A Refugee Again

VU TRAN

When I was younger, I never thought of myself as a refugee. In my mind, I was an immigrant. A Vietnamese-American. A permanent foreigner with U.S. citizenship. A refugee felt like a thing of the past, a provisional status I once held that suggested vulnerability, inferiority, alienness—everything I wanted to remove from my idea of myself.

I arrived in America at the age of five, too young to appreciate my own perilous journey here. I quickly forgot the six days my mother and sister and I spent at sea, on a fishing boat with ninety people. I quickly forgot the deserted Malaysian island where we lived for four months, in a refugee camp of thousands. And then there was my first time on a plane, headed for Oklahoma, and my first time meeting my father, five years after he was forced to flee Vietnam without us. I only recently remembered how for many years he seemed a stranger to me, how I felt like we were intruders in his life.

Growing up in Oklahoma further clouded this past. I was too immersed in white America to focus on anything but the need to look and act like those around me. I was too cocooned in safety to recognize how far I had come from my prior state of need and trauma, or how close that state would always be to me.

It’s only in the past few years that I’ve begun calling myself a refugee. I suspect my own maturation as a writer has had something to do with this. You can’t write meaningfully or honestly about anything, even things that have nothing to do with your own life, if you haven’t yet confronted who you are. My refugee experience does not define who I am, but for better or for worse it has informed how I see myself, how I see how others see me, and how I want to be seen.

So that begs the essential question, What is a refugee? It’s here that I get stuck. The American version alone offers a myriad of experiences that differ vastly by country, culture, and conflict of origin; and also by time, personal as well as historical. Ask this question to a Holocaust survivor from New York, and then ask an Iranian teenager who’s growing up Muslim in the South. Chances
are, their answers cannot be confined to a standard definition, not to their satisfaction. Chances are, they’ll tell you a story instead, and even then their stories might only capture literal experience. How do you go beyond facts and memories and get at what continues to shape the refugee long after refuge has been found? I’ve discovered it’s more useful to ask, “What is a refugee like—not only to those who see her but to the refugee herself?” To this end, I have an ongoing list.

In many ways, a refugee is like an orphan. She might literally be bereft of parents, and of siblings too, but she is bereft more so of her extended family: not just grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins, but also the familial bonds of her homeland, her native community and culture and customs. Stripped of agency from the moment she fled that homeland and dependent now on those who can protect her, she is frequently seen as childish, no matter how old she actually is. As a result, she is pitied for what she has suffered, whether real or imagined on the part of those pitying her, and the pity will diminish the heroism of her journey and all the choices she made to survive and complete it. At the same time, as is inevitable in the act of compassion, that same pity can become a form of undue respect and admiration. People will listen to her story and sigh, offering her an exemption from judgment she might not deserve or want at all.

Like an orphan, if she’s fortunate, she is adopted into a new family, but that requires an adjustment and perhaps a transformation of who she is. In many instances, in joining this new family and assuming this new identity, she will partly if not entirely forget her old ones. And on the inside, away from the eyes of those who see her only as a refugee and especially if she arrived at this status as a child, she will go on to feel as though she is not whole in some way. Her own narrative of who she is will feel incomplete because she will keep wondering where she came from, what she has lost, and what she would have become if that loss had never befallen her.

But being whole is not the refugee’s sole aspiration. Wholeness suggests singularity and consistency, and the imperative of acculturation demands personal fluidity, the ability to be more than one person. Which is why a refugee is also like an actor. She knows she must assimilate in order to earn acceptance, to survive and prosper, but the act of assimilation is inevitably a performance—not of a false or superficial identity necessarily, but of one more legible to her audience. She becomes versions of herself, donning the new clothes and accessories, the new habits and modes of behavior that hew to the various settings of her new life. She must speak a different language as well as adopt a different way of talking and expressing herself. She might even change her
name. Often, she is one person at home and another person at work or at school or simply in public. Her family and her people call her one name while everyone else calls her a wildly different one, though at some point she will have trouble determining which name is her true name. Over time, the new identity bleeds into the original one, or might even subsume it until what she has assimilated becomes the dominant reality of who she is. In other words, she comes to live the role that she was obliged to play, because what she’s been doing this entire time is interpreting a script forced on her by the new culture or by members of her own people who already successfully performed it. Her audience will either embrace or reject her, and sometimes they’ll do both simultaneously, or they will act like they embrace her while deep inside, perhaps without knowing it, they’ll judge the performance insufficient.

For those who can never quite accept her, a refugee is like a ghost. To them, she’s come from another world, an obscure and incomprehensible world, and now resides in the shadows of this one—an alien entity, an intruder. She can be invisible even though her presence is felt. If she is seen, she might very well be seen through, a specter both present and distant, both acknowledged and denied. She can be spoken of in whispers but also caricatured in the stories that contain her. She can be feared, even when she is not there, sometimes irrationally so, more significant and sinister than any version of herself that she could have conjured. And in that sense, she can be mythologized. She is seen as a manifestation of the past and as a dark harbinger of the future, though it can be argued that the anxiety she inspires is little more than a projection of the beholder’s personal fears, deeply rooted in religious, political, and cultural beliefs that are themselves a mythos. That’s all to say that a refugee’s outsize effect on people, on those who cannot accept her, is motivated more often than not by the imagination. What they feel, though, is not imaginary. It is real and consequential. If anything, it is imagined into being. And that space between what is real and imaginary is ultimately where the refugee resides. Like a ghost, her state of being—to others and even to herself—is ambiguous. Her identity, her goals and desires and intentions, her place in the world she now inhabits: they are all as hazy as those memories of the world she was once born into.

These ghost-like contours of the refugee—this is what I didn’t recognize until recently. I had moved on from the circumstances that brought me to America and into the life it had given me and continues to give me. But America itself never quite moves on. The country of refuge never does, regularly stirred by new conflicts that remind it of the old ones. It keeps remembering your tragic origins, no matter how successfully you’ve embraced and achieved the promises it
originally offered. On the street, it might no longer recognize the refugee in you, but the tide of American history continually washes new versions of you onto these shores, and their shadow is your shadow too.

But why would you want America to forget? This, I suppose, is the real question I’ve been asking myself.

Throughout elementary school, I remember things I would say in class that would begin with the phrase, “In my country.” I was referring to Vietnam, not America, and I was motivated by an innocent desire to offer my teacher and classmates exotic information. If someone mentioned an argument they’d had with their father, I would say that “in my country” you’d be spanked for talking back to an older sibling, let alone to your parents. If we were discussing the Civil War, I would say that “in my country” we’d had five or six of our own over the centuries, including the one that brought me here—something my father once told me.

What I was really doing, unknowingly, was preserving my connection to my first homeland and expressing to the class what I had lost. At an even deeper level, my need to express this was my intimation that my family and I had no choice in that loss.

By the time I got to high school, I rarely made such statements in class or anywhere else. That need was no longer there, overtaken no doubt by my successful assimilation into my second homeland. I’d become officially more American than Vietnamese, a fact my parents still mourn to this day. It wasn’t out of ignorance of my Vietnamese heritage or a lack of curiosity or self-identification. It was simply a matter of time and place: I had discovered and cultivated all my desires, aversions, and beliefs here.

But then, at nineteen, I returned to Vietnam for the first time with my family. Peering through the window as our plane flew into Saigon, I felt a sudden familiarity that I found again in the heat and farraginous smells of the city, in the throng of life on the streets, in the people who at once resembled me and behaved nothing like me. For two weeks, it was the shock of recognition amid aliens, over and over.

I remember a conversation during that trip with my aunt, my mother’s oldest sister, who had helped her raise me and my sister for the five years we were without our father. When we first left, she feared she would never see us again and didn’t know if distance or death would be the reason. Even after our survival was confirmed, she mourned us for years and ended up naming her first daughter after my sister. She told me how stubborn and preternaturally smart my sister was back then and how people used to mistake me for a girl because of my
delicate long hair. She recalled when I was two years old and my uncle—the only boy among five girls—drowned in a swimming accident. He was seventeen. I had been his constant companion, and the day after his funeral, I sat playing on the kitchen floor and sang a song he once taught me. I knew none of these things, except for his death. She recounted it all to me while smiling, a willed and hard-earned nostalgia, born from pain. In her smile, I confronted the most fundamental truth about exile: it is never yours alone. No matter how young or unaware I was when I left, I had had another life in Vietnam, and although I had moved on in America, the people from that life had never moved on from me. Even as I sat there beside my aunt as a nineteen-year-old man, the young boy I once was remained a ghost in her life, and ghosts never die.
THE DISPLACED

REFUGEE WRITERS ON REFUGEE LIVES

EDITED BY

VIET THANH NGUYEN

PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF THE SYMPATHIZER

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