



“Enchantment”

by Andrew Lam

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edited by Annick Smith and Susan O’Connor

When I was six or seven, and living in Dalat, a small town in Vietnam’s central highlands, my mother told me that my umbilical cord was buried in the garden. Afterward, I walked among the guava trees, daffodils, and overgrown lantana bushes in wonder and awe.

Not long after this, I witnessed Mrs. Lau, the wife of our servant, whose family lived in the small compound in the back of our villa, dragging herself out of bed only a few hours after giving birth to bury her newborn’s umbilical cord in that same garden. Something in her mysterious gestures among the grasses, flowers, and trees—the mumbling of prayers, the burning of joss sticks, and the offerings of mangoes and rice—stirred a deep sense of belonging in me.

I was part of the land, and it was part of me. Which is to say, our ways were very, very old and I lived once in awe of that hallowed land, gripped in its powers.

Where ties are permanent and traditions practiced daily, and where the land still holds one’s imagination, there exists a deep sense of mystery and enchantment. It is 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. A butterfly that lands on your shoulder at night may be a sign that your long dead grandfather has come for a visit. The wind that blows through your window that topples; the old vase portends a bad omen; someone close to you had died.

I can still see myself as a pious child climbing that desk above which was the family altar. In it, faced black-and-white photos of the dead stared out into our living room from high above. It was my role to put incense in the bronze urn. The smoke wafted amidst solemn chants. There was a war then and we prayed for safety, for peace.

The Vietnamese word for country is *Đất Nước*: Land and Water, the combination of which is mud, the rice field. I remember standing in line before class with other classmates—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 debts must be paid by blood.” I had believed in the lyrics, every word, felt that shared patriotic fervor among my young, bright-eyed peers. We swore to protect the land. We swore to live and die on it.

But then, at the end of the Vietnam War, all that changed. The old way of life gone.

Indeed, nothing could have prepared me or my family for the mass exodus that followed the end of the Vietnam War. We fled; my family and I, in an army cargo plane with many other refugees. From the plane’s window I saw the land giving way to a hazy green sea and the border was suddenly porous.

I remember a refugee camp in Guam made of Khaki tents and barren ground and long lines for food, for rations. I remember adults weeping upon news of the fall of Saigon. I remember myself, curling up on the army cot, crying to sleep each night, wondering about my dogs and neighbors and classmates and cousins and, above all, the fate of my father, who had stayed behind. (He managed to escape by boat and made it to America a few months after us.)



Almost half a million fled Vietnam at the end of the war, followed by countless others out to sea.

When I reached America I was almost twelve years old and in a few years I had become someone else. I stopped praying to the dead, stopped believing in old fairy tales, stopped, for that matter, speaking Vietnamese altogether.

The short version is that I stopped wanting to remember—not that I could forget—that lost homeland, no longing to mourn who we used to be, what we used to own, and how we used to behave in the old world. I couldn't bear the enormity of loss. None of it had helped me in the new world, so it seemed to me, and in fact my memories were like a heavy stone around my neck—they threatened to drown me each night. Often nostalgia renders many an exile helpless; failing to overcome his grief, his losses, he becomes an enemy of history.

Our first home in America was a crowded apartment at the end of Mission Street in Daly City, shared with my aunt's family who fled after us. In it the smell of incense wafted at the new makeshift altar and in it echoed adults' voices arguing and reminiscing. Vietnamese was spoken there, often in whispers, and occasionally they exploded in heated exchanges when the crowded conditions became too much to bear.

Vietnam, the lost country, ruled that apartment. It ruled in the form of two grandmothers praying in their separate corners. It ruled in the form of my mother's muffled cries late at night when she thought no one was awake. It ruled in the quiet way my father watched the evening news each night, his eyes glued to the images of people sailing out of our homeland seeking freedom and shelter, the ones Walter Cronkite called the "tragic boat people."

To stave off the past, my cousins and I would escape to the nearby library. Or else we would walk the hills behind our house. Or we would watch *Popeye the Sailor* and *Scooby-Doo* and *The Monkees* and laugh at *The Carol Burnett Show* and "ooh" and "ahh" at the amazing feats of *The Six Million Dollar Man*. We practiced our English. We played along with *Let's Make a Deal*. We recited commercial jingles—

My bologna has a first name, it's O-S-C-A-R

My bologna has a second name, it's M-A-Y-E-R

We pretended amnesia and saved ourselves from grief.

After all, if I was old enough to remember Vietnam, I was also young enough to embrace America, to let it seep into my dreams, bend my tongue, define my sense of humor, my outlook, let it feed my vision of the future. I was willing to be reshaped by newness.

Even my voice shattered upon speaking English, having gone through puberty a few months after coming to America. English, I felt, was changing me inside out.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" Mr. K., the eighth grade English teacher, asked. Such an American question. But I did not hesitate. "I want to become a movie star," I answered, and he laughed.

Perhaps I understood it without fully knowing that to swear allegiance to the lost homeland was to bond to an exile identity dictated by impossible longings. Indeed, the Vietnamese refugee child learns quickly that there is no returning, that he, like his family, is an exile and an enemy of history; that he must venture into the new world alone, as he, being young



and embracing newness, is a better navigator than his parents. I understood that in order to have any control over my life I had better embrace the American narrative. I needed to go down that road as fast and as furiously as I could, betraying memories, and go wherever it would take me.

And it's not just me, of course, who changed. My father, after twenty-five years in the South Vietnamese army, got an MBA and became a banker. My siblings, too, found their American Dreams, moved into well-placed professions in American society. Even my traditional mother became an accountant and found humor in it—an upper-class woman of the old world selling earthenware for an import-export company. Even my paternal grandmother, until a stroke put her in a convalescent home, studied English into her midseventies.

My community transformed too. The diaspora sent a people scurrying and subsisting elsewhere but in time we became a global tribe. Soon enough many prospered. We bought houses, found jobs, opened restaurants, built malls, temples, and churches, owned our own TV and radio programs and newspapers. Ours is a community whose roots burrowed, slowly but deeply, into the new loam.

If exile is spiritual amputation, then the pangs of longing and loss are dulled by the necessities of living and by the lorry of newfound status and wealth. And the refugee-turned-immigrant (a psychological transition) becomes a naturalized US citizen (more or less a transition of convenience) and finds his memories and longings insist a little less as he zooms down the freeway toward a glorious chimerical cityscape to work each morning.

How did this happen? Perhaps only a loser knows real freedom. Forced outside of history, away from home and hearth, the migrant can choose to remake himself: one night, America seeps in, and out slowly goes the Vietnamese soul of sorrow.

Some years ago a friend who worked for the United Nations at the Palawan refugee camp in the Philippines sent me a poem he found carved on a stone under a tamarind tree. Written by an unknown Vietnamese boat person, it tells how to escape tragedy. "Your mind is like a radio that you can dial to a different voice. It depends on you. So do not keep our mind always tuned to sorrow. If you want, just change the channel." It occurred to me that I, too, switched that dial in my teen years.

As did my family: didn't I see America invade the household when the dinner conversation in our new home leaned slowly but surely toward real estate and escrow, toward jobs and cars and GPAs, and over time to vacation plans to Europe and Disneyland—the language of the American Dream? Exile identity quietly slips away in America, giving in to the immigrant optimism.

The traumas of the initial expulsion and the exodus and memories of reeducation camps under communist rules, thirst and starvation on the high seas, years languishing in refugee camps, the horror of Thai pirates and unforgiving storms are slowly replaced by the jubilation of a newfound status and, for some, enormous wealth. A community that initially saw itself as living in exile, as survivors of some historical blight, gradually changed in its self-assessment. It began to see itself as an immigrant community, as a thriving Little Saigon, with all sorts of make-it-rich narratives.

And so, in between, the boy who once wandered in his mother's enchanted garden of Dalat and the man who writes these words sometimes ruled by the primacy of his childhood emotion, has become emboldened by his own process of individualization. se words witnessed 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 who once cried singing the Vietnamese national anthem had believed the borders, like the Great Wall of China, were real demarcations, their integrity not to be disputed. The man discovered that borders have always been porous. The boy was once overwhelmed by the tragedy that has fallen upon his people, resenting history for robbing him and his family of home and hearth and national identity. The man, though still sometimes ruled by the primacy of his childhood emotions, has become emboldened by his own process of individualization.

Many years passed.

I didn't become a doctor like my mother had wanted. The youngest member of my family, I rebelled. After I graduated from UC Berkeley with a biochemistry degree and started working with a team of cancer researchers at Cal, I was suddenly plagued with a deep yearning to make sense out of my Vietnamese memories. My fledgling scientific career thus came to an abrupt end: two years into research I put down the test tube, picked up the pen, and began to write. I struggled and, after some years, became a bona fide journalist and writer. I traveled the world.

But what of the old enchantment?

If I am American now, this much is true also: were it not for the Vietnamese people, their suffering, their tribulations, my American individuality would be shallow. In a sense, writing about the past makes me the kind of American that I'd like to become, someone who owns his past rather than flees from it.

Indeed, in adulthood and as a writer, I grew intrigued about my own inheritance, the old land-bound ethos, the archaic rituals, and my childhood vision in my mother's garden of long ago, that first sense of wonder and awe, the war and the tragedies that befell my people. I hunger for the lost enchantment. I hunger for memories.

Edward Said, the cultural critic, once suggested that if one wishes to transcend his provincial and national limits, one should not reject attachments to the past but work through them. Irrecoverable, the past must be mourned and remembered and assimilated. To truly grieve the loss of the nation in the robbed history of a vanished people, and through the task of art, through the act of imagination, that old umbilical cord, long buried, could be unearthed and transmuted into a new transpacific verse, a new living tapestry.

So I wrote and wrote.

A child forced to flee. The long line for food under a punishing sun. People weeping themselves to sleep. The family altar, where faded photographs of the dead stared out forlornly, the incense still burning but the living gone. A way of life stolen, a people scattered, uprooted, a way of life gone, all gone.

And I began to go back.

The man who sees the world with its many dimensions simultaneously can be a blessed man if he practices alchemy. To be defined by incongruous history is not necessarily an impediment these days. A border-crosser, the multilingualist builds bridges to otherwise disconnected, seemingly opposed ideas and civilizations. He takes his reference point across time zones and often from two or three different continents. Old traditions revive, transformed: Grandma's old recipes turn into new-world fusion dishes; the traditional zither plays jazz songs;



memories of war and exodus become—in another language, another country—poetry and novels.

I once met a woman in Belgium who lived in a castle. She had been a boat person. She and her sister, close to death from starvation and thirst on a crowded boat, were saved by a Belgian merchant ship, and they ended up living in the basement of a church in a town an hour by train outside of Brussels. One day the local baron saw her while praying there. He fell in love. They married. Now she's a baroness living in a castle with two children of noble blood. Listening to her story one summer evening many years ago while eating her Vietnamese cooking in the castle's gigantic kitchen where once deer and boars were roasted for the local nobility, I remember thinking to myself: there's tragedy but also marvel for those who cross the border. And who is to say the old enchantment is lost?

Instead, it has been synthesized. My sense of home these days seems to have less to do with geography than with imagination and memories. Likewise, I no longer see my identity as a fixed thing, but something open ended.

Home? Home is human connections, ambition, imagination, and memories. And it dwells in particularities: I live in San Francisco, but I am connected to different parts of the world. I have relatives in Ottawa, Paris, Hanoi, Saigon, Miami; friends in Rio, Dallas, New York, and yes, even Dalat. Over time, I've learned to navigate and live comfortably with these multiple nodes of connection, crossing back and forth over the hyphen that connects dissimilar spheres, different sensibilities and languages and practices, different senses of the self.

And more: Home becomes anywhere and everywhere, its logistics translated into a beatific vision of freedom. I feel most at home when I have a sense of direction, a purpose. If my work, my words, evoke enchantment, then I am home. I carry worlds within me; home is portable, if one is in commune with one's soul.