

## Love and honour and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice...

My father arrived on a rainy morning. I was dreaming about a poem, the dull thluck thluck of a typewriter's keys punching out the letters. It was a good poem—perhaps the best I'd ever written. When I woke, he was standing outside my bedroom door, smiling ambiguously. Still groggy with dream, I lifted my face toward the alarm clock.

"What time is it?"

"Hello, Son," he said in Vietnamese. "I knocked for a long time. Then the door just opened."

The fields are glass, I thought. Then tum-ti-ti, a dactyl, end line, then the words excuse and alloy in the line after.

"It's raining heavily," he said.

I frowned. The clock read 11:44. "I thought you weren't coming until this afternoon." It felt strange, after all this time, to be speaking Vietnamese again.

"They changed my flight in Los Angeles."

"Why didn't you ring?"

"I tried," he said equably. "No answer."

I twisted over the side of the bed and cracked open the window. The sound of rain filled the room—rain fell on the streets, on the roofs, on the tin shed across the parking lot like the distant detonations of firecrackers. Everything smelled of wet leaves.

"I turn the ringer off when I sleep," I said. "Sorry."

He continued smiling at me, significantly, as if waiting for an announcement.

"I was dreaming."

He used to wake me, when I was young, by standing over me and smacking my cheeks lightly. I hated it—the wetness, the sourness of his hands.

"Come on," he said, picking up a large Adidas duffel and a rolled bundle that looked like a sleeping bag. "A day lived, a sea of knowledge earned." He had a habit of speaking in Vietnamese proverbs. I had long since learned to ignore it.

I threw on a T-shirt and stretched my neck in front of the lone window. Through the rain, the sky was as gray and striated as graphite.

"You must be exhausted," I said.

He had flown from Sydney, Australia before touching down in Iowa—thirty-three hours all up. I hadn't seen him in three years.

"You'll sleep in my room."

"Very fancy," he said as he led me through my own apartment. As he moved into the kitchen, I grabbed the three-quarters-full bottle of Johnnie Walker from the second shelf of my bookcase and stashed it under the desk. I looked around. The desktop was gritty with cigarette ash; I threw some magazines over the roughest spots. Then I spotted the photo of Linda beside the printer. Her glamour shot, I called it: hair windswept and eyes squinty, smiling at something out of frame. One of her ex-boyfriends had taken it at Lake MacBride. She looked happy. I snatched it and turned it face down, covering it with scrap paper.

Walking into the kitchen I thought, for a moment, that I'd left the fire escape open. I could hear rain water gushing along gutters, down through the pipes. Then I saw my father at the sink, sleeves rolled up, sponge in hand, washing the month-old crusted mound of dishes. The smell was awful. "Ba," I frowned, "you don't need to do that."

His hands, hard and leathery, moved deftly.

"Ba," I said, half-heartedly.

"I'm almost finished." He looked up and smiled. "Have you eaten? Do you want me to make lunch?"

"Thoi," I said, suddenly irritated. "You're exhausted. I'll go out and get us something."

I went back through the living room, picking up clothes and rubbish along the way.

"You don't have to worry about me," he called out. "You just do what you always do."

\*\*\*

The truth was, he'd come at the worst possible time. I was in my last year at the Iowa Writers' Workshop; it was late November, and my final story for the semester was due in three days. I had a backlog of papers to grade and a heap of fellowship and job applications to draft and submit. It was no wonder I was drinking so much.

I'd told Linda only the previous night that he was coming. We were at her place. Her body was slippery with sweat and hard to hold. Her body smelled of her clothes. She turned me over, my face kissing the bedsheets, and then she was chopping my back with the edges of her hands. Higher. Out a bit more. She had trouble keeping a steady rhythm. "Softer," I told her. Moments later, I started laughing.

"What?"

The sheets were damp beneath my pressed face.

"What?"

"Softer," I said, "not slower."

She slapped my back with the meat of her palms, hard—once, twice. I couldn't stop laughing. I squirmed over and caught her by the wrists. Hunched forward, she was blushing and beautiful. Her hair fell over her face; beneath its ash-blond hem all I could see were her open lips. She pressed down, into me, her shoulders kinking the long, lean curve from the back of her neck to the small of her back. "Stop it!" her

lips said. She wrested her hands free. Her fingers beneath my waistband, violent, the scratch of her nails down my thighs, knees, ankles. I pointed my foot like a ballet dancer.

Afterwards, I told her my father didn't know about her. She said nothing. "We just don't talk about that kind of stuff," I explained. She looked like an actress who looked like my girlfriend. Staring at her face made me tired. "He's only here for three days." Somewhere out of sight, a group of college boys hooted and yelled.

"I thought you didn't talk to him at all."

"He's my father."

"What's he want?"

I rolled towards her, on to my elbow. "It's only three days," I said.

The look on her face was strange, shut down. She considered me a long time. Then she got up and pulled on her clothes. "Just make sure you get your story done," she said.

\*\*\*

I drank before I came here too. I drank when I was a student at university, and then when I was a lawyer—in my previous life, as they say. There was a subterranean bar in a hotel next to my work, and every night I would wander down and slump on a bar stool and pretend I didn't want the bartender to make small talk. He was only a bit older than me, and I came to envy his ease, his confidence that any given situation was merely temporary. My parents had already split by then, my father moving to Sydney, my mother into a government flat.

That's all I've ever done, traffic in words. Sometimes I still think about word counts the way a general must think about casualties. I'd been in Iowa more than a year and I'd written only three and a half stories. About seventeen thousand words. When I was working at the law firm, I would have written that many words in a couple of weeks.

Deadlines came, exhausting, and I forced myself up to meet them. Then, in the great spans of time between, I fell back to my vacant screen and my slowly sludging mind. I tried everything—writing in longhand, writing in my bed, in my bathtub. As this last deadline approached, I remembered a friend claiming he'd broken his writer's block by switching to a typewriter. You're free to write, he told me, once you know you can't delete what you've written. I bought an electric Smith Corona at an antique shop. It buzzed like a tropical aquarium when I plugged it in. It looked good on my desk. For inspiration, I read absurdly formal Victorian poetry and drank scotch neat. How hard could it be? Things happened in this world all the time. All I had to do was record them. In the sky, two swarms of swallows converged, pulled apart, interwove again like veils drifting at cross-currents. In the supermarket, a black woman leaned forward and kissed the handle of her shopping cart, her skin dark and glossy like the polished wood of a piano.

The week prior to my father's arrival, a friend chastised me for my persistent defeatism.

"Writer's block?" Under the streetlights, bourbon vapours puffed out of his mouth. "How can you have writer's block? Just write a story about Vietnam."

We had come from a party following a reading by the workshop's most recent success, a Chinese woman trying to immigrate to America who had written a book of short stories about Chinese characters in stages of immigration to America. The stories were subtle and good. The gossip was she'd been offered a six-figure contract for a two-book deal. It was meant to be an unspoken rule that such things were left unspoken. Of course, it was all anyone talked about.

"It's hot," a writing instructor told me at a bar. "Ethnic literature's hot. And important too."

Other friends were more forthright: "I'm sick of ethnic lit," one said. "It's full of descriptions of exotic food." Or: "You can't tell if the language is spare because the author intended it that way, or because he didn't have the vocab."

I was told about a friend of a friend, a Harvard graduate from Washington DC, who had posed in traditional Nigerian garb for his book-jacket photo. I pictured myself standing in a rice paddy, wearing a straw conical hat. Then I pictured my father in the same field, wearing his threadbare fatigues, young and hard-eyed.

"It's a licence to bore," my friend said. We were drunk and walking our bikes because both of us, separately, had punctured our tyres.

"The characters are always flat, generic. As long as a Chinese writer writes about Chinese people, or a Peruvian writer about Peruvians, or a Russian writer about Russians..." he said, as though reciting children's doggerel, then stopped, losing his train of thought. His mouth turned up into a doubtful grin. I could tell he was angry about something.

"Look," I said, pointing at a floodlit porch ahead of us. "Those guys have guns."

"As long as there's an interesting image or metaphor once in every this much text"—he held out his thumb and forefinger to indicate half a page. I nodded to him, and then I nodded to one of the guys on the porch, who nodded back. The other guy waved us through with his faux-wood air rifle. A car with its headlights on was idling in the driveway, and girls' voices emerged from inside, squealing, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

"Faulkner, you know," my friend said over the squeals, "he said we should write about the old verities. Love and honour and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice." A sudden sharp crack behind us, like the striking of a giant typewriter hammer, was followed by some muffled shrieks. "I know I'm a bad person for saying this," my friend said, "but that's why I don't mind your work, Nam. Because you could just write about Vietnamese boat people all the time. Like in your third story."

He must have thought my head was bowed in modesty, but in fact I was figuring out whether I'd just been shot in the back of the thigh. I'd felt a distinct sting. The pellet might have ricocheted off something.

"You could totally exploit the Vietnamese thing. But instead, you choose to write about lesbian vampires and Colombian assassins, and Hiroshima orphans, and New York painters with haemorrhoids."

For a dreamlike moment I was taken aback. Catalogued like that, under the bourbon stink of his breath, my stories sank into unflattering relief. My leg was still stinging. I imagined sticking my hand down the back of my jeans, bringing it to my face under a streetlight, and finding it gory, blood-spattered. I imagined turning around, advancing wordlessly up the porch steps, and dropkicking the two kids. I would tell my story into a microphone from a hospital bed. I would compose my story in a county cell. I would

kill one of them, maybe accidentally, and never talk about it, ever, to anyone. There was no hole in my jeans.

"I'm probably a bad person," my friend said, stumbling beside his bike.

\*\*\*

That afternoon, as I was leaving the apartment for Linda's, my father called out my name from the bedroom.

I stopped outside the closed door. He was meant to be napping.

"Where are you going?" his voice said.

"For a walk," I replied.

"I'll walk with you."

The rain had stopped outside. I don't know why, but we walked in the middle of the road, dark asphalt gleaming beneath the slick, pasted leaves like the back of a whale.

"There's a coffee shop downtown," I said. "And an art museum across the river."

"Ah, take me there."

"The museum?"

"No," he said, looking sideways at me. "The river."

We turned back to Burlington Street and walked down the hill to the river. He stopped halfway across the bridge. Behind us six lanes of cars skidded back and forth across the wet grit of the road, the sound like the shredding of wind.

"Have you heard from your mother?" He stood upright before the railing, his head strangely small above the puffy down jacket I had lent him.

"Every now and then."

He lapsed into formal Vietnamese: "How is the mother of Nam?"

"She is good," I said.

He was already nodding. Behind him, the east bank of the river glowed wanly in the afternoon light.

"Come on," I said. We crossed the bridge and walked to a nearby Dairy Queen. When I came out, two coffees in my hands, my father had gone down to the river's edge. Next to him, a bundled-up, bearded figure stooped over a burning gasoline drum. Never had I seen anything like it in Iowa City.

"This is my son," my father said, once I had scrambled down the wet bank. "The writer." I glanced quickly at him but his face gave nothing away. He lifted a hot paper cup out of my hand. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Thank you, no." The man stood watching his knotted hands, palms glowing above the drum's rim. I smelled animals in him, and fuel, and rain.

"I read his story," my father went on in his lilting English, "about Vietnamese boat people." He gazed at the man, straight into his blank, rheumy eyes, then said, as though delivering a punchline, "We are Vietnamese boat people."

We stood there a long time, the three of us, watching the flames. When I lifted my eyes it was dark.

"Do you have any money on you?" my father asked me in Vietnamese.

"Welcome to America," the man said through his beard. He didn't look up as I closed his fist around the damp bills.

\*\*\*

My father was drawn to weakness, even as he tolerated none in me. He was a soldier, he said once, as if that explained everything. When I was fourteen, I discovered that he had been involved in a massacre. Later I would come across photos and transcripts and books, but that night, at a family friend's party in suburban Melbourne, it was just another story in a circle of drunken men. They sat cross-legged around a blue tarpaulin, getting smashed on cheap beer. It was that time of night when things started to break up against other things. Red faces, raised voices, spilled drinks. We arrived late and the men shuffled around, making room for my father.

It was the first time I was allowed to stay. I sat on the circle's perimeter, watching. A thicket of Vietnamese voices, cursing, toasting, braying about their children, making fun of one man who kept stuttering, "It has the power of f-f-five hundred horses!" Through it all my father laughed good-naturedly, his face so red with drink he looked sunburned. Then someone called out his name; I realised he had set his chopsticks down and was speaking in a low voice:

"Heavens, the gunships came first, rockets and M60s. You remember that sound, no? Like you were deaf. We were hiding in the bunker underneath the temple, my mother and four sisters and Mrs Tran, the baker, and some other people. You couldn't hear anything. Then the gunfire stopped and Mrs Tran told my mother we had to go up to the street. If we stayed there, the Americans would think we were Vietcong. 'I'm not going anywhere,' my mother said. 'They have grenades,' Mrs Tran said. I was scared and excited. I had never seen an American before."

It took me a while to reconcile my father with this story. He caught my eye and held it, as though he were sharing a secret with me. He was drunk.

"So we went up. They made us walk to the east side of the village. There were about ten of them, about fifty of us. Mrs Tran was saying, 'No VC no VC.' They didn't hear her, not over the sound of machine guns. Only I heard her. I saw pieces of animals all over the paddy fields, a water buffalo with its side missing—like it was scooped out by a spoon. Then, through the smoke, I saw Grandpa Long bowing to a GI in the traditional greeting. I wanted to call out to him. His wife and daughter and granddaughters, My and Kim, stood shyly behind him. The GI stepped forward, tapped the top of his head with the rifle butt and then twirled the gun around and slid the bayonet into his throat. He wore a beaded necklace and a baseball cap. No one said anything. My mother tried to cover my eyes, but I saw him switch the fire selector on his gun from automatic to single-shot before he shot Grandma Long. Then he and a friend pulled the daughter into a shack, the two little girls dragged along, clinging to her legs.

"They stopped us at the drainage ditch, near the bridge. There were bodies on the road, a baby with only the bottom half of its head, a monk, his robe turning pink. I saw two bodies with the ace of spades carved into the chests. I didn't understand it. My sisters didn't even cry. People were now shouting, 'No VC no VC,' but the Americans just frowned and spat and laughed. One of them said something, then some of them started pushing us into the ditch. It was half full of muddy water. My mother jumped in and lifted my sisters down, one by one. I remember looking up and seeing helicopters everywhere, some bigger than others, some higher up. They made us kneel in the water. They set up their guns on tripods. They made us stand up again. One of the Americans, a boy with a fat face, was crying and moaning softly as he reloaded his magazine. 'No VC no VC.' They didn't look at us. They made us turn back around. They made us kneel back down in the water. When they started shooting I felt my mother's body jumping on top of mine; it kept jumping for a long time, and then everywhere was the sound of helicopters, louder and louder like they were all coming down to land, and everything was dark and wet and warm and sweet."

The circle had gone quiet. My mother came out from the kitchen, squatted behind my father, and looped her arms around his neck. This was a minor breach of the rules. "Heavens," she said, "don't you men have anything better to talk about?"

After a short silence, someone snorted, saying loudly, "You win, Thanh. You really did have it bad!" and then everyone, including my father, burst out laughing. I joined in unsurely. They clinked glasses and made toasts using words I didn't understand.

Maybe he didn't tell it exactly that way. Maybe I'm filling in the gaps. But you're not under oath when writing a eulogy, and this is close enough. My father grew up in the province of Quang Ngai, in the village of Son My, in the hamlet of Tu Cung, later known to the Americans as My Lai. He was fourteen years old.

\*\*\*

Late that night, I plugged in the Smith Corona. It hummed with promise. I grabbed the bottle of scotch from under the desk and poured myself a double. Fuck it, I thought. I had two and a half days left. I would write the ethnic story of my Vietnamese father. It was a good story. It was a fucking great story.

I fed in a sheet of blank paper. At the top of the page, I typed "ETHNIC STORY" in capital letters. I pushed the carriage return. The sound of helicopters in a dark sky. The keys hammered the page.

\*\*\*

The next day, at the coffee shop, I sat with my typed pages and watched people come and go. The door opened and a cold wind blew in.

"Hey." It was Linda, wearing a large orange hiking jacket and bringing with her the crisp, bracing scent of all the places she had been. Her face was unmaking a smile. "What are you doing here?"

"Working on my story."

"Is your dad here?"

"No."

She leaned over me, her hair grazing my face, cold and silken against my cheek. "Is this it?" She picked up a couple of pages and read them soundlessly. "I don't get it," she said, returning them to the table.

"What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"You never told me any of this."

I shrugged.

"Did he tell you this? Now he's talking to you?"

"Not really," I said.

"Not really?"

I turned to face her. Her eyes reflected no light.

"You know what I think?" She looked back down at the pages. "I think you're making excuses for him."

"Excuses?"

"You're romanticising his past," she went on, "to make sense of the things you said he did to you."

"It's a story," I said. "What things did I say?"

"Just tell me this," she replied, her voice flattening. "You've never introduced him to any of your exes, right?" The question was tight on her face.

I didn't say anything and after a while she nodded, biting one corner of her upper lip. I knew that gesture. I knew, even then, that I was supposed to stand up, pull her orange-jacketed body towards mine, speak into her ear; but all I could do was think about my father and his excuses. Those tattered bodies on top of him. The ten hours he'd waited, mud filling his lungs, until nightfall. I felt myself falling into old habits.

She said, "You said he abused you."

It was too much, these words, and what connected to them. I looked at her serious, beautifully lined face, her light-trapping eyes, and already I felt them taxing me. "I never said that."

She stepped forward and kissed the top of my head. It was one of her rules: never to leave an argument without some sign of affection. I turned away.

\*\*\*

The apartment smelled of fried garlic and sesame oil when I returned. My father was sitting on the living room floor, on the special mattress he had brought over with him. He told me it was for his back.

"I read your story this morning," he said, "while you were still sleeping." Something in my stomach folded over. I hadn't thought to hide the pages. "There are mistakes in it."

"You read it?"

"There were mistakes in your last story too."



In the kitchen, I scooped up a forkful of marinated tofu, cashews, and chickpeas. “They’re stories,” I said, chewing casually. “Fiction.”

He paused for a moment, then said, “Okay, Son.”

For so long my diet had consisted of chips and noodles and pizzas I’d forgotten how much I missed home cooking. As I ate, he stretched on his white mat.

“How’s your back?”

“I had a CAT scan,” he said. “There’s nerve fluid leaking between my vertebrae.” He smiled his long-suffering smile, right leg twisted across his left hip.

“Does it hurt, Ba?”

“It hurts.” He chuckled briefly, as though the whole matter were a joke. “But what can I do? I can only accept it.”

“Can’t they operate?”

I felt myself losing interest. I was a bad son. He brought up his back pains so often—always couched in Buddhist tenets of suffering and acceptance—that the cold, hard part of me suspected he was exaggerating, to solicit and then gently rebuke my concern. He did this. He’d forced me to take karate lessons until I was sixteen; then, during one of our final arguments, he came at me and I found myself in fighting stance. He had smiled at my horror. “That’s right,” he’d said. We were locked in all the intricate ways of guilt. It took all the time we had to realise that everything we faced, we faced for the other as well.

“I want to talk with you,” I said.

“You grow old, your body breaks down,” he said.

“No, I mean for the story.”

“About what?” He seemed amused.

“About my mistakes,” I said.

Afternoon. We sat across from one another at the dining room table: I asked questions and took notes on a yellow legal pad; he talked. He talked about his childhood, his family. He talked about My Lai. At this point, he stopped.

“You won’t offer your father some of that?”

“What?”

“Heavens, you think you can hide liquor of that quality?”

The afternoon light came through the window and held his body in a silver square, slowly sinking toward his feet, dimming, as he talked. I filled and refilled our glasses. He talked above the peak-hour traffic on

the streets, its rinse of noise; he talked deep into the evening. When the phone rang the second time, I unplugged it from the jack. He told me how he'd been conscripted into the South Vietnamese army.

"After what the Americans did? How could you fight on their side?"

"I had nothing but hate in me," he said, "but I had enough for everyone." He paused on the word hate like a father saying it before his infant child for the first time, trying the child's knowledge, testing what was inherent in the word and what learned.

He told me about the war. He told me about meeting my mother. The wedding. Then the fall of Saigon. 1975. He told me about his imprisonment in re-education camp, the forced confessions, the indoctrinations, the starvations. The daily labour that ruined his back. The casual killings. He told me about the tiger-cage cells and connex boxes, the different names for different forms of torture: the honda, the airplane, the auto.

He told me how, upon his release after three years' incarceration, he organised our family's escape from Vietnam. This was 1979. He was twenty-five years old then, and my father.

When finally he fell asleep, his face warm from the scotch, I watched him from the bedroom doorway. I was drunk. Then I shook myself conscious and went to my desk. I read my notes through once, carefully, all forty-five pages. I reread the draft of my story from two nights earlier. Then I put them both aside and started typing, never looking at them again.

\*\*\*

He wasn't in the apartment when I woke up. There was a note on the coffee table: I am going for a walk. I have taken your story to read. I sat outside, on the fire escape, with a tumbler of scotch, waiting for him. I had slept for only three hours and was too tired to feel anything but peace.

He would read it, with his book-learned English, and he would recognise himself in a new way. He would see how powerful was his experience, how valuable his suffering—how I had made it speak for more than itself. He would be pleased with me.

I finished the scotch. It was eleven-thirty and the sky was dark and grey-smeared. My story was due at midday. I put my gloves on and untangled my bike from the rack. He would be pleased with me. I rode around the block, then towards downtown. On Washington Street, a sudden gust of wind ravaged the elm branches and unfastened their leaves, floating them down thick and slow and soundless.

I was halfway across the bridge when I saw him. I stopped. He was on the riverbank. I couldn't make out the face but it was he, short and small-headed in my bloated jacket. He stood with the tramp, both of them staring into the blazing gasoline drum. The smoke was thick, particulate. For a second I stopped breathing. I knew with sick certainty what he had done. The ashes, given body by the wind, floated away from me down the river. He patted the man on the shoulder, reached into his back pocket and slipped some money into those large, newly mittened hands. He started up the bank then, and saw me. I was so full of wanting I thought it would flood my heart.

If I had known then what I knew later, I wouldn't have said the things I did. I wouldn't have told him he didn't understand—for clearly, he did. I wouldn't have told him that what he had done was unforgivable. That I wished he had never come, or that he was no father to me. But I hadn't known, and, as I waited, feeling the wind change, all I saw was a man coming toward me in a ridiculously oversized jacket, rubbing his black-sooted hands, stepping through the smoke with its flecks and flame-tinged eddies, who had

destroyed himself, yet again, in my name. The river was behind him. The wind was full of acid. In the slow float of light I looked away, down at the river. On the brink of freezing, it gleamed in large, bulging blisters. The water, where it still moved, was black and braided. And it occurred to me then how it took hours, sometimes days, for the surface of a river to freeze over—to hold in its skin the perfect and crystalline world—and how that world could be shattered by a small stone dropped like a single syllable.