Love and Honor 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 up, he was standing outside my bedroom door, smiling ambiguously. He wore black trousers and a wet, wrinkled parachute jacket that looked like it had just been pulled out of a washing machine. Framed by the bedroom doorway, he appeared even smaller, gaunter, than I remembered. 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. *Come on,* I thought.

"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 win-

dow. 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. *The fields are glass . . .* Like a shape in smoke, the poem blurred, then dissolved into this new, cold, strange reality: a wind-blown, rain-strafed parking lot; a dark room almost entirely taken up by my bed; the small body of my father dripping water onto hardwood floors.

I went to him, my legs goose-pimpled underneath my pajamas. He watched with pleasant indifference as my hand reached for his, shook it, then relieved his other hand of the bags. "You must be exhausted," I said.

He had flown from Sydney, Australia. Thirty-three hours all up—transiting in Auckland, Los Angeles, and Denver—before touching down in Iowa. 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. "You even have a piano." He gave me an almost rueful smile. "I knew you'd never really quit." Something moved behind his face and I found myself back on a heightened stool with my fingers chasing the metronome, ahead and behind, trying to shut out the tutor's repeated sighing, his heavy brass ruler. I realized I was massaging my knuckles. My father patted the futon in my living room. "I'll sleep here."

"You'll sleep in my room, Ba." I watched him warily as he surveyed our surroundings, messy with books, papers, dirty plates, teacups, clothes—I'd intended to tidy up before going to the airport. "I work in this room anyway, and I work at night." 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 flipped one of them over because its cover bore a picture of Chairman Mao. I quickly gathered up the cigarette packs and sleeping pills and incense burners and dumped them all on a high shelf, behind my Kafka Vintage Classics.

At the kitchen swing door I remembered 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 facedown, covering it with scrap paper.

As I walked into the kitchen I thought, for a moment, that I'd left the fire escape open. I could hear rainwater 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 in the sink.

"Ba," I said, halfheartedly.

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

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

I went back through the living room into my bedroom, 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.

Afterward, 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. I'd begun to feel this way more often around her. "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 toward her, onto my elbow. I tried to remember how much I'd told her about him. We'd been lying on the bed, the wind loud in the room—I remember that—and we were both tipsy. Ours could have been any two voices in the darkness. "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 barstool 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. I left exorbitant tips. After a while I was treated to battered shrimps and shepherd's pies on the house. 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—days passed in weeks, then months, more than a year of days—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. And they would have been useful to someone.

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 crosscurrents. In line at 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, vapors of bourbon puffed out of his mouth. "How can you have writer's block? Just write a story about Vietnam."

We had just 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 that she'd been offered a substantial 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."

A couple of visiting literary agents took a similar view: "There's a lot of polished writing around," one of them said. "You have to ask yourself, what makes me stand out?" She tag-teamed to her colleague, who answered slowly as though intoning a mantra, "Your *background* and *life experience*."

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, D.C., 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 license to bore," my friend said. We were drunk and walking our bikes because both of us, separately, had punctured our tires on the way to the party.

"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, his bike wobbling all over the sidewalk. 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 honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice." A sudden sharp crack behind us, like the striking of a giant typewriter hammer, 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 hemorrhoids."

For a dreamlike moment I was taken aback. Cataloged 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 drop-kicking 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 a few steps in front of me.

IF YOU ASK ME WHY I CAME TO IOWA, I would say that Iowa is beautiful in the way that any place is beautiful: if you treat it as the answer to a question you're asking yourself every day, just by being there.

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."

It always struck me how everything seemed larger in scale on Summit Street: the double-storied houses, their smooth lawns sloping down to the sidewalks like golf greens; elm trees with high, thick branches—the sort of branches from which I imagined fathers suspending long-roped swings for daughters in white dresses. The leaves, once golden and red, were turning brown, dark orange. The rain had stopped. 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.

I asked him, "What do you want to do while you're here?"

His face was pale and fixed in a smile. "Don't worry about me," he said. "I can just meditate. Or read."

"There's a coffee shop downtown," I said. "And a Japanese restaurant." It sounded pathetic. It occurred to me that I knew nothing about what my father did all day.

He kept smiling, looking at the ground moving in front of his feet.

"I have to write," I said.

"You write."

And I could no longer read his smile. He had perfected it during our separation. It was a setting of the lips, sly, almost imperceptible, which I would probably have taken for a sign of senility but for the keenness of his eyes.

"There's an art museum across the river," I said.

"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. The water below looked cold and black, slowing in sections as it succumbed to the temperature. 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—too loudly—trying to make myself heard over the groans and clanks of a passing truck.

He was 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 still, watching his knotted hands, palms glowing orange above the rim of the drum. His voice was soft, his clothes heavy with his life. 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 punch line, "*We* are Vietnamese boat people."

We stood there for 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. With me, he was all proverbs and regulations. No personal phone calls. No female friends. No extracurricular reading. When I was in primary school, he made me draw up a daily ten-hour study timetable for the summer holidays, and punished me when I deviated from it. He knew how to cane me twenty times and leave only one black-red welt, like a brand mark across my buttocks. Afterward, as he rubbed Tiger Balm on the wound, I would cry in anger at myself for crying. Once, when my mother let slip that durian fruit made me vomit, he forced me to eat it in front of guests. *Doi an muoi cung ngon.* Hunger finds no fault with food. I learned to hate him with a straight face.

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 on newspapers around a large 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.

"Thanh! Fuck your mother! What took you so long—scared, no? Sit down, sit down—"

"Give him five bottles." The speaker swung around ferociously. "We're letting you off easy, everyone here's had eight, nine already."

For the first time, my father let me stay. I sat on the perimeter of the circle, watching in fascination. 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. Bowl and chopsticks in his hands, he appeared somewhat childish squashed between two men trading war stories. I watched him as he picked sparingly at the enormous spread of dishes in the middle of the circle. The food was known as *do nhau*: alcohol food. Massive fatty oysters dipped in salt-pepper-lemon paste. Boiled sea snails the size of pool balls. Southern-style shredded chicken salad, soaked in vinegar and eaten with spotty brown rice crackers. Someone called out my father's name; 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 Viet Cong. '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 the story he was telling. He caught my eye and held it a moment, as though he were sharing a secret with me. He was drunk.

"So we went up. Everywhere there was dust and smoke, and all you could hear was the sound of helicopters and M16s. Houses on fire. Then through the smoke I saw an American. I almost laughed. He wore his uniform so untidily—it was too big for him—and he had a beaded necklace and a baseball cap. He held an M16 over his shoulder like a spade. Heavens, he looked nothing like the Viet Cong, with their shirts buttoned up to their chins—and tucked in—even after crawling through mud tunnels all day."

He picked up his chopsticks and reached for the *tiet canh*—a specialty—mincemeat soaked in fresh congealed duck blood. Some of the other men were listening now, smiling knowingly. I saw his teeth, stained red, as he chewed through the rest of his words:

"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 and the M79 grenade launchers. Remember those? 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. 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 again. 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 and scrolled down to the next line. The sound of helicopters in a dark sky. The keys hammered the page.

I WOKE UP LATE THE NEXT DAY. At the coffee shop, I sat with my typed pages and watched people come and go. They laughed and sat and sipped and talked and, listening to them, I was reminded again that I was in a small town in a foreign country.

I thought of my father in my dusky bedroom. He had kept the door closed as I left. I thought of how he had looked when I checked on him before going to bed: his body engulfed by blankets and his head so small among my pillows. He'd aged in those last three years. His skin glassy in the blue glow of dawn. He was here, now, with me, and already making the rest of my life seem unreal.

I read over what I had typed: thinking of him at that age, still a boy, and who he would become. At a nearby table, a guy held out one of his iPod earbuds and beckoned his date to come

around and sit beside him. The door opened and a cold wind blew in. I tried to concentrate.

"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."

Her friends were waiting by the counter. She nodded to them, holding up one finger, then came behind me, resting her hands on my shoulders. "Is this it?" She leaned over me, her hair grazing my face, cold and silken against my cheek. 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 around 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 romanticizing his past," she went on quietly, "to make sense of the things you said he did to you."

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

"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 took a half step back. "Just tell me this," she said, 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 toward mine, speak words 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 back into old habits.

She stepped forward and kissed the top of my head. It was one of her rules: not to walk away from an argument without some sign of affection. I didn't look at her. My mother liked to tell the story of how, when our family first arrived in Australia, we lived in a hostel on an outer-suburb street where the locals—whenever they met or parted—hugged and kissed each other warmly. How my father—baffled, charmed—had named it "the street of lovers."

I turned to the window: it was dark now, the evening settling thick and deep. A man and woman sat across from each other at a high table. The woman leaned in, smiling, her breasts squat on the wood, elbows forward, her hands mere inches away from the man's shirtfront. Throughout their conversation her teeth glinted. Behind them, a mother sat with her son. "I'm not playing," she murmured, flipping through her magazine.

"L," said the boy.

"I said I'm not playing."

HERE IS WHAT I BELIEVE: We forgive any sacrifice by our parents, so long as it is not made in our name. To my father there was no other name—only mine, and he had named me after the homeland he had given up. His sacrifice was complete and

compelled him to everything that happened. To all that, I was inadequate.

At sixteen I left home. There was a girl, and crystal meth, and the possibility of greater loss than I had imagined possible. She embodied everything prohibited by my father and plainly worthwhile. Of course he was right about her: she taught me hurt—but promise too. We were two animals in the dark, hacking at one another, and never since have I felt that way—that sense of consecration. When my father found out my mother was supporting me, he gave her an ultimatum. She moved into a family friend's textile factory and learned to use an overlock machine and continued sending me money.

"Of course I want to live with him," she told me when I visited her, months later. "But I want you to come home too."

"Ba doesn't want that."

"You're his son," she said simply. "He wants you with him."

I laundered my school uniform and asked a friend to cut my hair and waited for school hours to finish before catching the train home. My father excused himself upon seeing me. When he returned to the living room he had changed his shirt and there was water in his hair. I felt sick and fully awake—as if all the previous months had been a single sleep and now my face was wet again, burning cold. The room smelled of peppermint. He asked me if I was well, and I told him I was, and then he asked me if my female friend was well, and at that moment I realized he was speaking to me not as a father—not as he would to his only son—but as he would speak to a friend, to anyone, and it undid me. I had learned what it was to attenuate my blood but that was nothing compared to this. I forced myself to look at him and I asked him to bring Ma back home.

"And Child?"

"Child will not take any more money from Ma."

"Come home," he said, finally. His voice was strangled, half swallowed.

Even then, my emotions operated like a system of levers and pulleys; just seeing him had set them irreversibly into motion. "No," I said. The word shot out of me.

"Come home, and Ma will come home, and Ba promises Child to never speak of any of this again." He looked away, smiling heavily, and took out a handkerchief. His forehead was moist with sweat. He had been buried alive in the warm, wet clinch of his family, crushed by their lives. I wanted to know how he climbed out of that pit. I wanted to know how there could ever be any correspondence between us. I wanted to know all this but an internal momentum moved me, further and further from him as time went on.

"The world is hard," he said. For a moment I was uncertain whether he was speaking in proverbs. He looked at me, his face a gleaming mask. "Just say yes, and we can forget everything. That's all. Just say it: Yes."

But I didn't say it. Not that day, nor the next, nor any day for almost a year. When I did, though, rehabilitated and fixed in new privacies, he was true to his word and never spoke of the matter. In fact, after I came back home he never spoke of anything much at all, and it was under this learned silence that the three of us—my father, my mother, and I, living again under a single roof—were conducted irreparably into our separate lives.

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. It was made of white foam. He told me it was for his back. "There's some stir-fry in the kitchen."

"Thanks."

"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."

My last story. I remembered my mother's phone call at the time: my father, unemployed and living alone in Sydney, had started sending long emails to friends from his past—friends from thirty, forty years ago. I should talk to him more often, she'd said. I'd sent him my refugee story. He hadn't responded. Now, as I came out of the kitchen with a heaped plate of stir-fry, I tried to recall those sections where I'd been sloppy with research. Maybe the scene in Rach Gia—before they reached the boat. I scooped up a forkful of marinated tofu, cashews, and chickpeas. He'd gone shopping. "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. "I brought the scans to show you."

"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'd separated from my mother when I started law school and ever since then he'd 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 realize 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."

"Talk?"

"Yes."

"About what?" He seemed amused.

"About my mistakes," I said.

IF YOU ASK ME WHY I CAME TO IOWA, I would say that I was a lawyer and I was no lawyer. Every twenty-four hours I woke up at the smoggiest time of morning and commuted—bus, tram, elevator, without saying a single word, wearing clothes that chafed and holding a flat white in a white cup—to my windowless office in the tallest, most glass-covered building in Melbourne. Time was broken down into six-minute units, friends allotted eight-unit lunch breaks. I hated what I was doing and I hated that I was good at it. Mostly, I hated knowing it was my job that made my father proud of me. When I told him I was quitting and going to Iowa to be a writer, he said, *"Trau buoc ghet trau an."* The captive buffalo hates the free buffalo. But by that time he had no more control over my life. I was twenty-five years old.

The thing is not to write what no one else could have written, but to write what only you could have written. I recently found this fragment in one of my old notebooks. The person who wrote

that couldn't have known what would happen: how time can hold itself against you, how a voice hollows, how words you once loved can wither on the page.

"Why do you want to write this story?" my father asked me.

"It's a good story."

"But there are so many things you could write about."

"This is important, Ba. It's important that people know."

"You want their pity."

I didn't know whether it was a question. I was offended. "I want them to remember," I said.

He was silent for a long time. Then he said, "Only you'll remember. I'll remember. They will read and clap their hands and forget." For once, he was not smiling. "Sometimes it's better to forget, no?"

"I'll write it anyway," I said. It came back to me—how I'd felt at the typewriter the previous night. A thought leapt into my mind: "If I write a true story," I told my father, "I'll have a better chance of selling it."

He looked at me a while, searchingly, seeing something in my face as though for the first time. Finally he said, in a measured voice, "I'll tell you." For a moment he receded into thought. "But believe me, it's not something you'll be able to write."

"I'll write it anyway," I repeated.

Then he did something unexpected. His face opened up and he began to laugh, without self-pity or slyness, laughing in full-bodied breaths. I was shocked. I hadn't heard him laugh like this for as long as I could remember. Without fully knowing why, I started laughing too. His throat was humming in Vietnamese, "Yes . . . yes . . . yes," his eyes shining, smiling. "All right. All right. But tomorrow."

"But—"

"I need to think," he said. He shook his head, then said under

his breath, "My son a writer. *Co thuc moi vuc duoc dao.*" How far does an empty stomach drag you?

"*Mot nguoi lam quan, ca ho duoc nho,*" I retorted. A scholar is a blessing for all his relatives. He looked at me in surprise before laughing again and nodding vigorously. I'd been saving that one up for years.

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 refilled our glasses. He talked above the peak-hour traffic on the streets, its rinse of noise; he talked deep into 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 reeducation camp, the forced confes-

sions, the indoctrinations, the starvations. The daily labor 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. "They tie you by your thumbs, one arm over the shoulder, the other pulled around the front of the body. Or they stretch out your legs and tie your middle fingers to your big toes—"

He showed me. A skinny old man in Tantric poses, he looked faintly preposterous. During the auto he flinched, then, a smile springing to his face, asked me to help him to his foam mattress. I waited impatiently for him to stretch it out. He asked me again to help. *Here, push here. A little harder.* Then he went on talking, sometimes in a low voice, sometimes grinning. Other times he would blink—furiously, perplexedly. In spite of his Buddhist protestations, I imagined him locked in rage, turned around and forced every day to rewitness these atrocities of his past, helpless to act. But that was only my imagination. I had nothing to prove that he was not empty of all that now.

He told me how, upon his release after three years' incarceration, he organized 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. For a moment, watching him, I felt like I had drifted into dream too. For a moment I became my father, watching his sleeping son, reminded of what—for his son's sake—he had tried, unceasingly, to forget. A past larger than complaint, more perilous than memory. 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.

Dawn came so gradually I didn't notice—until the beeping of a garbage truck—that outside the air was metallic blue and the

ground was white. The top of the tin shed was white. The first snow had fallen.

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. Against the cold, I drank my whisky, letting it flow like a filament of warmth through my body. I had slept for only three hours and was too tired to feel anything but peace. The red geraniums on the landing of the opposite building were frosted over. I spied through my neighbors' windows and saw exactly nothing.

He would read it, with his book-learned English, and he would recognize himself in a new way. He would recognize me. 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 gray-smeared. My story was due at midday. I put my gloves on, treaded carefully down the fire escape, and untangled my bike from the rack. He would be pleased with me. I rode around the block, up and down Summit Street, looking for a sign of my puffy jacket. The streets were empty. Most of the snow had melted, but an icy film covered the roads and I rode slowly. Eyes stinging and breath fogging in front of my mouth, I coasted toward downtown, across the College Green, the grass frozen so stiff it snapped beneath my bicycle wheels. Lights glowed dimly from behind the curtained windows of houses. 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. His hands were empty.

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.

Cartagena

IN CARTAGENA, LUIS SAYS, the beach is gray at dawn. He points to the barrel of his G3 when he says this, *steel gray*, he says. He smiles. The sand is white, he says, this color, tapping his teeth. And when the sun comes up on your right, man, it is a slow-motion explosion like in the movies, a big kerosene flash and then the water is sparkling gray and orange and red. Luis is full of shit, of course, but he can talk and it is true that he is the only one of our *gallada* who has seen the Caribbean. Who has been to Cartagena.

And the girls? Eduardo asks.

Luis tosses back his greasy black hair. He knows we will wait for his answer. He is the oldest of us (except for Claudia, who doesn't count because she is a girl), and he has told this story many times with pleasure.

The girls, he says. He looks at me and it is proper, he is showing respect. Together we smirk at the immaturity of Eduardo.

No, says Claudia. The fishermen. Tell us the part—

The girls, Luis says, speaking over Claudia, they are the best in all of Colombia. They wear skirts up to here, like on MTV, and boots up to here, and it is not like the country, where the *autodefensas* will shoot them for it. They are taller and whiter and have beautiful teeth and can talk about real things. Nothing like here.