

April 30 [Excerpt], 2016

Viet Thanh Nguyen

Today is what many Vietnamese in the diaspora call “Black April.” For them it is the anniversary of the Fall of Saigon. I understand their feelings. I grew up in a Vietnamese community in San Jose, and I absorbed their memories and their unspoken trauma. My own family was marked by separation and division, by people and property left behind. And yet, I could never wholeheartedly endorse this sense of loss and grievance, could never bring myself to say “Black April”...I see every issue from both sides, and so I see that for some Vietnamese people this is not a day of mourning but one of celebration. The Fall is for some the Liberation.

And yet, it is important to mark this day because it is the symbolic moment when so many Vietnamese people became refugees. Many people have described me as an immigrant, and my novel as an immigrant story. No. I am a refugee, and my novel is a war story. I came to the United States because of a war that the United States fought in Vietnam, a war that the Vietnamese fought with each other, a war that China and the Soviet Union were involved in, a war that the Vietnamese brought to Laos and Cambodia, a war that did not end in 1975, a war that is not over for so many people of so many nationalities and cultures...

One of my Vietnamese language teachers said that the re-education camps were necessary to prevent postwar rebellion. Perhaps rebellion was in the making, but reaching out a hand in peace and reconciliation would have done so much more to heal the country. The Vietnamese people overseas remember the re-education camps as the ultimate hypocrisy of the Vietnamese revolution, the failure of Vietnamese brotherhood and sisterhood. This, too, is one reason why so many Vietnamese people became refugees and why so many find it hard to reconcile with a Vietnam that will not acknowledge its crimes against its own people, even as it is so ready to talk about the crimes of the South Vietnamese, the Americans, the French, and the Chinese. Nothing is more difficult than to look in the mirror and hold oneself to account. The victorious Vietnamese are guilty of that. So are the defeated Vietnamese...

As for me, I remain a refugee. My memory begins when I arrived in the United States at age four and was taken away from my parents to live with a white family. That was the condition for being able to leave the refugee camp in Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania. That experience remains an invisible brand stamped between my shoulder blades. I have spent my life trying to see that brand, to make sense of it, to rework it into words that I can speak to myself, that I can share with others. As painful as that experience was, what I learned from it was not to dwell only on my own pain. I needed to acknowledge that pain, to understand it, but in order to live beyond it, I also needed to acknowledge the pain of others, the worldview of others. This is why I cannot say “Black April,” because it is one story of one side, and I am interested in all stories of all sides.



Scan the QR code to
read Viet's full piece.

Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer* is a New York Times best seller and won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Other honors include the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, the Edgar Award for Best First Novel from the Mystery Writers of America, the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction from the American Library Association, and the First Novel Prize from the Center for Fiction, among others. His other books are *The Committed*, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* and *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*. He is a University Professor, the Aerol Arnold Chair of English, and a Professor of English, American Studies and Ethnicity, and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California. He is also the author of the bestselling short story collection, *The Refugees*, and co-founder of DVAN.