



Longing, Denise Duong

ON TRUE WAR STORIES

VIET THANH NGUYEN

There's no such thing
as a good war story.

War is hell. Like many Americans and people the world over, I enjoy war stories that depend on what seems to be a disturbing idea. I have a personal stake in such stories, having been born in Vietnam but raised, or made, as it were, in America. A war brought me from over there to over here, an experience I share with millions of my fellow Americans. Sometimes I wonder whether my circumstances, or what my parents endured, can be called a war story, and how that story can be told. In “How to Tell a True War Story,” from *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien says:

War is hell, but that’s not the half of it, because war is mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. The truths are contradictory.

I have only experienced the half of war that is not any fun. Perhaps that is why thrilling war stories captivate me, the ones with “gore galore,” in the words of art critic Lucy Lippard. But as good as those war stories are, perhaps they are not actually true.

One of my early encounters with a true war story was reading Larry Heinemann’s *Close Quarters*, which shocked me when I was perhaps eleven or twelve. Near the end of this Vietnam War novel, the young all-American soldier who is the narrator puts a gun to the head of a Vietnamese prostitute named Claymore Face. He gives her a choice: — him and his friends or get blown away. The novel renders no judgment on this rape, leaving me alone with my feelings, without the comfort provided by the author telling me that this was wrong. I could not forgive Heinemann for scarring me with such an ugly scene until I wrote a novel myself decades later. This is when I realized that

some things are so nasty the writer should simply show them as they are. The ugliness is, and must be, unforgettable.

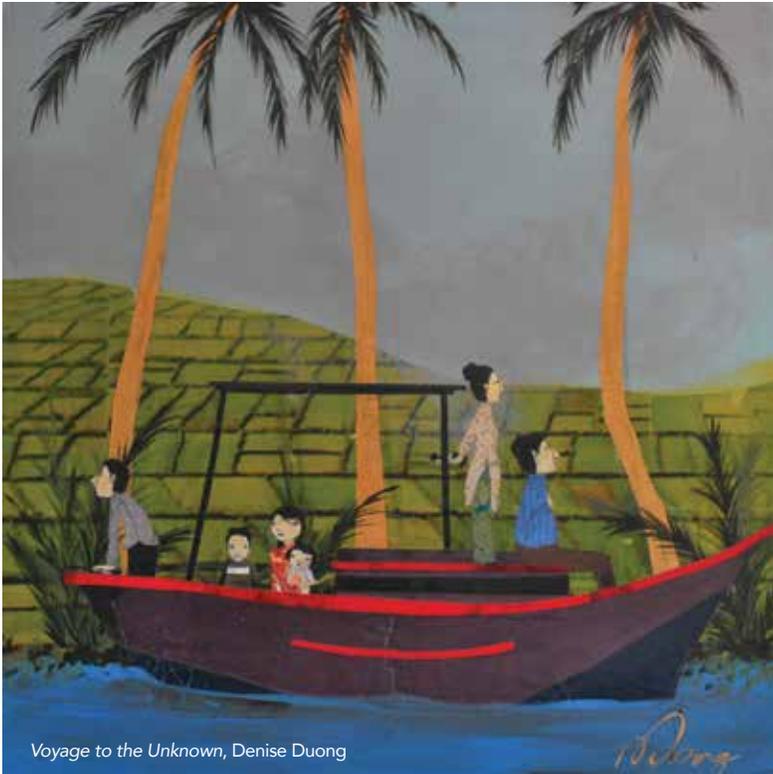
Still. It did not matter if Heinemann’s sympathies might lie with Claymore Face, because the story belonged to the American soldier. I dimly realized a few things that would take me years to articulate. First: better to be victimizer than victim. That’s why America’s Vietnam War stories, which often dwell on the bad things that Americans have done, depend on turning the Vietnamese into bit actors. As any movie star will attest, it is preferable to take center stage as antihero than take to the wings as virtuous extra. This is why bleak Vietnam War stories still do well in an America that sometimes does its hardest to deny its sometimes nasty behavior. Americans applaud these stories and successors like *Zero Dark Thirty*, for even if they depict Americans torturing others, their audiences know it is far more interesting to torture than be tortured. Or, as Milton’s Satan observed, better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven.

The second thing I learned from Heinemann: rape was hard to account for in a certain kind of war story, the one that audiences call “good.” If, in a good war story, war makes you a man, does rape make you a woman? If women are unmade by rape (as are the male victims of rape), *Close Quarters* shows that the kind of man made by rape was not the kind anybody wants around. That’s why Americans welcome home their soldiers without wanting to think too much about what they might have done over there. Killing is not the problem. No one is concerned that Clint Eastwood can celebrate, in his film, an American sniper who killed one hundred and sixty people in a rather intimate way, seeing their faces through his scope. But rape? Look away. The other side does it, not us.

The last thing I learned from Claymore Face was that she did and did not

have my face. She was Vietnamese and a gook. So was I in the eyes of some Americans, a host of Hollywood screenwriters, and directors who had killed nearly as many Vietnamese on screen as had died in the war. And yet I was also an American. People like me, the Vietnamese who fled to the United States after the war’s end, were living proof of the success of one of America’s greatest desires, to win the hearts and minds of others. America’s ability to do so was the central message of John Wayne’s propaganda movie set in Vietnam, *The Green Berets*. The wrong-headedness of this desire is inadvertently shown in the infamous final shot. Wayne, the American soldier, walks into the sunset with a young Vietnamese orphan in need of his paternal benevolence. The sun is setting in the South China Sea, but that sea lies east of Vietnam. Americans cannot see straight sometimes, which is why many thought that Iraqis would treat their invaders as liberators, even though Americans themselves would never do any such thing.

I heard a different kind of war story as I grew up among Vietnamese refugees. There was the one about a man who held up a mom-and-pop shop in a small Vietnamese town with a hand grenade. Or the one about a mother who fled that small town when the communists arrived, taking her sons but leaving behind her adopted teenage daughter to take care of the shop, believing she would soon return. Mother and daughter would not see each other again for twenty years. Or what about the time that mother and her husband opened another shop in San Jose, California, and were shot on Christmas Eve in an armed robbery? Or how they cried when they received letters announcing the deaths of their parents in their now lost homeland? Or how they worked twelve-hour days every day of the year except for Christmas, Easter, and Tet?



Voyage to the Unknown, Denise Duong

Being acclimated to hell is part of our disorder.

Those were my parents. Their stories are typical of refugees, although when I mention them to other Americans, an uncomfortable silence usually ensues, since these things did not happen to most Americans. But are not these stories also war stories? For many people, and according to O'Brien's definition, no. There is nothing fun about losing home, business, family, health, sanity, or country, some or all of which happened to so many of the Vietnamese people I know. You don't get a medal for these kinds of things, much less a belated parade or memorial, and hardly ever a movie. What you get are war stories told about the soldiers who came to your country to save you from communism, just as we are now getting war stories about the soldiers who went to Iraq and Afghanistan. Heinemann's novel was part of a whole wave of stories that refought the Vietnam War on page and screen. These stories are how most global audiences know this war, the first war in history where the loser gets to write the history for the world. While the Vietnamese have written history, too, their stories stand little chance against the shock and awe

of the American military-cinema-industrial complex. But as novelist Gina Apostol says of this complex: "Does it not suggest not only an economic order but also a psychiatric disorder?"

This disorder thrives on the excitement of good war stories, which, like O'Brien, overlook at least two things that war happens to be. First: war is profitable. Few storytellers want to discuss this because the fact that war makes an enormous amount of money is either disturbing to most Americans or not disturbing at all, due to the aforementioned disorder. Second: war is a bore. Photographer Tod Papageorge's book, *American Sports, 1970: Or How We Spent the War in Vietnam*, shows how trivial the war was for many Americans. The photographs simply capture Americans playing in sporting events or watching them. Only the last photograph of the War Memorial in Indianapolis acknowledges the war, with these words on the facing page: "In 1970, 4,221 American troops were killed in Vietnam." Even as American soldiers died abroad, life went on at home. So it is with America's wars in the Middle East, akin to a sporting event for those Americans not directly involved, which is to say the overwhelming majority. Papageorge's photos are true war stories of life inside the war machine for civilians, most of whom are not paying much attention, if at all, to the wars fought in their name. What is most disturbing about his photos is the implication that if war is hell, then this is what hell looks like, Americans enjoying seemingly innocent pastimes.

Being acclimated to hell is part of our disorder. But listen carefully. Can't you hear the dull hum of the war machine we live in, the white noise of a massive mechanism oiled by banalities, bolted together by triviality, and enabled by passive consent? In "The Brother Who Went to Vietnam," from her book *China Men*, Maxine Hong Kingston writes:

Whenever we ate a candy bar, when we drank grape juice, bought bread (ITT makes Wonder bread), wrapped food in plastic, made a phone call, put money in the bank, cleaned the oven, washed with soap, turned on the electricity, refrigerated food, cooked it, ran a computer, drove a car, rode an airplane, sprayed with insecticide, we were

supporting the corporations that made tanks and bombers, napalm, defoliants, and bombs.

For the carpet bombing.

From carpets to carpet bombing, war is so woven into society's fabric that it is almost impossible for a citizen not to find war underfoot even at home.

For many, this is not a good war story, but a bad one they would rather avoid. This story says that all war is, in a sense, total war. Opening a refrigerator is a true war story. So is paying one's taxes. Complicity is the truest war story of all, which is why a blood-drenched movie like *Apocalypse Now* tells only half the true war story. It is about the heart of darkness over there, in the jungle where the white man discovers that he, too, is a savage, the heart of darkness beating within him. But the other half of the true war story would show that the heart of darkness is also where we reside, over here, all around us. Americans do not wish to confront this domestic horror directly, which is why they substitute for it stories of zombies and serial killers and the like. Fictional violence and monstrous horror are easier to stomach than understanding how opening our refrigerator or watching a football game connects us to war, which is not thrilling at all. The true war story is not only that war is hell, a statement that never prevented us from going to war but has always gotten us to run to the movie theater or pick up a book. The true war story is also that war is normal, which is why we are always going to war. War is boring, a bad story most people do want to hear. War involves all of us, and that is more discomfiting than any horror story over here or blood-and-guts story over there.

The fact that my family of refugees has become living proof of the American Dream is also a true war story, my

parents wealthy, my brother a doctor on a White House committee, and myself a professor and novelist. To many Americans, we are evidence that the war was worth it, since it gave us the chance to be better Americans than many Americans. But if we are a testament to the immigrant story, we are only here because the United States fought a war that killed three million Vietnamese (not counting the three million others that died in neighboring Laos and Cambodia during the war and immediately after). Filipinos are here because of the U.S. war that killed a million people in the Philippines in 1898. Koreans are here because of the Korean War that killed three million. We can argue about the blame, but the list goes on, as Junot Díaz also understands. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, he tells us:

Just as the U.S. was ramping up its involvement in Vietnam, LBJ launched an illegal invasion of the Dominican Republic (April 28, 1965). (Santo Domingo was Iraq before Iraq was Iraq). A smashing military success for the U.S., and many of the same units and intelligence teams that took part in the 'democratization' of Santo Domingo were immediately shipped off to Saigon.

Many Americans forgot or never knew this true war story. If Americans think of the arrival of Dominicans to America at all, they most likely think of it as an immigrant story.

But what if we understood immigrant stories to be war stories? And what if we understood that war stories disturb even more when they are not about soldiers, when they show us how normal war is, how war touches and transforms everything and everybody, including, most of all, civilians? War stories that thrill may be true, but they only make war more

alluring, something that happens somewhere else, over there. Another kind of true war story reminds us of something much more uncomfortable: that war begins, and ends, over here, with the support of citizens for the war machine, with the arrival of frightened refugees fleeing wars that we have instigated. Telling these kinds of stories, or learning to read, see, and hear boring stories as war stories, is an important way to treat the disorder of our military-industrial complex. Rather than being disturbed by the idea that war is hell, this complex thrives on it.

VIET THANH NGUYEN's novel *The Sympathizer* (Grove Atlantic, 2015) won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and other awards. His other books include *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2016), a finalist for the National Book Award in nonfiction. His newest book is a short story collection, *The Refugees* (Grove Press, 2017). This essay first appeared in "(Re)Collecting the Vietnam War" (*The Asian American Literary Review*, Fall 2015).

DENISE DUONG is a Vietnamese-American artist residing in Oklahoma City. She has a deep love for nature, adventure, and exploration, which she lives through art, one stroke at a time, one layer at a time. Her mixed media works use paper, acrylic, and a variety of printing techniques. deniseduongart.com

EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- Visit Nguyen's website to link to essays, interviews, and lectures. vietnguyen.info/home
- *First Days Story Project: Voices of the Vietnam Refugee Experience*, a collaboration of *American Experience* (PBS) and StoryCorps. Audio narratives and photos documenting experiences of Vietnamese American refugees and Vietnam War veterans. pbs.org [search: American Experience, *Last Days in Vietnam*]
- "How Vietnamese Refugees Spent 40 Years Rejuvenating an Oklahoma City Neighborhood," Jacob McClelland, KGOU, Dec. 30, 2015. Vietnamese refugees who immigrated to OKC and created a vibrant Asian District of restaurants and businesses. kgou.org