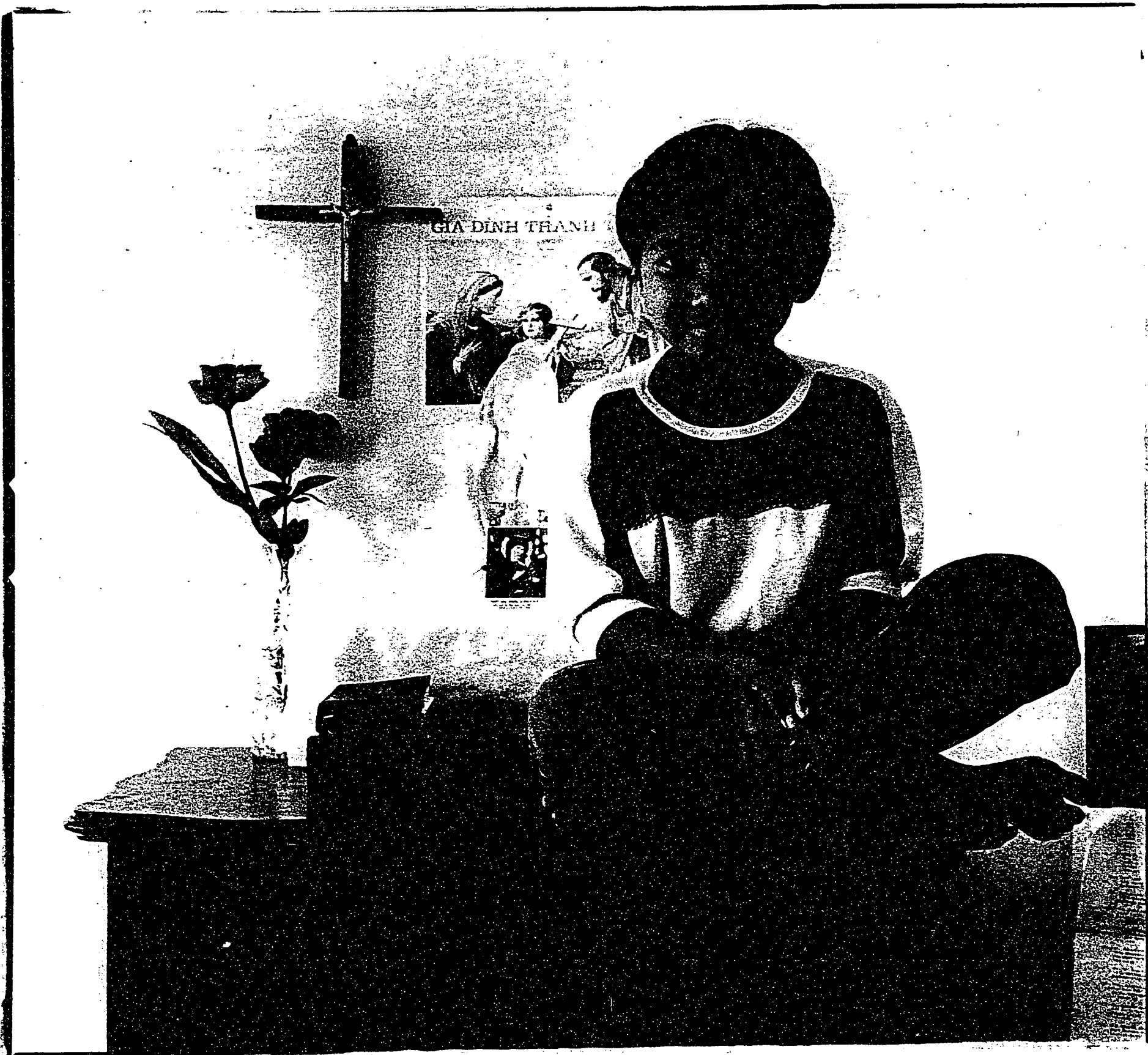


LONG YOERM and her daughter Siyon Dos in their Arlington home.

Robert Coles is professor of psychiatry and medical humanities at Harvard University and Pulitzer Prize-winning author of Children of Crisis. Alex Harris is the director of Duke University's Center for Documentary Photography.



KHEK SOUNDERA, a Laotian boy who was in Nancy McCracken's class at Abingdon School last spring, in his Arlington home. Behind him is an image of the Buddha receiving enlightenment as he meditated under the bo tree.



*HUONG NGUYEN, 6 when this photograph was taken,
poses in her brother's room at "Our Lady of Vietnam House" in Silver Spring.
The Roman Catholic residence is led by the Rev. Peter Long.*

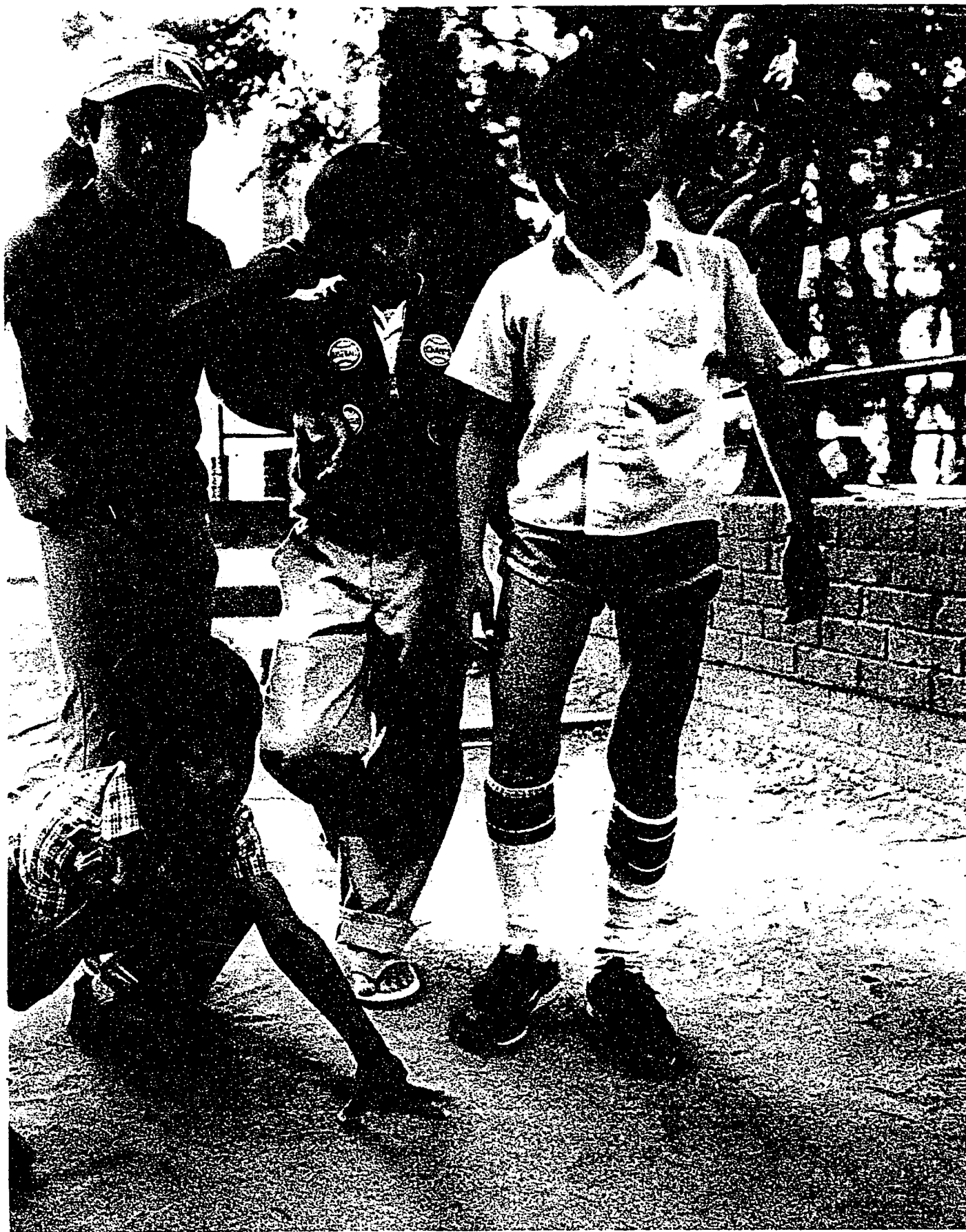
TAI HOANG does his homework while his father, Hoang Hang, watches. The Hoangs are refugees from Cambodia, but are of Chinese descent.



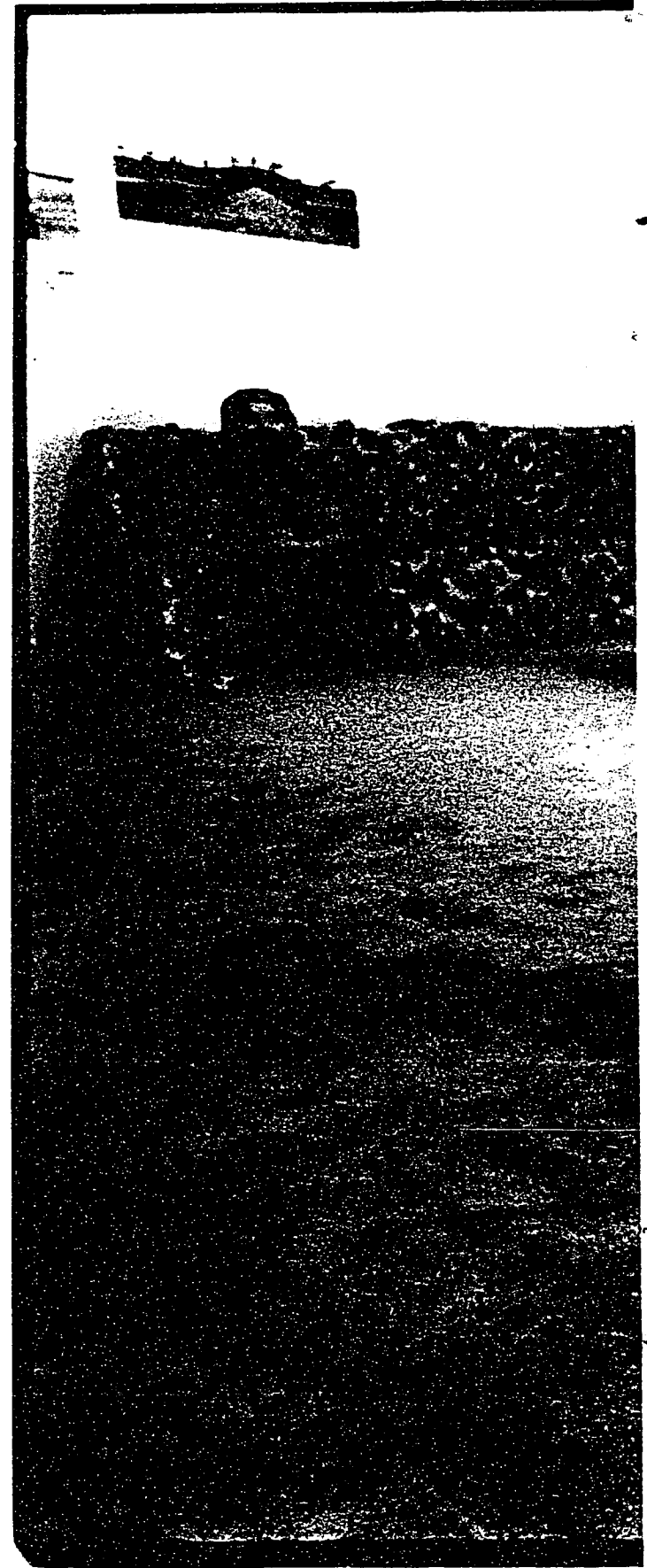
Swiftly the children pick up American ways—doing homework, playing marbles, pledging allegiance to the flag—but lurking behind their eyes are the memories of what was, the beauty and the pain that once was home and is no more.



FIVE BOYS PLAY marbles behind the apartment houses in the 1000 block of South Frederick Street in Arlington that are home to many Southeast Asians. From left they are Khek Soundara, Dene Symathong (front, center), Thanh Le, Tuan Hang and Minh Hang. In the background is Suwanna Phe.



*AT SCHOOL, in Nancy McCracken's class,
Tai Hoang pledges allegiance to
the American flag.*



HUNG CAO, upper left, lives in Silver Spring in "Our Lady of Vietnam House." Most of the residents of the Catholic house are single men and boys although one family, the Huongs, was living there when these photographs were taken last spring.

TIA SYMATHONG, left, from Laos, was living last spring on South Frederick Street in Arlington with his daughter Vaneyene and his son Dene. The Symathongs have since moved to California.

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but do not become overwhelmed by envy or bitterness: "If we study hard, we can get good jobs. If we save our money, we can buy what we want. My mother says we are much better off here than we'd be if we stayed behind. It was worth it, to escape. We'd be dead if we hadn't left. My mother would like to go back—but only to the village she knew when she was a girl. I am glad to be here. I wouldn't mind living over there."

He has pointed to the new, attractive building, to the spacious pool. People who have it better than he are goads to his not inconsiderable ambition, self-confidence, hopefulness—his social appetite. He comes from peasant stock, but even those of the Cambodian aristocracy are struggling here to make do. He is neither ashamed of his background, nor tied to its one-time constraints. He is

an intelligent realist, ready to make the best of his new situation. He is an American. When asked for his thoughts on life in his new country, he is quick to make this appraisal: "People don't sit here; they move. I remember my grandfather standing still. Even when he worked on his crops, he seemed still—when I compare him to people here. No one stays still here. People drive cars. Planes always come over us. People have motor bikes. They come home and go jogging. On television the cars are racing and crashing into each other. My mother says everyone wants her to wait on them at the same time. She never sits or stands or walks; she runs from the kitchen to the tables, and then back to the kitchen, and finally the clock has run, too—and she can go home. People run for the bus, and if she doesn't run with them, she feels she's sick, and so does everyone else, even her friends

Little Saigon, After the Fall

IN THE CLARENDON SECTION of Arlington, shops and restaurants bearing Vietnamese names line the blocks. The area is filled with the scents, sights and accents of old Saigon.

Large numbers of Indochinese refugees have been drawn to Northern Virginia—and Arlington in particular—since 1975, when the Communists gained control of Vietnam.

Originally, military and diplomatic sponsors here were a magnet for the many Indochinese who came to Arlington. As the school system and social service agencies developed programs geared to refugees, others were drawn to the area.

According to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, a division of the Department of Health and Human Services, about 21,400 Indochinese—including Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian—have moved to Virginia and about 8,000 to Maryland since 1975. About 1,300 Indochinese have arrived in the District since then.

Officials estimate there are about 8,000 Indochinese now living in Arlington, between 4 and 6 percent of the county's population.

According to Central Entry for Refugees, part of Arlington's Department of Human Resources, 543 Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian refugees settled in the county between July 1982 and June 1983. During fiscal 1984, that number dropped to 436.

Arlington, Alexandria, Fairfax, Montgomery and Prince George's counties, and the District of Columbia, according to ORR, all are among the nation's "local areas of high need"—places that receive special federal funds for refugee services. California, Florida and Texas are also home to significant numbers of Indochinese refugees.

—Anndee Hochman

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from Vietnam and Laos!"

He himself is rather fast on his feet. He dashes from his home to the ice-cream truck. He is speedy at playing catch. He is no slouch at marbles. He climbs a tree rapidly. And at school his mind goes at a swift pace. McCracken is impressed, and a little puzzled: "These children have gone through devastating experiences. They've marched with their parents for miles with no food or clean water to escape death. They've been on the sea for days—the 'boat people.' They've been sick and near death. They come here, to a faraway land, and most of them don't know any English. You'd think they'd be frightened and exhausted. You'd think they'd be suspicious and withdrawn. But they get right to work, and they smile and are polite, and they are determined to build a good life for themselves here, and they are willing to work hard—and if you, the teacher, make them work even harder, they're grateful. I have friends who tell me that there must be something else going on underneath—but I'll tell you, I'll just be grateful for what I see 'on the surface,' every single day, in this classroom."

What she observes all the time is, of course, an important psychological truth, not to be dismissed as in any way superficial or misleading: Children cannot forever dissemble emotionally. The children at the Abingdon School, or in Arlington's South Frederick Street neighborhood, are not psychological pretenders; nor are they fooling themselves by constantly denying past hardship and suffering. Their drawings and paintings can be grim and forbidding, more so than most of the world's children, and reminders of an earlier fate—soldiers with guns and itchy fingers, planes with bombs, a terrible political ideology at work, curbing freedom, engendering fear. No wonder a girl draws a helicopter black, and shows its bombs, and shows prostrate bodies in a field below. No wonder a boy gives a man with a rifle the huge, prominent teeth of a devouring animal.

No wonder, too, child after child, when asked what happened in Vietnam, in Cambodia, in Laos, will make mention of "bad people"—and when asked to spell out the nature of the badness, speak as one 9-year-old boy did while sitting on a low wall, behind his South Frederick Street home: "There was the government. No one could decide anything by himself. My father said we had to leave, because the government would kill anyone who didn't get down on his knees and beg to be a slave. If you asked the government *why*, you'd be on your way to jail, or they'd come and shoot you in your house. They'd take away our chickens. They'd kill your dog. Here the teacher doesn't tell you to 'spit out answers.' She said we couldn't 'spit out answers.' She says we should ask *why*. Every time I hear her tell us to ask *why*, I think of my father. He died on the boat, but before he did he told us he was happy. I remember—I remember then, I remember asking him why he was happy, and he said because he was sure I'd make it, and my brother, and my sisters, and that was all he wanted, for us to get out. Then he told us how he loved his village, but he was glad we'd escaped; and then he stopped breathing, and no matter how much we wanted him to stay with us, and breathe, we knew he was gone."

THOSE ARE sad words; they speak of a terrible 20th century tragedy. Yet, they are words that convey fierce pride, an unyielding determination—handed bravely from parent to child, and remembered constantly, it seems, no matter the thousands of miles between there and here, the thousands of days between then and now. For these children there have been many moments of anxiety, apprehension, regret, even despair. They have endured persecution, exile, hunger, the loss of parents, relatives, friends. Sometimes there are bad dreams, moments a particular child may describe tersely, but tellingly: "I wake up and

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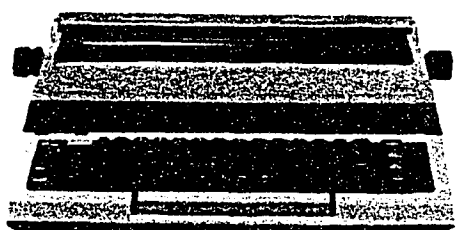
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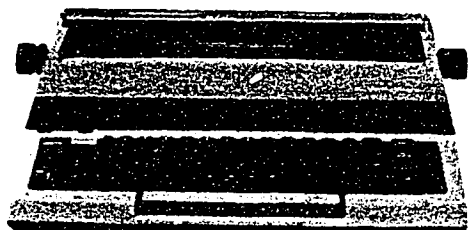
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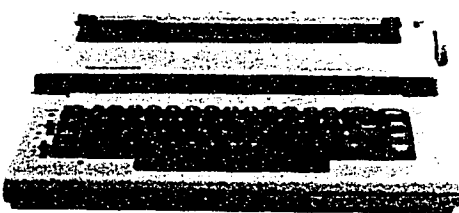
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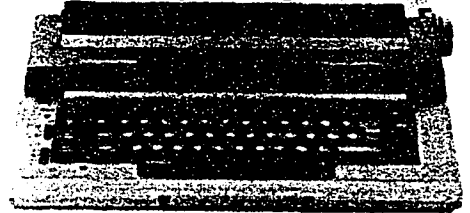
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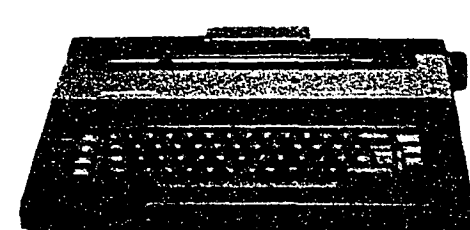
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I realize I've been back there, and they're trying to kill us, all of us, the soldiers are." Still, that girl is soon enough back to sleep: "I'm tired, and so I don't stay awake too long." What of the morning? "Oh, then I have to get up and eat. My mother and father go to work. We have to clean the house, and then the bus comes to take us to school."

The rhythms of a new life are healing to her, to others like her, and for those rhythms she is grateful. She can't imagine, these days, how "anyone" (meaning herself) could live without a McDonald's nearby, or a supermarket or a drugstore. She can't imagine how "they" (meaning the people who live in her native Cambodia) manage without television and pizza and that ice-cream truck and, not least, the Abingdon School, where "if you don't feel good, they find out why." This girl who saw so much death in Asia had been saved by antibiotics from a serious infection. She remembers sadly her earlier years, but talks with relief and gratitude about her present time. She knows she might have died (of all sorts of sicknesses) in Cambodia even if there hadn't been the disastrous wars of the past decades; and she knows that her chances of survival in this world are high compared with what would be the case most anywhere else in the world.

She was able to draw a colorful rendering of the idyllic side of her past (a bright yellow sun, a pink and blue thatched hut, the dog she remembered hazily, tall grass, fruit-laden trees) but she also made a point of saying that there is beauty in her contemporary life, of a kind she was eager to draw (a nicely decorated school building, with a grand view of trees, flowers, a beckoning blue sky with a sun no less cheerful than the Cambodian one she had earlier constructed).

What did she hope to be, to do, when grown up? She replies easily to such banal questions—and her answer offers, implicitly, evidence of a shrewd cross-cultural sensibility: "In the States you can try to get many kinds of jobs. You can't be sure until you're older what job you'll get. You may change your mind. My mother says she never had to make so many choices, until she came here. She says even when her mother gives people a menu, and they read it, they keep asking if there's more. My mother says a hundred times a day: 'Only what's on the menu.' The customers don't believe her, though. They don't even hear her. They keep asking!" The 8-year-old child also asks

questions about English words and phrases, questions about America's history and geography, questions about our flag—the reason for its many stars, its red and white bars. She wonders how old Arlington is, how old Washington is. She wonders whether America has known the kind of political lunacy and evil Cambodia has recently experienced, and she wonders whether one day, in some distant future, her native land will be "more like America."

What does she mean by that comparison? She hasn't the slightest difficulty being clear and specific: "There would be more food. You could have a school like this one here. The teachers wouldn't be scared, and we wouldn't be scared, the kids. No one would be scared of the government."

As she moves along, gets promoted from grade to grade, she will no doubt learn that this country was founded for just that reason—so that the settlers who came here would not be in constant fear of an overbearing political authority. Meanwhile she enjoys the freedom this country offers, and lets her mind wander—not toward Asia, but toward downtown Washington. She would like to see more of the city. She would like to go to college there. She would like to be a nurse, someday—oh, a doctor, if that were at all possible. She has seen lots of very sick people. She has seen people die. She would like to be able to "fight sickness," and not see it take lives. Her lively, discerning, ambitious mind is altogether remarkable, and soon enough I am thinking that I have never seen a group of children, in all the years of my work, who are more resilient and more perceptive. Moreover, the parents of these children, no less anxious to become adjusted to this country, to enjoy its possibilities, are as industrious and yet caring mothers and fathers as I've seen anywhere in the world.

A BOY NEARBY has been listening and nodding as I talk to the girl who would like to be a nurse or even a doctor. He makes a declaration: "There should be more friends everywhere." He adds force to his statement by pointing to the map of the world hanging on the classroom wall. With a sweep of his hand he moves over the planet's territory. Then, lest there be any doubt in the visitor's mind, the lad has his right forefinger pointed to Cambodia. He smiles. He claims his nationality: "I'm from here." Silence. Smiles from the other children. "Me, too," another boy says. "Me too," a girl says. "Me

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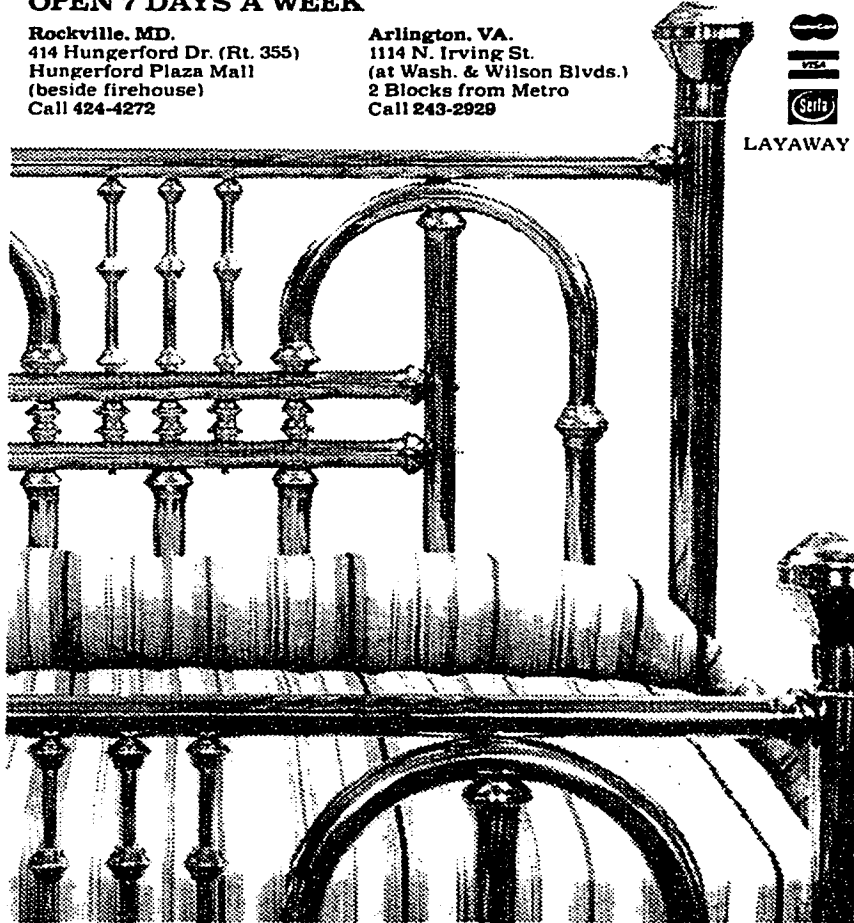
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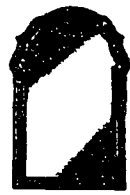
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from Laos," another, quite young girl says. The boy who started this series of avowals moves on—crosses the Pacific with his hand, stops at California, hastens eastward across the American West, the heartland of the Midwest, and stops at the nation's capital: "This is us; this is Washington; it is there, across the river." The others nod, smiles on their faces. The boy resumes his comments: "The distance from Asia . . ." He doesn't finish his sentence. We sit at our table, covered with crayons and paper, and wait, only a second or two, but with some curiosity, even tension. He has found his train of thought, his voice, his words: "The distance from Asia," he repeats, "well, it's long." A pause—then: "It is a big distance, yes. But we are here; we got here." The others nod. The boy goes back to his chair. The children are about to do some more drawing—but the teacher announces that spelling is next, all those English words to master.

"Let's try to get a hundred," urges the boy whose hand had just touched the various points on the map of the world. "Yes, let's," says a girl. Another girl is even then looking ahead: "Yes, we can get all the words right today, and then she'll give us new words." They pick themselves up, move across the room to another location, huddle yet again, and soon the air is once more filled with that lovely southern accented voice, an American teacher saying the words—"apple," "after," "house," "here," "yard,"—and then using them in a sentence, and waiting for the children to write them down, then look up—ready for the next.

Soon the morning will be over, lunchtime will have come: "They are good children, hard-working as can be," McCracken says for the third or fourth time, as the boys and girls who have come "the distance from Asia" prepare to eat their hamburgers, their french fries, which they all insist, in a chorus of celebration, is the best food anywhere in the world. ■