

Fatherland

A STORY

BY VIET THANH NGUYEN



WEBB CHAPPELL

Viet Thanh Nguyen is an associate professor of English and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California and the author of *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*. He has received fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Nguyen's fiction has been anthologized in *Best New American Voices 2007* and in *A Stranger among Us: Stories of Cross-Cultural Collision and Connection*.

IT WAS a most peculiar thing to do. Everyone said so who heard the story, of how Phuong's father had named his second set of children after his first. Phuong was the eldest of these younger children, and for all her twenty-three years she had believed that her father's other children were much more blessed. Evidence of their good luck was written in the terse letters sent home annually by the first Mrs. Ly, the mother of Phuong's namesake, who recorded in bullet points each of her children's height, weight, and accomplishments. Phuong's namesake, for example, was seven years older, fifteen centimeters taller, twenty kilos heavier, and, from the photographs included with the letters, in possession of fairer, clearer skin; whiter, straighter teeth; and hair, clothing, shoes, and makeup that only became ever more fashionable as she graduated from a private girls' school, then from an elite college, followed by medical school and then a residency in Chicago. Mr. Ly had laminated each of the photographs to protect them from humidity and fingerprints, keeping them neatly stacked on a side table by the couch in the living room.

The letters accompanying the photographs were the only communiqués that Phuong's family received about the children, for over the course of some twenty-seven

years' absence, Phuong's namesake and her two younger brothers had never written a word themselves. And so, when the first such letter finally arrived, it was the cause of a great deal of excitement. The letter was addressed to Mr. Ly, who, as the plenipotentiary of the house, always took it upon himself to open the mail. He sat on the couch and slit the envelope carefully, using one of the few relics from his past he had managed to keep, a silver letter opener with an ivory handle. Flanking him were Phuong and her mother, while his two teenage sons, Hanh and Phuc, sat on the armrests and craned their necks to catch a glimpse of the words their father read out loud. The letter was even shorter than the ones written by the ex-wife, merely announcing that Phuong's half sister would be coming for a two-week vacation, and that she hoped to stay with them.

"Vivien?" Mrs. Ly said, reading the name signed at the bottom of the letter. "Is she too good to use the name you gave her?"

But Phuong knew instantly why her sister had taken upon herself a foreign name, and whose name it must have been: Vivien Leigh, star of *Gone with the Wind*, her father's favorite film, as he had once told her in passing. Phuong had seen the film once, on a pirated videotape, and was seduced immediately by the glamour, beauty, and sadness of Scarlett O'Hara, heroine and embodiment of a doomed South. Was it too much to suppose that the ruined Confederacy, with its tragic sense of itself, bore more than a passing similarity to her father's defeated southern republic and its resentful remnants? In Phuong's fertile imagination, Vivien's imminent return to the land of her birth was foreshadowed by Scarlett's own return to her desolate plantation.

It was easy, then, in the weeks leading to Vivien's arrival, for Phuong to pass her days at home and at work constructing scenarios of a noble, kindly sister, somewhat solemn and sad, but nevertheless gentle and patrician, who would immediately take to her and become the mentor and guide Phuong never had. Her first glimpse of Vivien at the airport only confirmed the appropriateness of such a movie star's name for the young woman who paused at the terminal's glass gates—her eyes hidden behind enormous sunglasses, her lips slightly parted in a glossy pout—pushing a cart loaded with her own weight in crimson luggage. As she jumped and waved to get Vivien's attention, Phuong was thrilled to see that her sister bore utterly no resemblance to the throngs of local people waiting outside to greet the arrivals, hundreds of ordinary folk wearing drab clothes and fanning themselves under the sun.

Even after a week in Saigon, Vivien would appear no more of a native than on the day she arrived, at least in outdoor settings. On the streets, at outdoor cafés, or

hopping into a Mai Linh taxi, she was easily mistaken for a Korean businessman's frazzled wife or a weary Japanese tourist, her frosting of makeup melting under the tropical glare. In certain indoor settings, however, she was clearly the mistress of her domain. This was the case at the restaurant Nam Kha, on the street Dong Khoi, where Phuong had worked as a hostess for the two years since her graduation from college. It was Vivien's idea to treat the family to dinner at Nam Kha, a way to celebrate the halfway point in her vacation and an option Phuong would never have suggested, the restaurant's offerings being far more than Phuong or her family could ever afford.

"But it's a crime, don't you think?" Vivien said, glancing over the entrées. Their table was by the reflecting pool, across from which two young women sat on a cushioned dais, wearing silken, ephemeral *ao dai* and plucking gently at the sixteen strings of the zithers braced on their laps. "You should be able to eat where you work at least once in your lifetime."

"The real crime is five dollars for morning glory fried in garlic," Mrs. Ly said. She sold silk at Cho Ben Thanh and possessed the eyes of an experienced negotiator, smooth and unreadable as the beads of an abacus. "I can buy this for a dollar at the market."

"Look around," Mr. Ly said, his tone impatient. All the other guests were white, with the exception of an Indian couple in the corner, the man in a linen suit and the woman in a *salwar kameez*. "These are tourist prices."

"These are foolish prices."

"I like it here," Vivien declared. Her voice was authoritative, the way she must sound in her examination room in Chicago. Not for the first time, Phuong imagined herself in her sister's place, wearing a white coat in a white room, looking out a wall of windows at a haze of white snow. "What do you think?" Vivien nudged her knee. "Too outrageous for you?"

"Not at all!" Phuong hoped that she projected an air of confidence and ease, unlike her brothers. Hanh and Phuc were speechless, their silk-bound menus considerably more handsome than any textbook they owned. "I can get used to this."

"That's the spirit."

The guests at the neighboring table rose, and on the way out two of them paused beside Phuong, the brunette taking a photograph of the musicians strumming their zithers. "They're just like butterflies," she said in an Australian accent, squinting at the image on her camera. Eavesdropping on them, Phuong was relieved not to be the object of their fascination. "So delicate and tiny."

“I’ll bet they never worry about what they eat.” Her friend flipped open her compact to inspect her lipstick. “Those dresses look stitched onto them.”

Night after night, Phuong had observed the customs of tourists like these, her degree in biology no more than a memory as she opened the doors of Nam Kha with a small bow. Having come to dine on elegantly presented peasant cuisine, the guests were suitably impressed by the Cham statuary, by the Chinese scrolls hanging on the walls, and by Phuong herself, her slim and petite body sheathed in a golden, form-fitting *ao dai*. Sometimes guests would ask to photograph her, requests that initially flattered her and now irritated her. Still, she could not decline, as her manager had made clear, and so she would force herself to smile and tilt her head, a trellis of hair as black and silky as her trousers falling over her shoulder. Striking this or another pose, Phuong could pretend that she was not a hostess doing a foreigner’s bidding but rather a model, a starlet, or her sibling namesake. What she actually looked like she never knew, for while everyone promised to send her the pictures, no one ever had.

WHEN SHE ARRIVED, Vivien carried with her a schedule of the sights she wanted to see, complete with estimated travel times via train, bus, car, hydrofoil, or plane. President Clinton had come the year before, his much-celebrated visit reassuring her mother that Vivien’s return would be a safe one, especially when armed with a US passport and dollar bills. So equipped, Vivien had insisted on paying for the family during all their outings, her father putting up only token resistance. While Phuong was impressed by Vivien’s approach, as if vacationing were a job at which she sought promotion, she was not surprised. In the occasional dispatches sent by Vivien’s mother, a picture had emerged of an independent young woman, the unmarried pediatrician who had backpacked solo through western Europe and vacationed in Hawaii, the Bahamas, Rio. Mr. Ly, who made a humble living as a tour guide, reviewed the itinerary and said, “I couldn’t have done better myself.”

He was a man of rare praise, except when it came to his first trio of children. After the war, he’d been banished to a New Economic Zone for five years, and his mistress had gone to his wife, demanding money. Until then his wife had been ignorant of the mistress’s existence, and she responded to the discovery by fleeing the country with her children on a perilous boat trip. Mr. Ly learned of their flight in the middle of his sentence and sank into depression, until his return to Saigon. Life must move on, his mistress said, so he had divorced Vivien’s mother, made his mistress the second Mrs. Ly, and sired three more children. He often compared Phuong to

her absent namesake, which had cultivated in Phuong both a sense of yearning for this sister and also some undeniable jealousy. A weevil of envy resurfaced nearly every day of Vivien's visit, for her father was behaving completely unlike himself, as if he were competing to win Vivien's approval. Without questions or criticism, he followed Vivien's plan for visiting temples and cathedrals, shopping malls and museums, beaches and resorts, south through the Mekong Delta, west to Vung Tau, north to Da Lat, and, within Saigon, from the dense, cacophonous alleys of the Chinese quarter in Cho Lon to the glamour of downtown's Dong Khoi, where Nam Kha was the most expensive restaurant on the boulevard.

"This is like the Saigon of the old days." Mr. Ly smiled fondly, gazing on the restaurant's velvet drapes and marble pillars. During the war, he had owned a shoe factory, a beach home in Vung Tau, a chauffeured Citroën. Photographs from that time showed a dapper man with pomaded hair and a Clark Gable mustache. Now, as far as Phuong could tell, he wore his sadness and defeat in a paunch barely contained by the buttons of a short-sleeved shirt one size too small for him. "L'Amiral on Thai Lap Thanh. La Tour d'Ivoire on Tran Hung Dao. Paprika, with the best paella and sangria. I always used to go to those restaurants."

"Not with me," Mrs. Ly said.

"What do you want to do tomorrow?" Mr. Ly asked Vivien.

She refilled his glass from the bottle of Australian merlot and said, "I left it blank on my schedule. I always leave a day or two for surprises."

"Can we go to Dam Sen?" Hanh asked. Phuc nodded vigorously.

"What's that?" Vivien refilled her own glass.

"An amusement park," Phuong said. She was drinking lemonade, as were her mother and brothers. "It's not far from here."

"I worked at one when I was sixteen," Vivien said. "That was a crazy summer."

"We can save Dam Sen for later," Mr. Ly said. "Since you've seen where your sister works, let me take you on one of my tours tomorrow."

"One hundred percent." Vivien raised her glass, using the classic toast he had taught her.

He clinked his glass against hers, gazed on his sons affectionately, and said, "Yours is a lucky generation."

"I wouldn't say we were so lucky," Phuong said.

"You've never appreciated what you have." Her father waved his hand over the meal, and Phuong squeezed her glass, bracing herself to hear the stories of her parents one more time. "You want to talk about bad luck? After the Americans

abandoned us and the Communists sent me to the labor camp, we lived on roots and manioc. There were worms in the rice, which was mostly water. People caught dysentery or malaria or dengue fever like the common cold and just died. It was amazing we had blood left for the leeches.”

“It wasn’t so much better at home,” Mrs. Ly chimed in. “I sold everything to survive after the war. My sewing machine. The record player you gave me, and the records too.”

“The dumbest part was the confessions.” Mr. Ly stared into his glass, as if all the lessons learned in the labor camp, once distilled, merely served to fill it. “Every week I had to come up with a different way to criticize myself for being a capitalist. I wrote enough pages for a whole autobiography, but every chapter said the same thing.”

Phuong sighed, but Vivien was listening intently, chin cupped on her hand. “There’s something I’ve always wanted to know.” When their father looked up, Vivien said, “Why give your children with your next wife our names?”

This was the question Phuong had never asked, fearing the answer she always suspected, that she and her brothers were no more than regrets born into flesh. Vivien’s forthrightness, however, did not appear to surprise or daunt their father, who merely raised his glass and said, “If you hadn’t come back to see me, I would have understood. But I knew you would come back to see the one I named after you.”

Vivien glanced at Phuong, who maintained a stoic expression. After all, it wasn’t Vivien’s fault their father behaved the way he did, playing favorites and pitying himself. “So here I am,” Vivien said. She returned her father’s gaze and clinked her glass against his. “And here’s to us.”

“One hundred percent,” Mr. Ly said.

IN ALL THE years that Mr. Ly had worked as a tour guide, he had never asked Phuong to accompany him. Although she had never asked and had never thought of asking, she realized the next morning on the tour bus that she would have liked to have been asked before now. Vivien did not seem to appreciate their father’s special regard for her, or her fortune in even being a tourist on this day, the boys left behind at school and Phuong’s mother busy at work. Instead, Vivien focused her attention on the crowded conditions of the aging bus, whispering complaints into Phuong’s ear about the long-haired, budget-minded backpackers who jammed into the thinly cushioned seats and made their father’s company a success. Then, embraced by clammy weather once they stepped off the air-conditioned bus at Ben Dinh, Vivien could only mutter that this was not exactly her idea of fun.

“I don’t even like camping,” Vivien said as the sisters trailed behind the other tourists, winding their way through the eucalyptus trees and bamboo groves where the fabled tunnels of Cu Chi were preserved. “I’d rather be in a shopping mall or a museum, but even the museums don’t have air-conditioning here.”

“Father wants you to see him at work,” Phuong said patiently. “He’s good at what he does.”

“Don’t tell him I said anything, okay? I don’t want to hurt his feelings.”

“So we have a secret?” Phuong teased.

“Sisters have to have secrets,” Vivien said. “Oh, my God. What is it, thirty-four degrees?”

“This isn’t so bad. It’s not even that hot.”

“I’m being bit. I can feel it. Look at my legs!”

Vivien’s shins and thighs were studded with the pale bumps of fresh bites and the red kernels of fermenting ones. For a pediatrician and seasoned traveler, Vivien had proven woefully incapable of caring for her own body. While Phuong wore gloves extending to her upper arms and nylons underneath her jeans, her sister wore brief shorts and a T-shirt that exposed her bra straps and the waistband and thong of her panties, which today were lavender. Despite her bared skin, Vivien neglected to use mosquito repellent, and she complained whenever the weather was hot, which was, according to her, nearly every second of the day and night. Her sister’s vulnerability was alternately a source of annoyance and a source of endearment to Phuong, rendering Vivien less intimidating and perhaps more deserving of the secret Phuong longed to entrust, what she had never told her family and what only Vivien could understand. One day Phuong too would leave this place, for Saigon was boring and the country itself not big enough for the desires in her heart.

“This, ladies and gentlemen, a *punji* trap.” Mr. Ly spoke in English, beckoning for the group to halt. The two dozen tourists, all Westerners, stepped close to the bamboo trapdoor. He spun it on its hinge until it was vertical, revealing a pit as deep as a grave and as long as a coffin, a dozen sharp wooden stakes embedded in the earth. “Step on trapdoor, you fall in.”

After a couple of tourists took photographs, Mr. Ly waved the group forward. He wore a short-sleeved white shirt, gray slacks, and polished brown leather shoes, whereas at home he typically lounged in shorts and perhaps an undershirt. What was strangest to Phuong was seeing her father joke and chat with the tourists. Whenever he spoke to Phuong at home, it was mostly to call for another beer, to fetch him his cigarettes, or to request a particular dish for dinner.

“And this, an original tunnel.” Mr. Ly stopped and pointed at a square hole the size of a sheet of writing paper, covered with a wooden board and a scattering of leaves at the foot of a eucalyptus tree. “Here, guerrillas live for years and attack Americans anytime.” The tourists were almost all Americans, but this history did not seem to offend them. Instead they seemed fascinated, raising their cameras as he lifted the board to show the narrow, dark entrance. Off in the distance, from the shooting range, a machine gun fired a burst of rounds, each bullet costing a dollar, according to their father. Phuong was bemused by the fact that these tourists would want to spend their money and their day here instead of at the beach or a fancy restaurant, or in a hammock at a rustic riverside café. The reason for such behavior, her father said, was that the foreign tourists only knew one thing about this country, the war. These tunnels, then, were a must-see on their itineraries.

“Later we see new tunnels, made big just for you. Last time an American go in this one, he can’t get out. He too fat!” To illustrate his point, Mr. Ly extended his arms and joined his hands, creating a large hoop in the air. “Anyone want to try?”

The tourists grinned and shook their heads, the smallest of them as tall as Phuong’s father. Phuong was afraid he might call on her to slide into the tunnel, but when no one volunteered, her father scowled and raised his fist. “This is how we win our victory!” he cried. A camera flashed. “We reunite our country through courage and sacrifice!”

Two more cameras flashed as their father held his pose.

“Did he just say what I think he said?” Vivien whispered.

“He doesn’t really mean it. It’s only an act.”

But Phuong suspected that for the tourists, act was fact. Foreigners that they were, they could not tell the difference between a Communist and a man the Communists had exiled to a New Economic Zone. In a few days or a week or two weeks, they would leave, their most vivid memory about this day being the funny experience of crawling on their knees through a tunnel, and a vague memory of the passionate little tour guide and his passable English. We’re all the same to them, Phuong realized, with a mix of anger and shame—small, charming, and forgettable. She was worried her sister might see her this way as well, but when her father waved the tourists onward and Vivien followed, she appeared to be concerned only with brushing away the small cloud of mosquitoes hovering around her.

ON VIVIEN’S PENULTIMATE night in Saigon, she and her father drank four flasks of milky rice wine at a Chinese restaurant in Cho Lon. After returning home, Mr. Ly

went for a walk with his wife to clear his intoxicated head while Hanh and Phuc settled down on the blanketed floor of the living room, their bed next to the motor-bikes. Upstairs, after Vivien closed the door to the room that Phuong shared with her parents, she pulled one of her crimson suitcases out from underneath Phuong's narrow bed. The suitcase had been loaded with gifts from Vivien and her mother, from jeans and shirts to medicines and makeup, even shampoo and conditioner that had been bottled in the United States and were hence more valuable than the same brand bottled in a local plant. Now the suitcase was packed with souvenirs, a porcelain doll in a silk *ao dai* for Vivien's mother, hand-carved teak replicas of cyclos for her brothers, a bottle of rice wine with a cobra floating in it for her stepfather, and, for her friends, T-shirts emblazoned with Ho Chi Minh's avuncular face. But when Vivien opened the suitcase, she took out neither these mementos nor her own belongings. Instead, after rummaging underneath these things, she dug out a small pink bag, somewhat crumpled from its journey, and presented it to Phuong.

"I've got one last thing for you, little sister," Vivien said. "I wasn't sure I should give it to you, but I thought I'd come prepared."

Printed on the bag in cursive writing was *Victoria's Secret*. Inside were a black lace brassiere and black lace panties, a wispy thong rather than one of the scratchy, full-bottomed cotton affairs that Phuong's mother bought for her in packages of a dozen.

"I can't wear these!" Phuong said, laughing as she held up the nearly nonexistent panties. "They're scandalous!"

"Of course you can wear them," Vivien said, still kneeling by her suitcase. "Go on, try them on. I can't imagine you in those granny things you have."

For a moment, Phuong hesitated. But Vivien was her sister and a doctor, and there was no need to be shy. She quickly stripped off her rayon pajamas and her cotton underwear, and just as quickly slipped on the brassiere and panties. Vivien nodded approvingly and said, "Now you look sexy. Some boy's going to be very lucky to see you in those."

"My mother and father would never let me wear these." Phuong inspected herself from head to toe with the hand mirror her mother kept hanging from a nail in the wall. "Only naughty girls would wear this."

"It's time for you to be bad," Vivien said, yawning. "My God, you're twenty-three! You don't even want to know what I was doing when I was twenty-three."

The touch of lace against her skin, and the glimpses of her nearly nude body draped so provocatively, made Phuong inordinately happy. She hummed as they

tidied up, Vivien putting away the suitcase and Phuong donning her pajamas and drawing the curtain separating her side of the room from her parents'. Then she slipped into bed after Vivien, and lying there, her arm linked with Vivien's arm, she could feel her sister's gift endowing their relationship with even more intimacy and trust.

"What's the first thing you'll do in Chicago? Call your mother?"

"Take a long drive by myself. I miss my car."

"I don't even know anyone who owns a car."

Vivien stared at the ceiling fan stirring the hot air of a typically humid night. The open window allowed in the merest of breezes.

"Can I tell you a secret?" Vivien said.

"You already told me."

"What?"

"A secret." When Phuong turned her head, she could see into Vivien's ear, the canal small and dark. "At Cu Chi."

"I guess I did." Vivien scratched a bite on her neck. "I thought I would come here and I would love my father."

"You don't love him?" Phuong propped her head on her hand. "Or you didn't love him?"

"It's easy for you to love him." Vivien sighed. "It's easy for him to love me. That's the way it should be. He remembers me. I don't remember him. Can you love someone you don't remember? Can you love someone you don't know?"

"I'm not sure." A burst of cackling and laughter came from the alley outside, the neighborhood's old ladies sitting on their thresholds, gossiping before bedtime. "But I know he's not easy to love."

"A woman can't fall in love with a man for whom she feels sorry. Can she?"

"I've never fallen in love with anyone, so I don't know." The screech of the metal gate that was the living room's front door announced their father's return. "But you're saying it wrong. You're not falling in love, you just want to love him."

"You know what my mother told me when I said I was going to Viet Nam?" Vivien paused. "'Your father's only going to break your heart too.'"

Then Vivien rolled over on her side to face the wall, where a green gecko clung patiently to the plaster. The stairs creaked as Mr. and Mrs. Ly ascended, the discordant notes together constituting a coda to Phuong's day so familiar that only Vivien's arrival had made her aware of it. Her sister's restless presence in Phuong's bed and the caress of the lace on her skin rendered the usual unusual, sharpening Phuong's

perceptions as if before this they had amounted to no more than a dull pencil, allowing her to write in her mind with ever-increasing precision the outline of her desires and the characters in her life, none more vivid than her father, whom she pitied and, even worse, did not respect. If he were only an adulterer and a playboy, then there would be cause for resentment, but he was in decline, a failure without even the glamour of decadence and bad behavior. This was a matter of sufficient sadness and embarrassment that when her father's shadow appeared in the doorway, Phuong turned on her side as well. There, pressed into her sister's back under the weight of a humid night, she discovered that even lying down Vivien had broken into a sweat.

AT THE AMUSEMENT park the next morning, Mr. Ly photographed his children at the entry gates using a disposable camera, a gift from his ex-wife delivered by Vivien. After Vivien paid the family's fares, Hanh and Phuc seized the lead, the former tugging on his mother's hand. They picked their way through raucous troops of elementary school boys and girls, a battalion in red shirts and caps. A monorail traversed the park above the keen crowds, and in the distance a roller coaster rumbled. One exhibition hall soon caught Phuong's attention, its curious English name being the Ice Lantern. On a billboard outside were brightly colored photos depicting glacial facsimiles of the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, and other manmade wonders of the world, lit in a rainbow of neon. "Let's save this for later," she said, "when we'll need to cool down."

"Good plan," said Vivien, fanning herself with the park brochure.

After driving the bumper cars at Hanh and Phuc's request, Mrs. Ly insisted on visiting the Japanese orchid garden. Several young couples posed for wedding photographs in different corners, the veiled brides in Western wedding gowns and the grooms in white tuxedos, red roses pinned to their lapels. Mrs. Ly cooed over the spectacle, but Hanh and Phuc rolled their eyes and asked Vivien if the next destination could be the Ferris wheel, rotating slowly above the waterslides. It was Mrs. Ly who clambered into one cabin of the Ferris wheel with the boys, while Mr. Ly declined to join his daughters in another cabin, claiming acrophobia. As they ascended, Vivien studied the scenery from the barred window on her side, Phuong peeking over her shoulder, her breath tickling a hair on Vivien's ear. Vivien tucked away the hair and pointed toward the roller coaster climbing slowly into view, an upside-down caterpillar with dozens of human arms wiggling in the air. "I worked on a ride like that," Vivien said. "All my friends found jobs at the park so we could meet boys."

“Did you find a boyfriend?” Phuong leaned a shoulder against her sister’s arm. She hadn’t told Vivien that she was still wearing her gift, delighting in it like a child with a new and magical toy. “Was he handsome?”

“Rod was cute. He’d give me rides home, and we’d go on one of the side streets around my house, park, and . . . kiss. I don’t suppose you’ve done that?”

“Not yet.”

“You haven’t found any boys you like?”

“I don’t want any attachments,” Phuong said firmly. “I don’t want anyone holding me back.”

“From what?”

At the center of the park was a lake the size of a saucer, paddleboats floating like crumbs on its surface. Jutting into the lake was their noon destination, a restaurant in the shape of a dragon’s head, dividing the water as Vivien’s departure tomorrow would divide the world once more into those who stayed and those who left.

“Can I tell you a secret now?”

Vivien smiled. “Sure.”

Phuong hesitated. On the wall, over scabbing blue paint, someone had drawn the stick figure of a girl with a mop of hair, fingers flashing a V, eternally optimistic. “I want to be like you,” Phuong said, gripping her sister’s hands in her own. “I want to go to America and be a doctor and help people. I don’t want to spend my life waiting on people. I want to be waited on. I want to travel anywhere I want, anytime I want. I want to come back here and know I can leave. If I stay here I’ll marry some boy with no future and live with his family and have two children too soon and sleep in a room where I can touch both walls at the same time. I don’t think I can stand it, I really don’t. Haven’t you ever felt this way?”

“Oh, God,” Vivien said, looking up at the ceiling of the cabin. Phuong had hoped for enthusiasm and would have settled for reluctance, confusion, or condescension, but she was not prepared for the panic on her sister’s face. “I told her she should have told all of you the truth.”

The roller coaster plunged down the tracks, the passengers screaming. When Vivien shifted her weight and pulled her hands free, her arm peeled away from Phuong’s shoulder with a moist suck of sound, the air no cooler than down below.

“Who are you talking about?”

“My mother.” Vivien took a deep breath and looked once more through the barred windows. “Did you know that when she came to the States, she told the government she was twenty-five?”

“So?” A drop of sweat trickled down the small of Phuong’s back.

“She was thirty.”

“I can see a woman doing that.”

“My mother also told the government she was a widow.” Vivien turned back to meet Phuong’s gaze. “She wasn’t telling the truth when she told our father I was a doctor.”

Phuong blinked. “You’re not a doctor?”

“I’m a receptionist without a job. I was let go the month before. My mother and my stepfather do not own a house in the suburbs. They live in a condo in West Tulsa. And my mother does not own the Nice Nail Beauty Salon. She works for it as a beautician.”

“Then why tell us you were a doctor?”

“Because you all wanted to know how much I made a month, and what I paid on my mortgage, and how much my car cost. It was easier just to answer than to say I wasn’t a doctor. But just so you know, that whole story about me being a pediatrician was my mother’s idea, not mine.” The cabin had reached its zenith. Far below, an elephant the size of a windup toy tottered back and forth, chained by its ankle. “My mother also told me not to date my boss, especially if he’s married.”

“Your boss? What’s he got to do with this?”

“He said it wasn’t me, it was the economy,” Vivien cried. “Have you ever heard anything so stupid?”

“No,” Phuong said. “No one’s ever broken up with me before.”

“It happens to everybody.” Vivien’s eyes moistened. “So I thought I’d come here. A stupid reason, isn’t it?”

“I thought you came here to see us.”

“That too.”

“Where’s all the money coming from?” Phuong could not tabulate how much her sister had spent, but she knew it was in the thousands of dollars. Just the gift envelopes alone that Vivien had distributed on her first night in Saigon held six hundred-dollar bills for Mr. and Mrs. Ly, two of the same for Phuong, and one each for her brothers. “All the dinners and tickets? The trips to Da Lat and Vung Tau?”

“In America, they pay you extra when they fire you. Even receptionists get a nice check from big companies.” Vivien fumbled in her purse as their cabin continued its descent. “I also have credit cards. I don’t mind spending money. I wanted to show you a good time. You’ve never been anywhere.”

The park’s most prominent landmark loomed before them, a mountain painted an alluvial red, hollow and metallic. “It doesn’t matter,” Phuong said. None of it did,

neither the lies nor the fact that Vivien had everything, even Phuong's name, which she didn't care to use. "You don't have to be a doctor to sponsor me."

"Where are my tissues?" Vivien wiped her tears away with her hands.

"I won't bother you." Phuong touched Vivien on the arm, sticky with perspiration. Their cabin was nearing the platform. "I'll find a job. I'll take care of myself. I'll take care of you."

Vivien snapped her purse shut, still crying. "I'm sorry, Phuong. When I return, I'm putting my life back together. I've got to pay off four credit cards and my student loans and hope my house won't be taken from me."

"But—"

"I won't have time to worry about a little sister." Now it was Vivien who seized Phuong's hands with her own tear-dampened ones. "Can you understand that? Please?"

When the attendant opened the door, their father was waiting, disposable camera held to his eye, his wife standing behind him with the boys. The Ferris wheel rotated at its measured pace, slow enough for them to step out, Vivien first. A week later their father would develop the photograph, but it would take Phuong a moment to examine the laminated picture before she remembered what was absent underneath the clear plastic. Vivien was visible in the doorway, eyes moist and makeup smudged, but by an accident of timing and composition Phuong herself could not be seen.

WHILE IT HAD taken Vivien twenty-seven years to mail her first letter home, it took her only a month to send the second missive. Phuong returned one evening from Nam Kha to find her parents and brothers clustered around the table in the living room, sifting through a stack of pictures that Vivien had included. A smiling and cheerful Mr. Ly waved the letter at Phuong, a single sheet that she read sitting on the arm of the couch. The letter recounted Vivien's wonderful memories, dining on a floating restaurant on the Saigon River, being fitted for a custom-made *ao dai*, riding on a pony cart around Lake Xuan Huong in Da Lat, the best day her arrival and the worst her departure. *I looked out the window of the airplane until I couldn't see the country anymore, she wrote. Everything's so green. The moment the clouds covered it, all I wanted was to return.* And so the letter went, her sister's hypocrisy making Phuong so ill that it was all she could do not to tear the letter in half.

"Tomorrow I want you to have these pictures laminated," Mr. Ly said, sorting through the photographs Vivien had sent. "We'll make an album from them."

“What for?” Phuong said, tossing the letter onto the table.

“What do you mean, what for?” Mr. Ly was incredulous. “So that we’ll have something to remember her by until she comes back.”

Phuong studied her father as he sat on the couch, surrounded by her mother and brothers, clutching the photographs as if they were equal to the hundred-dollar bills Vivien had given him. Once again she felt a surge of pity for him, certain not only that her father would break his daughter’s heart but also that the daughters would one day break his. She contemplated telling him this truth, that Vivien was never going to return, and that one day, perhaps not soon, but eventually, Phuong would leave as well, to a world where she could fall in love with someone she didn’t already know. It was merely a matter of momentum, and she now knew how to begin.

By nine the next morning she was alone in the house, the boys gone to school, her parents at work. She wore her sister’s gift, and over the lace donned a blouse and Capri pants. It would be best, she thought, to do what needed to be done outdoors, and so she placed a stool by the living room gate and a tin bucket on the pavement of the alley. When she opened the envelope of photographs, the first picture featured her father and Vivien shivering in the Ice Lantern at the amusement park, their last stop that day. In the foyer, an attendant had handed them polyester parkas, hooded, knee length, and in neon hues of yellow, pink, orange, and green. Even wearing the parkas, stepping from the foyer into the Ice Lantern itself was a shock, for it was in essence an enormous freezer, a frigid, echoing hall that offered a walking tour of the world’s tourist landmarks, rendered as ice sculptures no taller than a man’s height. Dazzling neon lights in the same spectrum of colors as the parkas illuminated the sculptures, the scurrying crowds, and a pair of long chutes, also carved from ice, down which shrieking children slid.

“This is weird,” Vivien had said, hunching her shoulders from the cold as she stood before a miniature London Bridge. It was in front of this bridge, not far from the frozen pyramids of Egypt and the rimy Sphinx, that Vivien and her father posed for the photograph. While Phuong aimed Vivien’s camera, father and daughter had wrapped their arms around each other’s waists. Phuong had taken the picture mechanically, not paying much attention to the small digital image after it had flashed up on the camera’s screen. But now, holding the photograph as she sat on the stool, she could focus on its details. With their hoods over their heads, the only visible parts of her father’s and sister’s bodies were their pale, triangular faces, two white petals floating on lily pads of neon green. In the Ice Lantern’s glow, her sister’s

face looked more like her father's than Phuong's did, the symmetry rendering clear what Phuong could now say. Their father loved Vivien more than her.

The photograph ignited easily when Phuong lit it with a match. After she dropped the photo into the bucket, she watched it curl up and shrivel, remembering how Vivien had approached her after she took the picture and tried to make amends. "I never thought I'd say this," Vivien had said, smiling as she clasped Phuong's hand, "but I'm cold." Even a month later, Phuong could feel the chilliness of the Ice Lantern, and how she had shivered and turned away toward Egypt's crystalline sand. She fed the fire with more photos, and their heat warmed her, two dozen others disappearing until only one was left, of Vivien and Phuong at the airport on the morning of Vivien's departure, Vivien with her arm around Phuong's shoulder.

Unlike Vivien, Phuong was not smiling. Their father had forced her to wear an *ao dai* for Vivien's departure, and she looked serious and grim in its silk confines. Hers was the expression that older people of an earlier generation usually adopted as they stood before the camera, picture taking a rare and ceremonious occasion reserved for weddings and funerals. The photograph flared when she touched it with fire, Vivien's features melting first, their faces vanishing in flame. After the last embers from this photograph and the others died, Phuong rose and scattered their ashes. She was about to turn and enter the house when a gust of wind surged down the alley, catching the ashes and blowing them away. A flurry rose above the neighboring roofs, and she couldn't help but pause to admire for a moment the clear and depthless sky into which the ashes vanished, an inverted blue bowl of the finest crystal, covering the whole of Saigon as far as her eyes could see. **N**

Viet Thanh Nguyen's "Fatherland" was the Third Place winner in Narrative's Winter 2011 Story Contest.