By Andrew Lam

# Child of Two Worlds

## June 1998

*Two roads lead to my home: one long, yet short,*
*the other short, yet long.*
*—from a Vietnamese folk song*

Once, in my mother's garden in Dalat, Vietnam, I saw Mrs. Lau, the wife of our family servant, drag herself out of bed only a few hours after giving birth to bury her newborn's umbilical cord in our garden. Her gestures among the jasmine bushes, the mumbling of prayers, the burning of joss sticks, and the offerings of mangoes and rice stirred a deep sense of mystery in me. Later I asked my mother about the incident and she, in a solemn voice, announced that it was the Vietnamese way to ask the land to bless and protect the newborn. "Your umbilical cord is also buried in an earthen jar in our garden," she said. The incident and the knowledge of my own earthly ties made a strong impression on me: our ways were sacred and very old.

In that world of parochial sanctities, I was not entirely convinced that the outside world existed. Vietnam, the tropical garden, was all there was. Life was deemed cyclical but the world was not yet round. It hovered instead in my mind's eye in the shape of a voluptuous and ruffled S, the map of our country that I had more or less mastered in geography class in grammar school.

I remember standing in line before class with the others—white shirts and blue shorts, all—singing at the top of our lungs the national anthem each morning. "O Citizens, let's rise to this day of liberation," we would bellow. "Let's walk together and sacrifice our lives. Blood debt must be paid by blood." I had believed in the lyric, its every word, felt that shared patriotic fervor among my young,





bright-eyed peers. The war was at full throttle then, and we embraced it. In school we devised war games in which the winners would inevitably be Southerners, and the Northerners were often berated for trying to invade.

No Vietnamese history book, no patriotic song, no agrarian-based adage could have possibly prophesied my own abrupt departure from Vietnam nor my subsequent transnational ending. For at the end of the Vietnam War many of us did not die protecting river and land as we, in our rituals, games, poetry, and songs, had promised ourselves and our ancestors' spirits. For all the umbilical cords buried, for all the promises made, we did the unimaginable: we fled.

For the first time in Vietnam's embattled history, a history alleged to be four thousand years old, the end of a war had resulted in a mass exodus. A diaspora. Refugees, boat people, the dispossessed, three million Vietnamese or so scattered onto more than fifty countries across the globe.

On April 28, 1975, two days before Saigon fell to the communist army and the Vietnam War ended, my family and I boarded a cargo plane full of panicked refugees and headed for Guam. I remember watching Vietnam recede into the cloudy horizon from the plane's window, a green mass of land giving way to a hazy green sea. I was eleven years old.

I was confused, frightened, and from all available evidence—the khaki army tents in the Guam refugee camp, the scorching heat, the long lines for food rations, the fetid odor of the communal latrines, the freshly bulldozed ground under my sandaled feet—I was also homeless.

Places and times, when they can no longer be retrieved, tend to turn sacrosanct. Home forever lost is forever bathed in a certain twilight glow. Even after many years in America my mother still longed for the ancestral altar on which Grandpa's faded black-and-white photo stared out into our abandoned home. She missed the carved rosewood cabinet in which she kept the enamel-covered family albums and my father's special French wines from Bordeaux, and she yearned for the antique porcelain dining set covered by faded blue silk. She fretted over the small farm we owned

near the Binh Loi Bridge on the outskirts of Saigon, where the chickens roamed freely and the mangosteen and guava trees were heavy with fruits when we last visited, and where the river, dotted with water hyacinths, ran swift and strong.

"This is the time of year when the guavas back home are ripened," Mother would tell the family at dinnertime.

So far from home, Mother nevertheless took her reference points in autumn, her favorite season. Autumn, the dark season, came in the form of letters she received from relatives and friends left behind. Brown and flimsy thin like dead leaves, recycled who knows how many times, the letters threatened to dissolve with a single tear. They unanimously told of tragic lives: Aunty and her family barely survived; Cousin is caught for the umpteenth time trying to escape; Uncle has died from heart failure while being interrogated by the Viet Cong; yet another Uncle is indefinitely incarcerated in a malaria-infested reeducation camp; and no news yet of Cousin and family who disappeared in the South China Sea. The letters went on to inquire as to our health and then to timidly ask for money, for antibiotics, for a bicycle, and, if possible, for sponsorship to America. The letters confirmed what my mother, who had lived through two wars, had always known: life is a sea of suffering, and sorrow gives meaning to life. Then, as if to anchor me in Old World tragedy, as if to bind me to that shared narrative of loss and misery, mother insisted that I, too, read those letters.

What did I do? I skimmed. I skipped. I shrugged. I put on a poker face and raked autumn in a pile and pushed it all back to her. "That country," I slowly announced in English, as if to wound, "is cursed."

*That* country, mind you. No longer mine. Vietnam was now so far away—an abstraction—and America was now so near (outside the window, blaring on TV, written in the science fiction books I devoured like mad)—a seduction. Besides, what could a scrawny refugee teenager living in America do to save Uncle from that malaria-infested reeducation camp? What could he do for Cousin and her family lost somewhere in the vast South China Sea? He could, on the other hand, pretend amnesia to save himself from grief.





My mother made the clucking sounds of disapproval with her tongue as she shook her head. She looked into my eyes and called me the worst thing she could muster: "You've become a little American now, haven't you? A cowboy." Vietnamese appropriated the word "cowboy" from the movies to imply selfishness. A cowboy in Vietnamese estimation is a rebel who, as in the spaghetti Westerns, leaves town, the communal life, to ride alone into the sunset.

Mother's comment smarted, but she wasn't far from the truth. Her grievances against America had little to do with the war and the United States' involvement in it. Her complaint against America was that it had stolen her children, especially her youngest and once most-filial son. America seduced him with its optimism, twisted his thinking, bent his tongue and dulled his tropic memories. America gave him freeways and fast food and silly cartoons and sitcoms, imbuing him with sappy happy-ending incitements.

Yet it could not be helped. For the refugee child in America, the world splits perversely into two irreconcilable parts: Inside and Outside.

Inside, at home, in the crowded apartment shared by two refugee families, nostalgia ruled. Inside, the world remained dedicated to What Was.

Remember the house we used to live in, with the red bougainvillea wavering over the iron gate? Remember when we went to Hue and sailed down the Perfume River for the night market and that night the sky was full of stars? Remember Tet, when Uncle showed us that trick with the cards?

Inside, the smell of fish sauce wafted along with the smell of incense from the newly built altar that housed photos of the dead—a complex smell of loss. Inside, the refugee father told and retold wartime stories to his increasingly disaffected children, reliving the battles he had fought and won. He stirred his whiskey and soda on ice, then stared blankly at the TV. Inside, the refugee mother grieved for lost relatives, lost home and hearth, lost ways of life, a whole cherished world of intimate connections, scattered and uprooted, gone, gone, all gone. And so Inside, I, their refugee child, felt the collected weight of history on my shoulders and fell silent.

Outside, however...

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" Mr. K., the English teacher in eighth grade, asked.

I had never thought of the question before. Such an American question. But it intrigued me. I did not hesitate. "A movie star," I answered, laughing.

Outside I was ready to believe, to swear that the Vietnamese child who grew up in that terrible war and who saw many strange, tragic, and marvelous things was someone else, not me, that it had happened in another age, centuries ago.

That Vietnamese boy never grew up; he wanders still in the garden of my childhood memory, whereas I—I had gone on. Hadn't I? It was a feeling that I could not help. I came to America at a peculiar age—pubescent, and not fully formed. Old enough to remember Vietnam, I was also young enough to embrace America, and to be shaped by it.

Outside, in school, among new friends, I spoke English freely and deliberately. I whispered sweet compliments to Chinese and Filipino girls and made them blush. I cussed and joked with friends and made them laugh. I bantered and cavorted with teachers and made myself their pet.

Speaking English, I had a markedly different personality than when speaking Vietnamese. In English, I was a sunny, upbeat, silly, and sometimes wickedly sharp-tongued kid. No sorrow, no sadness, no cataclysmic grief clung to my new language. A wild river full of possibilities flowed effortlessly from my tongue, connecting me to the New World. And I, enamored by the discovery of a newly invented self (I even gave myself a new name—"Andy, call me Andy," I would tell each new teacher and each new friend who had trouble pronouncing my Vietnamese name)—I sailed its iridescent waters toward spring.

Now, more than two decades later, in her suburban home with a pool shimmering in the backyard, my mother talks to ghosts. Every morning she climbs a chair and piously lights a few joss sticks for the new ancestral altar on top of the living room's bookcase and mumbles her solemn prayers to the spirits of our dead ancestors





and to Buddha. On the shelves below stand my father's MBA diploma, my older siblings' engineering and business degrees, my own degree in biochemistry, our combined sports trophies, and, last but not least, the latest installments of my own unending quest for self-reinvention—plaques and obelisk-shaped crystals and framed certificates—my journalism awards.

What Mother's altar and the shelves carrying their various knickknacks seek to tell is the typical Vietnamese American tragicomedy, one where Old World Fatalism finally meets New World Optimism, the American Dream.

Almost half of Vietnamese moving abroad ended up in North America, and the largest portion of this population resettled in California. Vietnamese immigrants, within one and a half generations, have moved from living at the receiving end of industrial revolution to being players in the information age. The second largest Vietnamese population outside of Vietnam is centered around Silicon Valley.

Ours is an epic filled with irony: the most fatalistic and sentimental people in the world found themselves relocated to a state created by fabulous fantasies, high-tech wizardry, and individual ambitions.

My mother watches the smoke undulate before her eyes and sighs. Do her ancestors hear her prayers amidst this world of computers, satellite dishes, and modems? She does not know. But she does not like contradiction. One cannot be both this and that. She sees herself simply as a Vietnamese living in exile. She resists America as much as she can though she knows too well. She of sad-ending fairy tales, in her golden years, reluctantly concedes that she may have lost this battle with America. Spring will come.

In retirement my mother is a rejuvenated woman. She even goes to the gym with my father. She walks the treadmill religiously. Her fingers, fingers that once knew the blades of ripened rice and the gangrened wounds of dying soldiers, dart on the flat electronic panel of the cardio equipment at her spa with such ease. Mother even lifts weights.

All in all, she feels a little embarrassed that she still looks so young for a grandmother in her mid-sixties—her hair is jet black,

her legs are sturdy, her arms strong, and there still echoes in her laughter that twang of the gaiety of the teenager. Her own mother at her age could barely walk. "If we were living in Vietnam now, I suppose I would sit on the wooden divan, fan myself, and chew betel nuts like your grandma."

To deny her own American conversion, Mother keeps a small garden. Lemongrass and mint vie for space among bitter melons, Vietnamese coriander *(rau ram)*, and basil. The air in the backyard is filled with scents of home. She insists on observing the death date of her father each year, complete with burning paper offerings and cooking a favorite dish for the dead. Each Tet, she stays awake all night to make Vietnamese rice cakes. And she tells Vietnamese stories, drenched in sadness, to anyone willing to hear.

Consider this then as a late Rockwell tableau: a sunny living room in a Silicon Valley home where a Vietnamese woman sits on her sofa, telling the story of an ill-fated princess to her two wide-eyed, American-born grandchildren.

Once, she says, there was a beautiful princess who fell in love with a fisherman who sang beautiful ballads of love each morning as he sailed past her pavilion. One day the fisherman, unaware of the princess's existence, sailed downriver to fish another kingdom. One season followed another and she, pining for his voice, fell ill and died. And in her ashes, in place of her heart, the king found a bright red ruby. He had it carved into a drinking bowl. And whenever he poured into it, the image of the fisherman appeared, sailing his boat on the water. And his voice is heard singing sweet and sad songs.

Years later, the fisherman came sailing back. He heard of this magic bowl and begged at the palace gate for entrance. Days passed and he despaired and began to sing. And his voice reached the king in his palace and the fisherman was summoned. Into the bowl, tea was poured. Then lo and behold, the fisherman watched in amazement as his own image appeared in the princess's heart. He began to weep. Had he only known of her love! Then another miracle: as one of his tears fell into the bowl, the bowl turned into blood and disappeared.

The story, taking its cue from a tradition of fatalism, does not go down well in America—certainly not with my brother's children. Back home children do not challenge such an outcome. Back home





they accept that noble deeds are rarely rewarded with happily-ever-afters, that broken love is the norm, and that those who do good can be and often are punished. These stories are concerned with their young listeners' spiritual growth, not with convincing them that they live in a benevolent universe. Considering how the country has been war-ridden for thousands of years and how disasters have a way of destroying hope, Vietnamese tales have evolved to prepare the next generation for cataclysm and grief.

But my mother's grandchildren are Americans, are Californians, and they naturally resist her tragic endings. They challenge her fatalism with their American wisdom. "The princess only sleeps in the enchanted forest, Grandma. She waits for the Prince Charming kiss." My mother shakes her head and laughs. And she gives in. At her grandchildren's request, she slips in the video of *The Little Mermaid* and they watch the princess struggle toward a happily-ever-after.

What woke the Vietnamese refugee—that fleeing princess—from her millennial stupor, on the other hand, was no Prince Charming kiss but the simple yet potent idea of progression. A cliché to native-borns, the American Dream nevertheless seduces the sedentary Vietnamese to travel from halfway around the world. It's the American Dream that kissed her hard, tongued her, in fact, and in the morning she awakes to find, to her own amazement, that she can readily pronounce mortgage, escrow, aerobic, tax shelter, GPA, MBA, MD, BMW, Porsche, overtime, stock options. Gone is the cyclical nature of her provincial thinking, and lost is her land-bound mentality. She finds that she's upwardly mobile, that she is connected to other countries by virtue of her relatives spreading across the globe and by new communication technologies. She can email relatives as far away as France and Hong Kong. She can see the future.

She sees, for instance, her own restaurant in the "for rent" sign on a dilapidated store in a run-down neighborhood. She sees her kids graduating from top colleges. She imagines her own home with a pool in five years time—all things that were impossible back home. Indeed, she astonishes herself by her ambitions. We'll build a shop here, buy a house there. We'll borrow money and start a company in a few years if we work hard, really hard...

And why not? Her American Dream has chased away her Vietnamese nightmare. Compared to the bloody battlefields, the malaria-infested New Economic Zone, a vindictive communist regime that monitored everyone's movements, the squalid refugee camps scattered across Southeast Asia, the murders and rapes and starving and drowning on the high seas, California is paradise.

Soon enough houses are bought, jobs are had, children are born, old folks are buried, and businesses are opened. A community that previously saw itself as exiled, as survivors of some historical blight, as a people born from tragedy and who are prepared to return to their homeland, to tend their abandoned ancestral graves, to face their oppressors, slowly changes its mind. Its roots are sinking deeper and deeper into the American loam.

Soon enough in San Jose, Orange County, San Diego, LA (not to mention Houston and Dallas), up and down the California coast, Little Saigons, economic and cultural centers that altered the existing landscapes, begin to sprout and blossom. And the stories of the horrible war and terrifying escape over the high seas that once emanated from these places slowly give way to gossip of successes in the Golden Land.

*Did you hear about the Vietnamese Rhodes Scholar in England? He was on the* Tonight Show *with Johnny Carson.*

*Brother, did you know that there is a Vietnamese astronaut at NASA?*

*Did you know that the first person to receive seven degrees from MIT was a Vietnamese boat person, and he did it in five years!*

*Remember him, Sister? He's now a CEO for a multimillion-dollar electronics firm in Silicon Valley.*

The drama of the initial expulsion is replaced by the jubilation of a new-found status and wealth. Truth be told, the letters sent from Vietnam had far less a grip on my mother than the letters she, in turn, sent back home to those left behind. Full of reports of whose son and daughter graduated summa cum laude and valedictorian and whose husband has become a surgeon and whose wife has become a successful real estate agent and so on, and enclosed with photos of two-story homes, of expensive and shiny sports cars in front of which tall and beautiful children stand waving and smiling to the yokel cousins they barely remember, the letters





confirmed for the long-suffering relatives back home what they have suspected all along: anything is possible in America.

A race of modern Ulysseses responded to my mother's siren letters. In the dead of night, Vietnamese bent on an American conversion climb on board—by the hundreds, by the thousands—old rickety fishing boats for the perilous journey to America.

Here then perhaps is the final irony of that bitter war: since the start of the Vietnamese Diaspora, when the war ended in 1975, Vietnam, having defeated imperialistic America, fell susceptible to America's charms and seduction. In their postwar poverty and suffering, Vietnamese yearned for a new beginning in America. They want Levi's, freedom, microwaves, democracy, double-tiered freeways, happiness. They diligently remove Uncle Ho's photo from their walls, and to replace the void they put up posters of *Baywatch* and AC/DC and Kiss. They slip a video from Hong Kong or Hollywood into the VCR and marvel at the beauty and glamorous possibilities that exist in the outside world.

What has happened is that a new and radical idea has injected itself in the Vietnamese land-bound imagination. It is a powerful migratory myth, one that exhorts fabulous cosmopolitan endings. And the Vietnamese language of nationalism, too—what had for millennia given the Vietnamese unfathomable strength to endure incredible suffering, to fend off foreign invaders and colonizers alike—has been subverted by a single vocabulary word: Viet Kieu.

Viet Kieu: Vietnamese nationals living abroad, especially those in America, whose successes and wealth serve as a mirror against which the entire nation, mired still in poverty and political oppression, reflects on its own lost potential. Uncle Ho Chi Minh once preached freedom and independence to his compatriots (though he meant independence and freedom from colonization and imperialism, not for the individual) to spur them to battle against the French and American and South Vietnamese. Today it is the Viet Kieu, those persecuted by Uncle Ho's followers and forced to flee—people like me—who exude that much-coveted independence and freedom.

"Go to America"—so goes the new Vietnamese mantra, where multiple reincarnations may be had in one lifetime. Go to America

and your sufferings end. Go to America and your sons and daughters will grow up to be astronauts or presidents of rich computer companies.

It happened before. Surely it will happen again.

Trung, the rice farmer's son, for instance, the one who brought only seven oranges with him onto a crowded boat thinking they should last him the whole journey across the Pacific—how big is the ocean anyway?—had escaped to America. And instead of helping the old man plant next season's crop he turned into an architect who helps design—on his brand-new laptop—glassy high-rises for cities across the globe. And Thao, the jackfruit vendor's daughter who once expected to follow in her mother's footsteps, also escaped and found herself a decade or so later in a different kind of market: Wall Street. Now called Cynthia, a sophisticate, she is busy negotiating through her computer link-ups across time zones, oceans, continents.

And recently I read about a farmer who escaped Vietnam to become a well-known, successful businessman in the high-tech industry. He has returned to open shops in Vietnam. I could almost see the farmer turned high-tech entrepreneur as a character in some hybrid movie about Vietnam and America. In his high-rise, he sits staring down into the microchip on his finger and smiles; from certain angles at least, the tiny thing with its grids and lines that combines his ambition and his memories looks like a green, rich rice field, albeit portable and very, very small.

On the wall above my writing desk there's a photograph of me taken a few years ago during one of my many trips back to Vietnam as a journalist. In it I stand at the entrance of my old house; its green iron gates are rusted beyond recognition and the bougainvillea of my memory is gone.

Although I smile in the photo, it's a sad and discerning smile. For behind that smile is complex self-knowledge based on opposite ideas that took me a long, long time to grasp: the past is irretrievable yet I can never be free from it. Though I can never sever myself from my childhood visions and my own sentimental longings, I have irrevocably changed.





Somewhere in between the boy who once sang the Vietnamese national anthem in the schoolyard in Saigon with tears in his eyes and the man who writes these words was the slow but natural demise of the old nationalistic impulse. The boy was willing to die for his homeland. The man had become circumspect. The boy had believed that the borders, like the Great Wall of China, were real demarcations, their integrity not to be disputed. The man discovered that the borders have always been porous. The boy was once overwhelmed by the tragedy that had fallen on his people, had resented history for robbing him and his family of home and hearth and national identity. The man, though envious of the primacy of his childhood emotions, has become emboldened by his own process of individualization.

And yet this much is true also: were it not for my ties to the Vietnamese people, their trials and tribulations, were it not for my own memories of the life that was taken from me, my American individuality would be shallow.

Often I wonder why my Vietnamese childhood seems full of magic and why—though I am no longer beholden to the reality of my homeland with her many current troubles and problems—my memory of her continues to inform and inspire me. There are no easy answers to this, of course, but I think it has to do with that deep sense of reverence I once felt toward the land in which my umbilical cord is buried.

After all, to live in a less than modern society where land still holds your imagination, where ties are permanent, and where tradition is concrete, is, in a way, to live in an enchanted world. It's normal that your ancestors' ghosts talk to you in your dreams, that they inhabit all sorts of corners of your house, and that you should answer them in your prayers, in your offerings, in the incense smoke you burn nightly. In that world, omens are to be read from the wind, and the butterfly that comes hovering above the altar or lands on your shoulder is the spirit of your grandfather. On a certain day of the year, you do not leave the house for fear of bad luck; then on another the entire family flocks to the cemetery to burn offerings and cut the grass of Grandpa's grave to appease him in the spirit world.

Which is to say Vietnam was once for me a world full of deep mystery and I lived then in awe of the hallowed land, its powers.

And then no more.

The greatest phenomenon in this century, I am now convinced, has little to do with the world wars but with the dispossessed they sent fleeing; the cold war and its aftermath has given birth to a race of children born "elsewhere," of transnationals whose memories are layered and whose biographies transgress national boundaries.

Globalization for me means, among other things, a world awash with people whose displaced lives mock the idea of borders. They are prophets of migration, moving from language to language, sensibility to sensibility, constantly in flux, shifting. And if the Vietnamese refugee left Vietnam under the shadow of history, he also, in the blink of an eye, became the first global villager by default. The trauma of his leaving, the effort he makes in claiming and creating a new place for himself in a quickly shifting world, his ability to negotiate himself in an age of open systems and melting borders makes him the primary character in the contemporary global novel.

My sense of home these days seems to have less to do with geography than imagination and memories. Home is portable if one is in commune with one's soul. I no longer see my identity as a fixed thing but something open-ended. What lies before me then is a vision of continents overlapping and of crisscrossing traditions. Call it a new American frontier if you will, but one chased by a particular transpacific sensibility. For mine is a landscape where Saigon, New York, and Paris intersect, where the Perfume River of Hue flows under the Golden Gate Bridge.

I applaud Edward Said, the cultural critic who suggests that if one wishes to transcend his provincial and national limits, one should not reject attachments to the past but work through them. Irretrievable, the past must be mourned and remembered and assimilated. To truly grieve the loss of a nation and the robbed history of a banished people, that old umbilical cord must be unearthed and, through the task of art, through the act of imagination, be woven into a new living tapestry.





Trung, the farmer turned architect, knows something of this. Perhaps that is why he paints late at night. On his large canvasses, blurred figurines amid a sea of colors dance, mourn, contemplate, or simply gawk at the stars. What Trung knows but cannot say is that some psychic disconnection occurred the moment he left the rice field to embrace a new cosmopolitan reality. Yet something survived. Call it restlessness of the soul. And though he designs homes and condos by day, at night he paints like a demon.

Another friend, a poet who left Vietnam at age seven, tells me his unfinished book of poetry is his true home. It is the only thing he takes with him as he travels. I've read his poems. They are dark and lyrical yet void of rancor. They range instead like clouds or rain as to create a new space—his words are to replace lost land—for all displaced souls to dwell.

And me—each morning I write. I long for freedom. I yearn for memory. And only this morning as I type these words does it occur to me that mine too, strangely enough, is a kind of filial impulse, an effort to reconcile between spring and autumn, between my agricultural past and my cosmopolitan future.

Still, I shudder at the irony. The sounds of my fingers gliding on the keyboard remind me of the solemnity of my mother's morning prayers. When I was younger, I found Mother's story of the weeping fisherman and his dead princess morbid—so much death and blood and sorrow seem to plague the Vietnamese narratives, even those told to children. Only now, approaching middle age, do I recognize that the sad tale is, in its own wise way, one of requited love.

"Tell me, where are you from?" the platinum blonde in a black Donna Karan dress asked me at a recent cocktail party in a Russian Hill villa.

I gestured my martini to the shimmering bay outside the French window and smiled. "Over there, long ago."

"Oh!" she said. She did not know what to make of such an opaque answer or how to reconcile the sadness in my voice with the gesture and the smile. What I was not willing to divulge at such a festive event is that somewhere in between "here" and "over there" a part of me ceased to exist.

In my mind now, I see him as if in a newsreel. See him standing on the beach in Guam at sunset, a small boy staring westward, the waves lapping at his feet, tears in his eyes. A day after Saigon fell and he is alone. See him raise his hand, reluctantly, shyly, and wave good-bye to that S-shaped land. He waves some more, as if somehow this overzealous gesture will alleviate his sorrow. But then his eyes begin to wander. He notices the glowing soda pop machines by the army PX with all the choices—Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Dr. Pepper. He is mesmerized by their colorful glow, so beautiful and entrancing. He is awed. Then he hears two young GIs joking with one another as they stroll toward their sports car. He grows curious about the language of the young men. It's full of laughter and banter, a seductive song to his ears. He feels his tongue curling inside his mouth, forming new words, new names of things. His eyes follow them as they drive out of the refugee camp down the smooth freeway. The sun is almost gone now, a tiny golden arc over a darkening sea. On the red sand, the boy's shadow elongates. He turns then, toward the open road. Takes a step. Then another. And the sun disappears entirely. And he, too, is gone.

Into memories.

Into words.

# Letter to a Young Refugee

## April 1999

On the news last night I saw you amidst a sea of desperate Albanian refugees and afterward I couldn't get the image out of my mind. You with your wide eyes and shy smile, your hand gripping your mother's as if it were a lifesaver, you are repeating my story of a few decades ago.

Listen, even if I know so little about your country's tumultuous history, even if I don't know your name, I think I know what you are going through. When I was eleven, about your age, I too fled from my homeland with my mother and sister and two grandmothers when the communist tanks came rolling into Saigon, Vietnam. We ended up in a refugee camp while our father was left behind.

Back then I couldn't make any sense out of what had happened to me or my family. History, after all, is always baffling to the young. One day I am reading my favorite comic book in my mother's garden, my two dogs sleeping lazily at my feet, and the next day I am running for my life with a small backpack in which I only managed to save my stamp collection. Everything else was burnt—photographs, mementos, books, toys, letters, identifications.

For the first few days in the refugee camp I walked about as if in a kind of trance. I kept thinking I would return home. I kept thinking this was just camping and soon my father would rescue us, would take us home to what I knew and loved. I had no words, no references to what I was experiencing. But now I know: I was dispossessed, an exile.

My young friend, there are so many things I want to tell you, so many experiences I want to share with you, but most of all I want to warn you that the road ahead is a very difficult and treacherous one and you must be brave, strong, and cunning. There are crucial

things you should learn and learn quickly and then there are things you must mull over for the rest of your life.

The immediate thing is to learn to rise as early as possible. The food line is always long, and no matter how early you are, there will always be a line. You must have a hat or a scarf to protect your head from the cold and then from the sun.

When you get to the end of the line, try to act as helpless and as sad as possible. Tell the person in charge of food that your frail grandmother is bedridden and could not wait in line, that you are feeding her. Cry if you can. Try not to feel ashamed. That you never begged before in your life means nothing. Swallow your pride. Another plate will save you or your mother or sister many hours of waiting for the next meal. It will give them time to stand in line for medicine or clothes, if there are any.

Listen carefully, a new reality is upon you and you must rise to it as best you can. It entails a drastic change in your nature, in your thinking. It requires new flexibility and courage. Be aggressive even when you are naturally shy. Be brave even though until recently you still hugged your teddy bear in your own bed going to sleep.

Be fierce. Do not let others take advantage of you. Do not show that you are weak. In the worst circumstances, the weak get left out or beaten and robbed. Arm yourself if you can—a knife, a stone—and guard your family and what possessions you have left like a mad dog its bone. People can sense that you are willing to fight for what you have and most will back away.

Be alert. Listen to gossips and news. Find out what is coming down the line: food, donated clothes, blankets, tents, medicines. Always get more than you need if you can manage it because what you have extra can be traded with others for something you don't have or can be given away to the elderly and feeble who are not as quick as you. An extra blanket is so helpful on a cold spring night, as you, I'm sure, have already found out.

Be hopeful. Maybe your father has made it somewhere else, to another camp possibly. The same can be said of your aunts and cousins, friends and neighbors. Never give up hope. Soon enough the camp will organize and there'll be a newsletter with information regarding lost relatives looking for each other or there'll be a bulletin board with names and agencies that will track displaced loved ones. Go every day to check to see whether your father has sent word. Console your inconsolable mother and sister. Hug them as often as you can.

My young friend, I close my eyes now and cast my mind back to that time spent in the refugee camp and all I hear are the sounds of weeping. I imagine it is not that different from what you are hearing now each morning, each afternoon, each night. Throughout the green tent city that flapped incessantly in the wind was the music of sorrow and grief. A woman who saw her husband shot in front of her wailed until she was hoarse and breathless. A man who left his feeble father behind cried quietly into his blanket. A woman whose teenage son was lost in the escape stared out into the dark as if she had lost her mind. For a while, the sound of weeping was my refugee camp lullaby.

Life in limbo is difficult and humiliating, but you must remember that being robbed of what you loved does not speak to your weakness or frailty. It only speaks of the inhumanity and fear and hatred of those who caused you to flee and endure in this new dispossessed reality.

I implore you, do not give in to their hatred. I know it is very hard, if not impossible, for someone who has just been forced out of his homeland, but you must try. Those who killed and robbed and caused so much pain and suffering to you, your family, and your people are, in fact, trying to make you into their own image, even if they don't realize it yet. They want you to hate just like them. They want you to be consumed with the fire of their hatred.

But don't hate. It will take great strength not to hate. And it will take even greater resilience to not teach hatred to those who come after you. Hatred consumes oppressed and oppressors alike and its terrible expressions—revenge is chief among them—always result in blood and tears and injustice and unspeakable suffering, an endless cycle of grief.

Learn to love what you have instead, learn to love those who suffered along with you, for their suffering and yours are now part of your inheritance.

Above all, don't forget. Commit everything—each blade of grass, each teary-eyed child, each unmarked grave—to memory. Then when you survive and are older, tell your story. Tell it on your bruised knees if you must, tell it at the risk of madness, scream it from the top of your lungs.

For though the story of how you suffered, how you lost your home, your loved ones, and how you triumphed is not new, it must always be told. And it must, by all means, be heard. It is the only light we ever have against the overwhelming darkness.