

*THE  
REFUGEES*

*VIET THANH NGUYEN*



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For all refugees, everywhere



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I wrote this book for the ghosts, who, because  
they're outside of time, are the only ones with time.

Roberto Bolaño, *Antwerp*

It is not your memories which haunt you.

It is not what you have written down.

It is what you have forgotten, what you must forget.

What you must go on forgetting all your life.

James Fenton, "A German Requiem"

## ***BLACK-EYED WOMEN***

**F**ame would strike someone, usually the kind that healthy-minded people would not wish upon themselves, such as being kidnapped and kept prisoner for years, suffering humiliation in a sex scandal, or surviving something typically fatal. These survivors needed someone to help write their memoirs, and their agents might eventually come across me. “At least your name’s not on anything,” my mother once said. When I mentioned that I would not mind being thanked in the acknowledgments, she said, “Let me tell you a story.” It would be the first time I heard this story, but not the last. “In our homeland,” she went on, “there was a reporter who said the government tortured the people in prison. So the government does to him exactly what he said they did to others. They send him away and no one ever sees him again. That’s what happens to writers who put their names on things.”

By the time Victor Devoto chose me, I had resigned myself to being one of those writers whose names did not appear on book covers. His agent had given him a book that I had ghostwritten, its ostensible author the father of a boy who had shot and killed several people at his school. “I identify with the father’s guilt,” Victor said to me. He was the sole survivor of an airplane crash, one hundred and seventy-three others having perished, including his wife and children. What was left of him appeared on all the talk shows, his body there but not much else. The voice was a soft monotone, and the eyes, on the occasions when they looked up, seemed to hold within them the silhouettes of mournful people. His publisher said that it was urgent that he finish his story while audiences still remembered the tragedy, and this was my preoccupation on

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the day my dead brother returned to me.

My mother woke me while it was still dark outside and said, "Don't be afraid."

Through my open door, the light from the hallway stung. "Why would I be afraid?"

When she said my brother's name, I did not think of my brother. He had died long ago. I closed my eyes and said I did not know anyone by that name, but she persisted. "He's here to see us," she said, stripping off my covers and tugging at me until I rose, eyes half-shut. She was sixty-three, moderately forgetful, and when she led me to the living room and cried out, I was not surprised. "He was right here," she said, kneeling by her floral armchair as she felt the carpet. "It's wet." She crawled to the front door in her cotton pajamas, following the trail. When I touched the carpet, it was damp. For a moment I twitched in belief, and the silence of the house at four in the morning felt ominous. Then I noticed the sound of rainwater in the gutters, and the fear that had gripped my neck relaxed its hold. My mother must have opened the door, gotten drenched, then came back inside. I knelt by her as she crouched next to the door, her hand on the knob, and said, "You're imagining things."

"I know what I saw." Brushing my hand off her shoulder, she stood up, anger illuminating her dark eyes. "He walked. He talked. He wanted to see you."

"Then where is he, Ma? I don't see anyone."

"Of course you don't." She sighed, as if I were the one unable to grasp the obvious. "He's a ghost, isn't he?"

Ever since my father died a few years ago, my mother and I lived together politely. We shared a passion for words, but I preferred the silence of writing while she loved to talk. She constantly fed me gossip and stories, the only kind I enjoyed concerning my father back when he was a man I did not know, young and happy. Then came stories of terror like the one

about the reporter, the moral being that life, like the police, enjoys beating people now and again. Finally there was her favorite kind, the ghost story, of which she knew many, some firsthand.

“Aunt Six died of a heart attack at seventy-six,” she told me once, twice, or perhaps three times, repetition being her habit. I never took her stories seriously. “She lived in Vung Tau and we were in Nha Trang. I was bringing dinner to the table when I saw Aunt Six sitting there in her nightgown. Her long gray hair, which she usually wore in a chignon, was loose and fell over her shoulders and in her face. I almost dropped the dishes. When I asked her what she was doing here, she just smiled. She stood up, kissed me, and turned me toward the kitchen. When I turned around again to see her, she was gone. It was her ghost. Uncle confirmed it when I called. She had passed away that morning, in her own bed.”

Aunt Six died a good death, according to my mother, at home and with family, her ghost simply making the rounds to say farewell. My mother repeated her aunt’s story while we sat at the kitchen table the morning she claimed to have seen my brother, her son. I had brewed her a pot of green tea and taken her temperature despite her protests, the result being, as she had predicted, normal. Waving the thermometer at me, she said he must have disappeared because he was tired. After all, he had just completed a journey of thousands of miles across the Pacific.

“So how did he get here?”

“He swam.” She gave me a pitying look. “That’s why he was wet.”

“He was an excellent swimmer,” I said, humoring her. “What did he look like?”

“Exactly the same.”

“It’s been twenty-five years. He hasn’t changed at all?”

“They always look exactly the same as when you last saw them.”

I remembered how he looked the last time, and any humor that I felt vanished. The stunned look on his face, the open eyes that did not flinch even with the splintered board of the boat's deck pressing against his cheek—I did not want to see him again, assuming there was something or someone to see. After my mother left for her shift at the salon, I tried to go back to sleep but could not. His eyes stared at me whenever I closed my own. Only now was I conscious of not having remembered him for months. I had long struggled to forget him, but just by turning a corner in the world or in my mind I could run into him, my best friend. From as far back as I can recall, I could hear his voice outside our house, calling my name. That was my signal to follow him down our village's lanes and pathways, through jackfruit and mango groves to the dikes and fields, dodging shattered palm trees and bomb craters. At the time, this was a normal childhood.

Looking back, however, I could see that we had passed our youth in a haunted country. Our father had been drafted, and we feared that he would never return. Before he left, he had dug a bomb shelter next to our home, a sandbagged bunker whose roof was braced by timber. Even though it was hot and airless, dank with the odor of the earth and alive with the movement of worms, we often went there to play as little children. When we were older, we went to study and tell stories. I was the best student in my school, excellent enough for my teacher to teach me English after hours, lessons I shared with my brother. He, in turn, told me tall tales, folklore, and rumors. When airplanes shrieked overhead and we huddled with my mother in the bunker, he whispered ghost stories into my ear to distract me. Except, he insisted, they were not ghost stories. They were historical accounts from reliable sources, the ancient crones who chewed betel nut and spat its red juice while squatting on their haunches in the market, tending coal stoves or overseeing baskets of wares. Our land's confirmed residents, they said, included the upper half of a Korean lieutenant, launched by a mine into the branches of a rubber tree; a scalped black American floating in the creek not far

from his downed helicopter, his eyes and the exposed half-moon of his brain glistening above the water; and a decapitated Japanese private groping through cassava shrubbery for his head. These invaders came to conquer our land and now would never go home, the old ladies said, cackling and exposing lacquered teeth, or so my brother told me. I shivered with delight in the gloom, hearing those black-eyed women with my own ears, and it seemed to me that I would never tell stories like those.

Was it ironic, then, that I made a living from being a ghostwriter? I posed the question to myself as I lay in bed in the middle of the day, but the women with their black eyes and black teeth heard me. You call what you have a life? Their teeth clacked as they laughed at me. I pulled the covers up to my nose, the way I used to do in my early years in America, when creatures not only lurked in the hallway but also roamed outside. My mother and father always peeked through the living room curtains before answering any knock, afraid of our young countrymen, boys who had learned about violence from growing up in wartime. “Don’t open the door for someone you don’t know,” my mother warned me, once, twice, three times. “We don’t want to end up like that family tied down at gunpoint. They burned the baby with cigarettes until the mother showed them where she hid her money.” My American adolescence was filled with tales of woe like this, all of them proof of what my mother said, that we did not belong here. In a country where possessions counted for everything, we had no belongings except our stories.

When knocking woke me, it was dark outside. My watch said 6:35 in the evening. The knock came again, gentle, tentative. Despite myself, I knew who it was. I had locked the bedroom door just in case, and now I pulled the covers over my head, my heart beating fast. I willed him to go away, but when he started rattling the doorknob, I knew I had no choice but to rise. The fine hairs of my body stood at attention with me as I watched the doorknob tremble with the pressure of his grip. I



reminded myself that he had given up his life for me. The least I could do was open the door.

He was bloated and pale, hair feathery, skin dark, clad in black shorts and a ragged gray T-shirt, arms and legs bony. The last time I had seen him, he was taller by a head; now our situations were reversed. When he said my name, his voice was hoarse and raspy, not at all like his adolescent alto. His eyes, though, were the same, curious, as were his lips, slightly parted, always prepared to speak. A purple bruise with undertones of black gleamed on his left temple, but the blood I remembered was gone, washed away, I suppose, by salt water and storms. Even though it was not raining, he was water-soaked. I could smell the sea on him, and worse, I could smell the boat, rancid with human sweat and excreta.

When he said my name, I trembled, but this was a ghost of someone whom I loved and would never harm, the kind of ghost who, my mother had said, would not harm me. "Come in," I said, which seemed to me the bravest thing I could say. Unmoved, he looked at the carpet on which he was dripping water. When I brought him a clean T-shirt and shorts, along with a towel, he looked at me expectantly until I turned around and let him change. The clothes were my smallest but still a size too large for him, the shorts extending to his knees, the T-shirt voluminous. I motioned him in, and this time he obeyed, sitting on my rumpled bed. He refused to meet my gaze, seemingly more fearful of me than I was of him. While he was still fifteen I was thirty-eight, no longer an exuberant tomboy, reluctant to talk unless I had a purpose, as was the case when I interviewed Victor. Being an author, even one of the third or fourth rank, involved an etiquette I could live up to. But what does one say to a ghost, except to ask why he was here? I was afraid of the answer, so instead I said, "What took you so long?"

He looked at my bare toes with their bare nails. Perhaps he sensed that I was not good with children. Motherhood was too intimate for me, as were relationships lasting more than one night.



“You had to swim. It takes a long time to go so far, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.” His mouth remained open, as if he wanted to say more but was uncertain of what to say or how to say it. Perhaps this apparition was the first consequence of what my mother considered my unnatural nature, childless and single. Perhaps he was not a figment of my imagination but a symptom of something wrong, like the cancer that killed my father. His was also a good death, according to my mother, surrounded by family at home, not like what happened to her son and, nearly, to me. Panic surged from that bottomless well within myself that I had sealed with concrete, and I was relieved to hear the front door opening. “Mother will want to see you,” I said. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

When we returned, we found only his wet clothes and the wet towel. She held up the gray T-shirt, the same as he had worn on the blue boat with the red eyes.

“Now you know,” my mother said. “Never turn your back on a ghost.”

The black shorts and gray T-shirt stank of brine and were heavy with more than just water. When I carried them to the kitchen, the weight of the clothes in my hands was the weight of evidence. I had seen him wear these clothes on dozens of occasions. I remembered them when the shorts were not black with grime but still pristine blue, when the shirt was not gray and ragged but white and neat. “Do you believe now?” my mother said, lifting the lid of the washing machine. I hesitated. Some people say that faith burns inside them, but my newfound faith was chilling to me. “Yes,” I said. “I believe.”

The machine hummed in the background as we sat for dinner at the kitchen table, the air anointed with star anise and ginger. “That’s how come it took him so many years,” my mother said, blowing onto her hot soup. Nothing had ever daunted her appetite or dented her cast-iron stomach, not even the events on the boat or the apparition of her son. “He swam

the entire distance.”

“Aunt Six lived hundreds of miles away and you saw her the same day.”

“Ghosts don’t live by our rules. Each ghost is different. Good ghosts, bad ghosts, happy ghosts, sad ghosts. Ghosts of people who die when they’re old, when they’re young, when they’re small. You think baby ghosts behave the same as grandfather ghosts?”

I knew nothing about ghosts. I had not believed in ghosts and neither did anyone else I knew except for my mother and Victor, who himself seemed spectral, the heat of grief rendering him pale and nearly translucent, his only color coming from a burst of uncombed red hair. Even with him the otherworldly came up only twice, once on the phone and once in his living room. Nothing had been touched since the day his family left for the airport, not even the sorrowful dust. I had the impression that the windows had not been opened since that day, as if he wanted to preserve the depleted air that his wife and children had breathed before they suffered their bad deaths, so far from home. “The dead move on,” he had said, coiled in his armchair, hands between his thighs. “But the living, we just stay here.”

These words opened his last chapter, the one I worked on after my mother went to sleep and I descended into the bright basement, illuminated with fluorescent tubes. I wrote one sentence, then paused to listen for a knock or steps on the stairway. My rhythm through the night was established, a few lines followed by a wait for something that did not come, the next day more of the same. The conclusion of Victor’s memoir was in sight when my mother came home from the nail salon with shopping bags from Chinatown, one full of groceries, the other with underwear, a pair of pajamas, blue jeans, a denim jacket, a pack of socks, knit gloves, a baseball cap. After stacking them next to his dried and ironed T-shirt and shorts, she said, “He can’t be wandering out in the cold with what you gave him, like a homeless person or some illegal immigrant.” When I said that I hadn’t thought of it that way, she snorted,

annoyed by my ignorance of the needs of ghosts. Only after dinner did she warm up again. Her mood had improved because instead of retreating to my basement as usual, I had stayed to watch one of the soap operas she rented by the armfuls, serials of beautiful Korean people snared in romantic tangles. "If we hadn't had a war," she said that night, her wistfulness drawing me closer, "we'd be like the Koreans now. Saigon would be Seoul, your father alive, you married with children, me a retired housewife, not a manicurist." Her hair was in curlers, and a bowl of watermelon seeds was in her lap. "I'd spend my days visiting friends and being visited, and when I died, a hundred people would come to my funeral. I'd be lucky if twenty people will come here, with you taking care of things. That frightens me more than anything. You can't even remember to take out the garbage or pay the bills. You won't even go outside to shop for groceries."

"I'd remember to take care of your soul."

"When would you hold the wake? When would the celebration of my death anniversary be? What would you say?"

"Write it down for me," I said. "What I'm supposed to say."

"Your brother would have known what to do," she said. "That's what sons are for."

To this I had no reply.

When he had still not appeared by eleven, my mother went to sleep. I descended to my basement once more and tried to write. Writing was entering into fog, feeling my way for a route from this world to the unearthly world of words, a route easier to find on some days than others. Lurking on my shoulder as I stumbled through the grayness was the parrot of a question, asking me how I lived and he died. I was younger and weaker, yet it was my brother we buried, letting him slip into the ocean without a shroud or a word from me. The wailing of my mother and the sobbing of my father rose in my memory, but neither drowned out my own silence. Now it was right to say a few words, to call him back as he must have

wanted, but I could not find them. Just when I thought another night would pass without his return, I heard the knock at the top of the stairs. I believe, I reminded myself. I believe that he would never harm me.

“Don’t knock,” I said when I opened the door. “It’s your home, too.”

He merely stared at me, and we lapsed into an awkward silence. Then he said, “Thank you.” His voice was stronger now, almost as high-pitched as I remembered, and this time he did not look away. He still wore my T-shirt and shorts, but when I showed him the clothes that my mother had bought, he said, “I don’t need those.”

“You’re wearing what I gave you.”

His silence went on for so long I thought he might not have heard me.

“We wear them for the living,” he said at last. “Not for us.”

I led him to the couch. “You mean ghosts?”

He sat down next to me, considering my question before answering.

“We always knew ghosts existed,” he said.

“I had my doubts.” I held his hand. “Why have you come back?”

His gaze was discomfiting. He had not blinked once.

“I haven’t come back,” he said. “I’ve come here.”

“You haven’t left this world yet?”

He nodded.

“Why not?”

Again he was silent. Finally he said, “Why do you think?”

I looked away. “I’ve tried to forget.”

“But you haven’t.”

“I can’t.”

I had not forgotten our nameless blue boat and it had not forgotten me, the red eyes painted on either side of its prow

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having never ceased to stare me down. After four uneventful days on a calm sea under blue skies and clear nights, islands at last came into view, black stitching on the faraway horizon. It was then that another ship appeared in the distance, aiming for us. It was swift and we were slow, burdened with more than a hundred people in a fishing boat meant to hold only a fishing boat's crew and a fishing boat's load of cold mackerel. My brother took me into the cramped engine room with its wheezing motor and used his pocketknife to slash my long hair into the short, jagged boy's cut I still wore. "Don't speak," he said. He was fifteen and I was thirteen. "You still sound like a girl. Now take off your shirt."

I always did as he told me, in this case shyly, even though he hardly glanced at me as he ripped my shirt into strips. He bound my barely noticeable breasts with the fabric, then took off his own shirt and buttoned me into it, leaving himself with just his ragged T-shirt. Then he smeared engine oil on my face and we huddled in the dark until the pirates came for us. These fishermen resembled our fathers and brothers, sinewy and brown, except that they wielded machetes and machine guns. We turned over our gold, watches, earrings, wedding bands, and jade. Then they seized the teenage girls and young women, a dozen of them, shooting a father and a husband who had protested. Everyone fell silent except those being dragged away, screaming and crying. I didn't know any of them, girls from other villages, and this made it easier for me to pray I would not be one of them as I pressed against my brother's arm. Only when the last of the girls had been thrown onto the deck of the pirate ship, the pirates climbing back on board after them, did I breathe again.

The last man to leave glanced at me in passing. He was my father's age, his nose a sunburned pig's foot, his odor a mix of sweat and the viscera of fish. This little man, who spoke some of our language, stepped close and lifted my chin. "You're a handsome boy," he said. After my brother stabbed him with his pocketknife, the three of us stood there in astonishment, our gaze on the blade, tipped by blood, a silent moment broken

when the little man howled in pain, drew back his machine gun, and swung its stock hard against my brother's head. The crack—I could hear it still. He fell with the force of dead weight, blood streaming from his brow, jaw and temple hitting the wooden deck with an awful thud still resonant in my memory.

I touched the bruise. “Does it hurt?”

“Not any more. Does it still hurt for you?”

Once more I pretended to think about a question whose answer I already knew. “Yes,” I said at last. When the little man threw me to the deck, the fall bruised the back of my head. When he ripped my shirt off, he drew blood with his sharp fingernails. When I turned my face away and saw my mother and father screaming, my eardrums seemed to have burst, for I could hear nothing. Even when I screamed I could not hear myself, even though I felt my mouth opening and closing. The world was muzzled, the way it would be ever afterward with my mother and father and myself, none of us uttering another sound on this matter. Their silence and my own would cut me again and again. But what pained me the most was not any of these things, nor the weight of the men on me. It was the light shining into my dark eyes as I looked to the sky and saw the smoldering tip of God's cigarette, poised in the heavens the moment before it was pressed against my skin.

Since then I avoid day and sun. Even he noticed, holding up his forearm against mine to show me I was whiter than he was. We had done the same in the bunker, splaying our hands in front of our faces to see if they were visible in the dark. We wanted to know we were still all there, coated in the dust that sifted onto us after each impact, the memory of the American jets screaming overhead making me tremble. The first time we heard them, he whispered in my ear not to worry. They were only Phantoms.

“Do you know what I liked the most about those times?” He shook his head. We sat on the sofa of my basement office,

warmer than the living room in November. “We would come outside after the bombing, you holding my hand while we stood blinking in the sun. What I loved was how after the darkness of hiding there came the light. And after all that thunder, silence.”

He nodded, unblinking, curled up on the sofa like me, our knees touching. The parrot crouched on my shoulder, roosting there ever since we let my brother go into the sea, and it came to me that letting it speak was the only way to get rid of it.

“Tell me something,” it said. “Why did I live and you die?”

He regarded me with eyes that would not dry out no matter how long they stayed open. Mother was wrong. He had changed, the proof being those eyes, preserved in brine for so long they would remain forever open.

“You died too,” he said. “You just don’t know it.”

I remembered a conversation with Victor. A question struck me one night at eleven, so urgent that I telephoned him, knowing he’d be awake. “Yes, I believe in ghosts,” he said, not surprised to hear from me. I could see him curled up on his chair, head aflame on his candle-wax body, as if he were lit up by the memory of the airplane crash that had taken the lives of his family. When I asked him if he had ever seen any ghosts, he said, “All the time. When I close my eyes, my wife and children appear just like when they were alive. With my eyes open, I’ll see them in my peripheral vision. They move fast and disappear before I can focus on them. But I smell them too, my wife’s perfume when she walks by, the shampoo in my daughter’s hair, the sweat in my son’s jerseys. And I can feel them, my son brushing his hand on mine, my wife breathing on my neck the way she used to do in bed, my daughter clinging to my knees. And last of all, you hear ghosts. My wife tells me to check for my keys before I leave the house. My daughter reminds me not to burn the toast. My son asks me to rake the leaves so he can jump in them. They all sing happy birthday to me.”

Victor’s birthday had been two weeks ago, and what it was



that I imagined—him sitting in the dark, eyes closed, listening for echoes of birthdays past—became the opening of his memoir.

“Aren’t you afraid of ghosts?” I asked.

Over the line, in the silence, the static hissed.

“You aren’t afraid of the things you believe in,” he said.

This, too, I wrote in his memoir, even though I had not understood what he meant.

Now I did. My body clenched as I sobbed without shame and without fear. My brother watched me curiously as I wept for him and for me, for all the years we could have had together but didn’t, for all the words never spoken between my mother, my father, and me. Most of all, I cried for those other girls who had vanished and never come back, including myself.

When it was published a few months later, Victor’s memoir sold well. The critics had kind things to say. My name was nowhere to be found in it, but my small reputation grew a little larger among those who worked in the shadows of publishing. My agent called to offer me another memoir on even more lucrative terms, the story of a soldier who lost his arms and legs trying to defuse a bomb. I declined. I was writing a book of my own.

“Ghost stories?” Her tone was approving. “I can sell that. People love being frightened.”

I did not tell her that I had no desire to terrify the living. Not all ghosts were bent on vengeance and mayhem. My ghosts were the quiet and shy ones like my brother, as well as the mournful revenants in my mother’s stories. It was my mother, the expert on ghosts, who told me my brother was not going to return. He had disappeared when I turned my back on him, reaching for a box of tissues. There was only a depression in the sofa where he had sat, cold to the touch. I went upstairs to wake her, and after putting the teakettle on the stove, she sat down with me at the kitchen table to hear of her son’s visit.



Having cried over him for years, she did not cry now.

“You know he’s gone for good, don’t you? He came and said all he wanted to say.”

The teakettle began rattling and blowing steam through its one nostril.

“Ma,” I said. “I haven’t said all I wanted to say.”

And my mother, who had not looked away from me on the deck of the boat, looked away now. For all the ghost stories she possessed, there was one story she did not want to tell, one type of company she did not want to keep. They were there in the kitchen with us, the ghosts of the refugees and the ghosts of the pirates, the ghost of the boat watching us with those eyes that never closed, even the ghost of the girl I once was, the only ghosts my mother feared.

“Tell me a story, Ma,” I said. “I’m listening.”

She found one easily, as I knew she would. “There was once a woman,” she said, “deeply in love with her husband, a soldier who disappears on a mission behind enemy lines. He is reported dead; she refuses to believe it. The war ends and she flees to this new country, eventually marrying again decades later. She is happy until the day her first husband returns from the dead, released from the camp where he has suffered as a secret prisoner for nearly thirty years.” As proof, my mother showed me a newspaper clipping with a photograph of the woman and her first husband, reunited at the airport some years ago. Their gazes do not meet. They look shy, uncomfortable, forlorn, surrounded by friends and reporters who cannot see the two ghosts also present at this melancholic meeting, the smudged shadows of their former selves.

“These kinds of stories happen all the time,” my mother said, pouring me a cup of green tea. This evening séance would be our new nightly ritual, my mother an old lady, myself an aging one. “Why write down what I’m telling you?”

“Someone has to,” I said, notepad on my lap, pen at attention.

“Writers.” She shook her head, but I think she was pleased. “At least you won’t just be making things up like you usually do.”

Sometimes this is how stories come to me, through her. “Let me tell you a story,” she would say, once, twice, or perhaps three times. More often, though, I go hunting for the ghosts, something I can do without ever leaving home. As they haunt our country, so do we haunt theirs. They are pallid creatures, more frightened of us than we are of them. That is why we see these shades so rarely, and why we must seek them out. The talismans on my desk, a tattered pair of shorts and a ragged T-shirt, clean and dry, neatly pressed, remind me that my mother was right. Stories are just things we fabricate, nothing more. We search for them in a world besides our own, then leave them here to be found, garments shed by ghosts.