Notes on *The Sorrow of War*

Kien’s hammock is in a liminal space between the worlds of the living and dead. (4)

Which ideas and feelings do we associate with the Jungle of Screaming Souls? (4)

Flashback to 1969 (4)

Images of war (5)

“political indoctrination” (8)

“cards of the dead” (9)

What does the author hope to convey with the symbol of the cards? (10-11)

Rosa canina: what is it? (12-13)

Kien’s nickname: “Sorrowful Spirit” (16)

ARVN: Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnamese Army)

“become a seed for successive war harvests” (18)

Social class: peasant class vs. “North” (agrarian vs. urban)

What is the significance of Can’s story? (22-24)

“Their remains had long since been liquidized into mud.” (25)

Phuong: “youthful, innocently beautiful” (13), “our love is so pure” (30)

Why doesn’t Kien stop hi three young soldiers from visiting the three farm girls?

Southern Commandos captured (38-39)

Pages 3-40: flashback and memories

Mental war films (45)

What happened to Hoa? (46)

“our reward of enlightenment” (47)

Flashback from age 40 – 1988: (48)

Shifts from 3rd person to 1st person (44-48)

Metafiction: Kien’s heavenly duty as a writer (48-51)

Lan’s story of love for Kien (51-56)

Metafiction: (56-57)

“anti-intellectual atmosphere” (57)

Kien’s stepfather and romanticism (59)

“a story of symphonies” (60)

Prewar Hanh and Kien in a bomb shelter (sister and brother: comrades) (63-68)

Vinh’s little sister: Green Coffee Girls (72-73)

Vietnamese Army removes Pol Pot from Cambodia (74-75)

Postwar: Sinh, the poet (76-79)

Hien a befriended girl soldier (80)

Postwar Phuong and another man (84)

Metafiction: (88-89)

“Hamburger Hill” (90)

Kien’s collection of bodies is much like his process as a writer collecting the stories of the dead.

“The sorrow of war is similar to the sorrow of love” (94)

Commander Quang’s story, dry season of 1966 (94-95)

Victory Day (V Day) at the airport, 1975 (100-104)

Oanh & the female combatants at the police station (104-106)

“Fall of Saigon” or “Liberation of Saigon” 30th of April, 1975 (107)

“She became the last of his enduring obsessions” [the woman’s corpse at the airport] (108)

Mute Girl (108)

Mute Girl is mistaken for all of the women in Kien’s life (113)

Kien experiences death as a river, a stream of life (117)

A series of flashbacks ensue (117-122)

Kien’s father and yellow faded photographs (123)

“He had been criticized by the Party…and was regarded as a suspicious malcontent” (124)

“required artists to accede to certain socialist ethics” (125)

“all [paintings] done in tones of yellow” (125) What does yellow symbolize?

Kien’s father’s death coincides with the start of the war in Hanoi (127)

Chu Van An school with Phuong (131)

Kien’s father burns paintings with Phuong (130)

Youth Union members denounced “liberalism and romance” (131)

Post war at the West Lake (132)

Phuong offers herself to Kien (134)

Electra Complex with Kien’s father (135)

Kien “suckles” on Phuong (137-138)

Seeing Phuong in different contexts (138-142)

Phuong and Kien’s post war break-up (142-146)

Kien writing his stories (147-148)

Balcony Café and Vuong (152)

Vuong recalls the horrors of war (152-153)

Balcony Café 1977 (154)

Kien vs. Leather Jacket (155-156)

Spring of 1965 troop train (159)

“We’ll burn an incense stick and say a prayer for your dad and my mother” (163)

“Luck” that Kien had not been on the troop train (166)

Kien and Phuong catch the train (166)

“You’re so sexy, so beautiful” (170)

“The voice” on the train (172)

“The farther we go, the more I’m lost, the better it is. We’ll see what war is like”—Phuong (176)

Kien remains impotent “like a warrior half-drawing a sword” (178)

Hoa’s story at Crocodile Lake (183-)

Hoa’s romantic image of salvation (190-191)

The psychological scars of war (193)

The coffee plantation (197)

“Rural scene of paradise lost” (196)

“Marxist theories will ruin it if we win” (199)

Phuong’s mother predicted that Phuong would become “warped and twisted” (201)

Kien recalls Phuong’s rape on the freight train (202)

Imagery associated with Phuong’s rape (204)

Why doesn’t Phuong respond to Kien? (207)

“Hell you’re really soft. A little bourgeois softie, aren’t you” (207)—soldier says to Kien.

“Let me go,” Phuong shouted at Kien (208)

Why does Phuong run away from Kien after he finds her? (209)

“Scores of bodies lay in all imaginable twisted positions” (211) –after the train in bombed

Imagery associated with Phuong’s rape (214)

Kien’s first association with the hammock and his roles as a Psychopomp (217)

“Look how innocent we are” (218) –allusion to their new status as multiple-rape victim and brutal murderer.

“Before his eyes she had metamorphosed” (218)

“She’s over screwing the driver of Company 8” (220) –we later find out this was a lie.

“From being a pure, sweet and simple girl she was now an experienced woman” (223)

Kien was about to “take his own life,” yet he hears Phuong’s voice call from across the water (223)

Ky’s honest letter to Ken about Phuong… “Contrary to what we told you, your girlfriend was not like that at all” (226)

Kien imagines his life as a river (227)

The narrator (Bao Ninh) describes how Kien’s writing was given to him by the mute girl and he describes the writing and revision process he went through in developing the novel in its current form.  
--Metafiction (228-233)

The author and Kien shared a “common sorrow, the immense sorrow of war” (232)